



NEW BEGINNINGS FOR AN OLD PROFESSION

by Daniel M. Isard, MSFS

The Academy of Professional Funeral Service Practice has gone through its own new beginning with a new management team. In part, the Academy chose to make the change, and in part, change was thrust upon it due to common life changes. Funeral service is going through these normal life changes. Yet funeral service is adapting to change with far less tolerance. In this article, I hope to give funeral service the words to accept change.

During many speeches, I tell a story about meeting a new client. He was 72 years old at the time of our first meeting. He told me within a few minutes, “I embalmed my very first body when I was only 15 years old!” I pondered aloud, “I bet you have seen many changes in funeral service over the past 57 years.” His reply was illuminating. He said, “Yep. And I have been against every one of them!” We all write the same list when identifying these changes. For many of you, when writing the list, you are angrily grinding the pencil into the paper. We must be more accepting of change because we cannot stop it.

Recently, Doug Gober and I were on the same program speaking on the topic of change. Gober inspirationally encouraged the audience to accept change as “This is the best the business will ever get!” With this sense of embracing the positive, let me talk about two initiatives I see we must embrace and mold to give the funeral profession the best result.

1. Create a Complete and Level Cremation Service Model. There is no such thing as a divide between funerals and cremations. There are only funerals. Some result in a body

going to a cemetery, and others result in a body going to the crematory. In both cases, we have a dead body and a group of living people who are going through a very difficult experience. As a funeral director, your job is to deal with the needs of each.

One of the services we provide our clients is a family follow-up survey. Our survey is different from other funeral-service surveys in that ours is electronic. There are many benefits to electronic surveys, but the best is the fact that with an electronic survey there is a thumbprint. By using electronic surveys, I get replies that I can assess, and then I can go back and look at the thumbprint to sort and correlate responses by groups that would not be available by the old-fashioned paper survey. For example, when it comes to cremation consumers, we can track the percentage of families that are choosing cremation for the very first time. In many firms, this number represents about 60 percent of all their cremation consumers! We have the chance to teach these people why and how to have a funeral when the body is being cremated.

If you do the math, as I love to do, assume there are 2.3 million deaths each year. If cremation is growing by 1 percent per year, that means that 230,000 families that previously have buried their dead are now cremating them. This is a large number, and this number needs direction and education about their options. You have to accept this challenge.

To implement a complete cremation service model, you answer one simple question: “If cremation accounts for X percent (whatever your current rate is) of your business, will you work to have it provide that same percent of your overhead?” Studies have shown us several points. Cremation is rising. Yet funeral directors are not pricing their service fees to cover their overhead on cremation services. Funeral directors are discounting cremation, believing they



have to discount it. However, the only way to discount cremation is to tax or assess a premium upon burial consumers. This is not fair and not working. When your cremation rate exceeds 50 percent, you cannot tax the minority to provide a discount for the majority!

This industry retires about 1,000 people per year. While it might seem that our mortuary schools can graduate enough students to supply these numbers, they cannot. If we graduate 2,000 people in a year, about 50 percent of them are gone from the profession within five years.

I hope this profession will begin anew. Cremation consumers are accounted for the same as burial consumers. All your funeral-service consumers should pay their apportioned percentage of your overhead. Funeral-home business owners must step up and make sure they are pricing fairly while at the same time providing a top-notch service experience to families.

2. Our Education and Licensure Need to Come into the 21st Century. The funeral profession in the United States was built around the presentation of a body. Therefore, for ease of transporting, lifting and display, we continued the English idea of casketing bodies. Looking at our DNA, those early funeral directors transcended from casket builders. Those casket builders learned to embalm bodies. Embalming allows funeral directors to preserve the bodies so they can be presented without fear of infectious disease and, in many cases, to ship them to their point of funeral without losing their appearance.

I understand that our early education promoted embalming as a science and funeral directing as a legal requirement. Over time, states have combined the license for the embalming skill set and the funeral-directing license. In the past, some states felt this was easier, to make one license, because every body was being embalmed. However, with more cremation, direct burial and graveside funerals, we are seeing fewer and fewer bodies being embalmed.

No one change in this industry is more of a business challenge than the reduction in the presentation of a prepared body. For those who are proud of their ability to embalm, they take exception to someone being licensed only for directing funerals. For those who want to work with the living, they take exception to the time they spend on the embalmer's art. Yet due to this impasse, we are not attracting some talented, socially skilled people to this profession.

Most funeral-home owners have a building, specially adapted to provide for large crowds to come together for mutual support. We call these either a visitation or a funeral. In reality, these are nothing more than gatherings, and they can take place at your building or another building. If we do not have staff members who can help plan these social events, our buildings will not provide the return on investment we need.

We are also facing staffing shortfalls. There are about 35,000 licensees. This industry retires about 1,000 people per year. While

it might seem that our mortuary schools can graduate enough students to supply these numbers, they cannot. If we graduate 2,000 people in a year, about 50 percent of them are gone from the profession within five years. Of those graduates, some are attracted to the profession due to the embalming skills, and others are attracted to the ministry of the living. These are not co-equal groups.

Yet 23 of the 50 states require that a funeral director must be an embalmer. They have but one license. I contend this should change. Today, we need people who can come into this business and make effective funeral plans. These people do more event-planning and social directing. They can deal with the multifamily issues of a deceased person who has been married and maybe has children from more than one marriage. They can deal with the fact that a family is geographically spread. They need to be better prepared to plan an event than embalm a body. I am not condemning the embalmer's art, but I am promoting the arranger's social skills.

I am convinced that we need to reform our licensure and, therefore, the preparation for admission into this profession to the new standards of this century. We need to attract people to work either in the back room or front room, or for those businesses that are too small to afford both, cross-train our recruits. We need a new beginning in light of the changing world of funeral service. With the Academy being at the heart of education, this can be a new mission for it.



The changing mindset and business plan to manage these businesses without the sale of caskets will be tough, but it is manageable. Recruiting, training and educating our next generation are also manageable. However we need a change in mindset, business model and educational model to fulfill our future professional staffing needs. We need to accept this is a profession, and as such, we should get paid as professionals and pay our staff members at the levels of professionals. The recompense will be great for those focused on these new beginnings! ■

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