

Winter 2014

# From the Other Side: Funeral Directors Talk about the Changing Face of Funerals

Mark A. Granquist  
mgranquist001@luthersem.edu

Follow this and additional works at: [http://digitalcommons.luthersem.edu/faculty\\_articles](http://digitalcommons.luthersem.edu/faculty_articles)

 Part of the [Family, Life Course, and Society Commons](#), and the [Practical Theology Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Granquist, Mark A., "From the Other Side: Funeral Directors Talk about the Changing Face of Funerals" (2014). *Faculty Publications*. 81.

[http://digitalcommons.luthersem.edu/faculty\\_articles/81](http://digitalcommons.luthersem.edu/faculty_articles/81)

## Published Citation

Granquist, Mark Alan. "From the Other Side: Funeral Directors Talk about the Changing Face of Funerals." *Word & World* 34, no. 1 (2014): 31–37. <https://luthersem.idm.oclc.org/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=rfh&AN=ATLA0001971038&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.



# From the Other Side: Funeral Directors Talk about the Changing Face of Funerals

MARK GRANQUIST

One key element in most funerals are those professionals, the funeral directors, who handle the arrangements: from the care and disposition of the body to the details of the visitation, funeral, and burial. These professionals have a distinctive vantage point from which to observe the contemporary aspects of the funeral and to comment on the changes they have seen over the past few decades and the challenges that they currently face. This article will be a compilation of conversations with several funeral directors in the southern Minnesota area, all of whom have had at least twenty years' experience; they represent a range of rural/small town, suburban, and urban settings. Since their reputations are (in large part) their business, and so that they might speak freely, the article will not identify the individual funeral directors by name, but will simply paraphrase their responses. All of these professionals were interested in sharing their experiences and perspectives for the benefit of clergy and others in the church.

All of the funeral directors interviewed were, in essence, small businessmen (and all were men, although some of their assistants were women—a recent trend). All of them were graduates of college or university programs in mortuary science and had to pass both professional and state certification in several areas. They

*This report of interviews with funeral directors will provide pastors with insight on funeral trends from the side of these professionals. More, it might serve as an impetus for useful conversations between pastors and funeral directors in their areas.*

operated their own funeral homes (and, in one case, two locations), and many of them had worked their way up the ranks and had eventually bought out the retiring owners for whom they had worked. One said, “This is essentially a service profession, and we have to serve an increasingly diverse population. Sometimes it makes it hard to keep up with trends and developments.” Most of them have built relationships with particular religious congregations and work hard to maintain them. In some areas, they can specialize in certain types of funerals (Roman Catholic, Protestant, or Jewish) but most of them serve a diverse religious (and nonreligious) community. As one of them put it, “You’d be surprised at the number of things we need to know and to be good at.”

---

*one element that almost all of the funeral directors mentioned was a shift in the expected “tone” of funeral services: from a sense of mourning and loss to a stronger emphasis on a “celebration of the life” of the deceased*

---

All of these funeral directors agreed that in the last twenty to thirty years the average American funeral has changed dramatically. This is to say, there is not really anything like an “average” funeral anymore. One said, “You used to be able to predict fairly well what a person’s funeral would be like if you knew their background or affiliations, but now it is almost impossible to predict.” The expectations and needs of the family have also caused important changes, directing both the content of the funeral and its timing. Another suggested, “The timing of funerals is being either compressed or lengthened to meet the [perceived] needs of families,” and he added that both developments are problematic. The very patterns of death and burial are now up in the air; in Minnesota, the rate of cremation is moving toward 50 percent, and although these funeral directors have seen few examples of the trend towards “green burials,” they expect it to be a growing part of their business.

#### *Participants and tone*

These funeral professionals are seeing the shift in America from loosely attached “cultural Christians” to nonaffiliated “spirituals.” One put it this way: “Thirty years ago these people would seek out the church at the time of death, and they’d be almost pathetically grateful for being allowed to have a church funeral. No longer.” Increasingly, this segment of the population chooses to hold their funerals in a variety of places: funeral homes, of course, but also cemetery chapels, a variety of non-sacred places, and even outdoor venues. The directors also observe that, because of these shifts, the family dynamics surrounding the funeral are much more complicated, and that they spend a great deal of their time “refereeing” disputes over differing needs and expectations.

One element that almost all of the funeral directors mentioned was a shift in

the expected “tone” of funeral services: from a sense of mourning and loss to a stronger emphasis on a “celebration of the life” of the deceased. There has always been an element of this, they recalled, and the place of the eulogy or other such element in funerals has always been an issue, but now the tendency towards “personalizing” the funeral to focus on the life of the deceased person has become very strong. One found these “celebrations” to be “a way of avoiding grief, of putting on a brave face and denying the reality of death.” Another described his discomfort with the prevalence of eulogies in the funeral service, especially a practice of encouraging members of the congregation to come forward and speak impromptu during the service, comparing it (negatively) to “the open mike for drunken toasts at a wedding reception.” There is generally a shift away from tradition to informality, from hymns to contemporary music, and from grief and mourning to attempts at upbeat celebrations. However, one urban funeral director suggested that people are still looking for elements of tradition; as he put it, “tradition sells,” in that people are often looking for meaningful rituals surrounding death, although they are less likely to accept the theological meanings inherent in the rituals that they choose.

### *Timing*

To a person, these funeral directors observed that the traditional timing of funerals has become generally disrupted. The usual pattern would be to hold a community funeral at a church or funeral home between two and five days after a death, with a visitation at the funeral home the afternoon and evening before the funeral. The trends they see are either to compress this schedule or to elongate it, either “doing it all on one day,” with the visitation just prior to the funeral, or waiting to have a funeral or memorial service until weeks or even months after the death. Most of them commented negatively on both developments, suggesting that both tend to disrupt the normal patterns of grieving and are difficult for the wider community, the family, or both.

One funeral director decried the trend toward the “one-day” funerals (with visitation just prior) as tough on the community, suggesting “many people might not be able to come and participate in the process.” Another worried about the effects of the same-day visitation on the family, stating that “most people arrive ten to fifteen minutes before the service, and there is a logjam of people talking with the family just as we need to get them prepared for the service itself.” In this case, the family cannot concentrate on interacting with the friends and community members, which is frustrating for everyone. One director said that, increasingly, emphasis seems to be on making everything fit into the busy schedules of the family, but he commented, “Death isn’t convenient, and death doesn’t work around our schedules. We really ought to take out time from our busy lives to do these important things up right.”

On the other end of the spectrum are the funerals or memorial services held weeks or months later. Usually this is done to meet the needs of far-flung and scat-

tered family members, but, in the eyes of these funeral directors, the end result is often less than satisfactory. They see it as essentially disrupting the process of grief. People cannot use the ritual and ceremonies of the funeral for some sense of closure but have to do this privately. They also suggested that such delayed funerals or memorial services seem to them “awkward” and “unsatisfactory,” and that the lapse of time makes for an air of artificiality. One observed that these delayed rituals are also tough on the friends and community members of the deceased, who often are not informed (or forget) about services set far into the future; he commented, “The family misses the presence of the wider community, and the wider community misses the chance to console the family.”

### *Cremation*

One area of these new developments, the trend toward cremation, was the subject of much discussion. The funeral directors generally realized that this was probably a permanent trend, but they were worried about some of its aspects. Some speculated that some of the prevalence of cremation was sometimes due to the family’s desire for convenience and control, that they could have their loved one cremated and then deal with the rest when “the time was right.” But as one of them points out, “Death and grief cannot be scheduled; they are by nature disruptive, and cannot be managed.” Others saw this trend toward cremation as a means, for some, of shortchanging or denying grief, in the vein of “out of sight, out of mind.” A number of them worried about the negative effects of not having a physical body as a point of reference in the visitation and funeral process, almost, one suggested, to the point of “denying death, or sanitizing it.” One funeral director suggested that if families want cremation, they might consider “having the body physically present for the visitation and funeral, and then have the remains cremated afterwards.” Others have heard family members declare that cremation was “easier” on the grieving family than dealing with the burial of a body, but one at least thought the opposite was probably true. All of these funeral directors said that they would certainly work with whatever requests the families had, including cremation, but many of them had their reservations about it.

### *Planning*

A number of these funeral directors expressed surprise and dismay at the numbers of funerals they hold currently where neither the deceased nor their families had done any advanced planning of the funeral. In the middle of death and grief, the survivors essentially are left with few resources on which to build a funeral, and often such efforts turn out awkward and perfunctory. One noted, “At least when we had some common funeral rituals and elements, people had settled traditions on which they could draw. Now they are trying to put something meaningful together in a rush.” They suggested that this was one of the areas where pastors and churches could assist the families and the funeral directors, both in providing resources and in encouraging advance planning. One observed, “The

best funerals we generally have are when the deceased has provided clear wishes and guidelines for their funeral, and when the family has a clear sense of what they themselves want.” They worried that the churches no longer really talk about death and how to handle it, so that when the time comes, people do not know what to do. One of them observed, “Many people still want some form of tradition or ritual, but they really don’t know how to do it well,” thus suggesting that this was a way for pastors to provide assistance and direction.

---

*they worried that the churches no longer really talk about death and how to handle it, so that when the time comes, people do not know what to do*

---

Some of the funeral directors commented on how the families now have different expectations of pastors at funerals, especially those who are only marginally connected with churches (if at all). Most people still want a clergyperson present and officiating at their loved ones’ funerals, but they are now more assertive about what they expect from that clergyperson. Some of these families are now tending to see the clergy as essentially the “facilitators” of their funerals, wanting something “meaningful but not too religious,” according to one funeral director. Another put it this way: “Families are still looking for a pastor, but they want someone who will not necessarily challenge them.” Still, these funeral directors thought that doing funerals for these disaffected or marginally affiliated families was an “important opening for pastors to connect with these families in a meaningful way,” although they noted that this was often a tricky thing to do.

#### *Place of the family*

One area that caused much comment was the growing complexity of family and relational structures during the funeral and grief process, especially now with the prevalence of broken families, stepfamilies, blended families, and just plain outright dysfunctional families. A number of these funeral directors remarked that they, and the clergy, spend much of their time refereeing family disputes that are either worsened or awakened by the process of a loved one’s death. Differing expectations, often widely divergent, sometimes make coming to any sort of consensus about funeral arrangements a real challenge. One related the story of a family that consisted of both religious and nonreligious persons which, in the funeral planning process, was deeply conflicted about the nature of the service itself. Finally, in a desperate attempt to find some common ground, the family requested of the funeral director and the pastor that the funeral be religious in nature, but “without mentioning God.” Again, the point was made that preplanning or making one’s wishes clear to one’s family was a way to avoid (or at least to minimize) such conflicts. One funeral director suggested that they and pastors needed to be “nimble” in such situations and not to expect that families have either a clear plan

of procedure for funerals or even much of a consensus about the basic purposes of a funeral in the first place.

### *Funeral directors and clergy*

One area frequently mentioned was the nature of the working relationship between the funeral directors and the clergy. All of these funeral directors went out of the way to stress two things: first, that the working relationship between the two professionals was of the utmost importance to a successful funeral; and second, that these funeral directors, by and large, felt that they had a very good relationship with most of their local pastors. One funeral director mentioned, “We cannot do our jobs without the assistance of pastors, and we hope that we are of as much help to the pastors as they are to us.” Most of them said that they encouraged pastors to meet with them outside of the funeral process, especially when taking a new call or pastoral position. “I get to know a lot about how the local congregations work, and what their culture is,” one observed, “and, to be honest, how your predecessors did or did not work out. I’d be glad to share whatever insights I could.” These funeral directors also felt that developing a good initial working relationship was extremely helpful. “It’s important to me to get to know you, your style, and what you expect out of the funeral process,” one said. “If I know what you want and expect, I can work more easily with the families when they come to see me.”

One thing that many of these funeral directors stressed was the effectiveness of a pastor’s personal visitation with the grieving family; they felt that this made a huge difference—not only in the successful funeral—but also in long-term relationships between the families and the pastors. Several of them stressed that meeting with the bereaved family in their home before the funeral (actually to begin the planning process) was a huge positive for many families. One observed, “I think it is of much greater effectiveness if the pastor goes out and into the family home right after the death, both to begin the grieving process, and to begin to think about the funeral. A few families won’t want this, but most of them will appreciate that you made the offer. It is always much better than meeting at the church, in your office, if you can manage it.” Again and again, these funeral directors stressed how important and effective the small, personal elements are at this time, and that families will remember small gestures and details. One suggested that this is of most importance in dealing with unchurched or marginal members: “I can’t tell you the number of times that you can really make an inroad into people’s lives and relations with the church if you go the extra mile for them at the time of death.”

Most of the funeral directors did not want to criticize specific clergy but, when pressed, did relate stories regarding particularly bad examples of pastoral care that they had witnessed. One of them related an incident where a clergyperson showed up at a funeral having never met with the family ahead of time. The director said, “The clergyperson waved me over, pointed to a group of people sitting in the front, and asked me, ‘Who are these people?’ I said, ‘They are the family of the deceased.’” Worse, said the director, “This was a family that was fairly prominent,

both in the community and in the congregation.” Another worried that some clergy are too interested in personalizing the service, to the point where it can become simply a testimonial. He said, “Preach to them, give them something to hold on to, to think about. This is one point in their lives when they really want to listen to your sermon, so make it a good one.” One funeral director remarked, “The good and successful clergy are those who really know how to listen and to work with families. I watch pastors work all the time, and I can tell which ones will be a success, and which ones will be moving on shortly.”

---

***“Preach to them, give them something to hold on to, to think about. This is one point in their lives when they really want to listen to your sermon, so make it a good one.”***

---

Certainly any gathering of clergy could also be coaxed to relate similar stories about difficult and frustrating funeral directors, so the door swings both ways. On the other hand, one would hope that clergy would be equally appreciative of the good funeral directors with whom they work, recognizing the valuable ministry of these professionals—a ministry that can be of great importance to families in times of grief and stress. A good working relation between clergy and funeral directors is very important, especially as the whole social phenomenon of death rituals, grieving, and funerals becomes more complex and more divergent. ⊕

*MARK GRANQUIST is associate professor of church history at Luther Seminary, Saint Paul, Minnesota. He currently serves as chair of the Word & World board.*