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What's Your
Cultural IQ?

Honoring
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Cremation
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is Good for
Business

by Holly Escudero

It's no secret that consumers' increasing preference for cremation is impacting the traditional funeral home business model. Because cremation services generally produce lower revenue, many funeral home owners are expanding their product and service offerings. Others are discovering ways to serve the needs of new groups within their communities.

As reported in IBISWorld industry research and echoed in the NFDA's 2023 Cremation & Burial Report, "It is predicted that funeral homes will continue to expand their array of extra services offered to families; increase their focus on niche markets to differentiate themselves; and draw attention to their value-added services, such as ... serving groups with diverse cultural and religious preferences."

Cultural differences play a significant role in funeral practices and the better we understand the religious and cultural diversity of our communities, the greater our opportunity to serve those groups. Ask yourself three questions:

1. What is the religious and cultural makeup of my community?
2. Am I proactively reaching out to diverse groups?
3. What am I doing to better understand and accommodate unique funeral customs and rituals in my area?

Breaking Down Cultural Barriers

In Orange County California, for example, our team at The Omega Society was contacted by a writer for *Orange Network*, the monthly magazine of the Orange County Japanese American Association. She was writing a story to inform and educate the local Japanese American community to the range of funeral, cremation and burial options available from the Society.

Southern California has the largest Japanese American population in North America, and many adhere to the beliefs of the Shinto faith. The writer told us that in Shintoism, terminal illness, dying and death are considered "impure," making frank discussions of death and dying very difficult and even taboo. The result is a population with insufficient knowledge of end-of-life care and local resources available to assist them when the need arises.

Our Omega Society location leader met with this writer for a tour of our facility and a wide-ranging discussion that included cremation options, costs, the advantages of prepayment, and options for the disposition of cremated remains. The resulting article did a great deal to shed light on this important subject and positioned The Omega Society as a caring local partner with professionals ready to assist the Japanese American community with all their funeral service needs.

This is just one example of funeral professionals who are filling unmet community needs and finding new markets among diverse cultural and religious communities.

Honoring Buddhist Traditions

Located 20 miles southeast of downtown Portland, the city of Happy Valley is one of the most diverse communities in Oregon, including an Asian population of more than 22 percent. Our Sunnyside Funeral, Cremation and Memorial Gardens has worked with local Buddhist temples to serve this community for more than 60 years. Buddhists believe that the soul is reincarnated; death is not the end, so it is not to be dreaded. Most Buddhist



Opposite page: The Sunnyside Funeral, Cremation and Memorial Gardens Buddha Tower. Above: Buddhist Services at Little Chapel of the Chimes

societies cremate their dead to purify and free the soul, and aid in the attainment of enlightenment—just as The Buddha himself was cremated.

"Although funeral services can vary by sect of Buddhism, all are beautiful, meaningful celebrations in which family members participate over a two-day period," said Sunnyside General Manager Samantha Haxton. "Common elements include an invocation to the Buddha, offerings of food and flowers, readings from Buddhist scriptures and a procession of monks. The body of the deceased is transported to our crematory on the second day, where final chanting and praying proceed cremation. Some of our Buddhist families choose to permanently memorialize their loved ones by interring their cremated remains at their temple and many are placed at our Sunnyside Memorial Garden near a large statue of Buddha."

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Please join us for a Dia de los Muertos celebration for the whole family!

DIA DE LOS MUERTOS

Saturday, Oct. 29, 10am-4pm

JOIN US FOR:

- Face Painting Station
- Live Mariachi Band
- Candles & Blessing
- Out of Area Protection Booth
- Food provided by Ochoa Mexican Restaurant
- Sweets & treats provided by La Imperial Bakery

Also free drawing for:

- Out of Area Protection Plan (\$500 value)

Special Pricing Offers:

- \$500 off Property Certificate
- \$200 off Cremation Package Pre-arrangements

VALLEY MEMORIAL PARK AND FUNERAL HOME
503-648-5444
3929 SE Indian Valley Highway
Hillsboro, OR 97123

Above: Valley Memorial's Day of the Dead Facebook post.

Celebrating the Day of the Dead

Samantha and her Sunnyside team also serve many Mexican families in the Portland suburb of Hillsboro, where nearly one-third of residents identify as Hispanic or Latino. Annual Dia de los Muertos (Day of the Dead) celebrations, held in late October/early November, are extremely important to these families.

Rooted in the rituals of the aboriginal American Indian cultures that evolved in Mexico and Central America and later adopted as All Souls Day in the Catholic Church, Dia de los Muertos is a Mexican holiday in which the spirits of the dead are believed to return home and spend time with their relatives. Families build altars and decorate them with yellow marigolds, candles, family photos and tissue-paper skulls to honor their deceased loved ones. Food and beverage offerings are a large part of the celebrations.

During Valley Memorial's Dia de los Muertos celebration, the community gathers to "revel in the spirit of those who live on in our hearts." Residents are invited to bring photos or mementos of their deceased loved ones to contribute to a communal altar, share in stories, enjoy Mariachi music, and dine at food trucks. A local Catholic priest conducts a brief service in Spanish at the altar, which is placed at the foot of the statue of Our Lady of Guadeloupe, who holds a special place in the religious life of Mexico.

While the majority of Mexican Americans still choose traditional burial, Samantha says cremation is increasingly popular among families of Mexican origin in the Portland area.

Providing Cross-border Funeral Services

In a country where ancestors are honored and death is regarded as a constant presence, another Mexican tradition is the wish to be buried in one's place of origin. At Mexico City International Airport, more than 300 bodies arrive each month and this is just one of many ports of entry for remains from the U.S.

Our bilingual team at Samaritan Funeral & Cremation Services, with two locations in Phoenix, Arizona, is on the front lines of repatriation of remains for the area's Mexican population. English is a second language for 30 to 40 percent of Samaritan's clients. Our team works closely with the local Mexican consulate and has built a solid reputation for compassionately and professionally serving families who wish to ship their loved ones' remains back to their native countries.

"No other funeral home in Phoenix does as many 'ship outs' as Samaritan," said Venitria Curtis, lead funeral director. "Traditional burial remains the most popular choice for Hispanic families in our area, but that is slowly changing with many more Mexican American families choosing cremation. In the past, we would not even discuss cremation with a Hispanic family, but today that conversation has become much more acceptable. The trend began about eight years ago, but the COVID-19 pandemic played a big part in accelerating acceptance of cremation among these families."

Understanding New Vatican Guidance on Handling Cremins

Although the Vatican forbade cremation for centuries, the Church amended its Code of Canon Law in 1963 to lift the ban on cremation with several caveats, including one stipulating that ashes must be placed in a proper vessel in a "sacred" place and may not be scattered or divided among family members. Cremation has been gaining popularity in American Catholic communities ever since. The Vatican provided further instruction on the disposition of cremated remains in 2016 and, today, nearly one-third of American Catholic families opt for cremation.

Additional guidance from the Vatican on handling cremated remains was issued in December 2023 in response to the increasing numbers of Catholics who want to scatter the ashes of their loved ones in nature. The Vatican Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith upheld the rule mandating that the ashes



Above: Our Lady of Guadeloupe—Valley Memorial Park.

of the deceased be preserved in a consecrated place, but also said family members could request “a minimal part of the ashes” be kept in a sacred place of “significance for the history of the deceased person.” The dicastery also said a parish or diocese could establish “a defined and permanent sacred place” where the cremains of multiple people would be commingled and preserved together.


While the new instructions may seem like good news for many Catholics, the practical application of these rules are not crystal clear. Steve Trevino, a 45-year funeral service veteran, founder and current funeral director at Ponderosa Valley Funeral Services in Parker, Colorado, said this issue has caused many discussions with families over the years.

“As active members of the local Roman Catholic community, my wife, Nanci, and I serve a large number of Catholic families and they have been requesting options for memorializing their cremated loved ones for a long time,” Steve said. “We don’t represent the Church, but we share the rules as we know them, and this issue has caused many families to walk away from those discussions very disappointed. Many have opted to disregard church rules. The bottom line for funeral professionals is that our obligation is to each family we serve and it’s their decision. We always advise families to seek the advice of their priests.”

Steve and Nanci reached out to several local priests following the dissemination of the new guidelines and received feedback contrary to the popular interpretation of the new rules. This is an

area that will require further clarification from the Vatican and one that funeral professionals in Catholic communities will be wise to monitor.

Cultural and Religious Diversity are Here to Stay

The shift in ethnicities and increasingly diverse funeral traditions across the United States will only accelerate in the years ahead. As funeral professionals, it’s our job to learn about and appreciate the different cultures and religions present in our communities. We need to make ourselves seen in these communities and let families know we are available and ready to serve them in keeping with their unique customs and rituals surrounding death and mourning. Do your research, build relationships and provide support to all segments of your changing community. Differentiating your funeral home by understanding and accommodating all types of funerals will help you remain a trusted service leader for years to come. 



Holly Escudero is Vice President for Foundation Partners' Northwest Area. She is responsible for overseeing and supporting more than 250 team members in 100 locations in the states of Washington, Oregon and Idaho.

RICK TUSS

CHARLOTTE MEMORIAL FUNERAL
HOME, CEMETERY & CREMATORY

“MY ONLY
REGRET:
I WISH
I'D SOLD
SOONER.”



Our funeral business experienced significant growth, but along with it came the challenge of managing back-office tasks with a busy schedule serving families. The turning point came when I decided to sell my business to Foundation Partners Group. Our families continue to receive the same expert level of care they’ve always known, while the staff benefits from partnership with a larger organization. Deciding whether or not to sell your business is a deeply personal choice. I wish I’d done it sooner.

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