



Victory over the grave.(Serenity Funeral Service)(Brief Article)

albertareport Alberta Report; 5/8/2000; SMITHSON,
CARLA

A group of Edmonton churches unites to provide low-cost funerals

After conducting 27 funerals in just the first six months of 1999, Raymond Rueb, pastor of Edmonton's Southside Pentecostal Assembly, concluded that churches ought to expand their role in the dying business. "My philosophy is that churches used to be the educational centres, but gave that up and are now trying to take it back again," he explains. "It's the same thing with the funeral business."

One particular funeral cemented his desire to act on this conviction. "It was the direct cremation of a 50-year-old," he says. "I asked the widow what it cost, and with only the basics of an urn, a chapel service for 30 and a light lunch, the price was \$6,000." Angered and shocked that a woman who supported herself by working for minimal wages as a hotel housekeeper had to go into debt to pay for her husband's funeral, Pastor Rueb took action.

Research by members of his congregation revealed that there was room for competition on price. They found casket prices, for example, marked up as much as 500%. With support from his church board, Rev. Mr. Rueb began recruiting other churches to his vision of a co-operative not-for-profit funeral service. By November, Serenity Funeral Service was born--but not without labour pains.

"We're a threat to those who oversell funeral services," says Serenity director Garry Rohr. Because the company is not driven by the profit motive, Mr. Rohr says it can price its services an average of \$1,000 lower than commercial funeral suppliers. Congregants of the more than 30 member churches (which pay \$1,000 to join the co-op) are guaranteed a minimum of \$250 off Serenity's quoted prices. Mr. Rohr has helped people cancel contracts with other funeral sellers within the 30-day waiting period, or transferred "pre-need" contracts from companies that use the same insurance company Serenity employs, with the promise of a rebate to the estate at the time of death.

When Serenity was applying for a licence, other funeral homes had concerns about competing with a non-profit church group. "There were questions, especially about pre-need sales," says Stan King, chairman of the Alberta Funeral Services Regulatory Board. Provincial regulations prohibit telephone, door-to-door and high-pressure sales of funeral services, and competitors were nervous that a church-run business would gain an unfair advantage by marketing from the pulpit. "This is

something totally different," says Mr. King. "Everybody is just trying to figure out how this works. It takes time for the market to adjust."

A few other non-profit funeral services are operating in Canada and in general they have not overwhelmed the market, says Gary Carmichael, vice-president of government and corporate affairs for Howard and McBride Funeral Homes. "The death rate is 100% and the population is aging," he says. "There will always be new providers for services. If you provide service and value to families, profit or non-profit, the public will continue to use you."

Unlike its competitors, Serenity is not just in the market for cadavers, but souls too. "We are focused on helping people," says Mr. Rohr. "It is a way for churches to connect with the unchurched."

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