



Changes forecast for 21st century. (new funeral industry services)(Brief Article)



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By 2010, as baby boomers move into their golden years, the death rate in the U.S. will climb to epic proportions and death care hardly will resemble what we know today, according to industry experts. Predictions call for a major change in customs and education, as well as who controls the businesses and how they will be run, all of which greatly will shape funerals in the next century.

There are many ways that funeral traditions are changing already, and perhaps the most prevalent and obvious is in the increases seen in cremations, indicates Jon Thomas, president of Thomas-Pierce & Co., Tallahassee, Fla., an acquisition firm that buys up independent funeral homes and cemeteries to form chains of such facilities. In south Florida, for example, cremation has risen from less than 10% to more than 60% in two decades.

As a result, new services and products will be offered for cremation clients, suggests Susan R. Little, a death care financial analysis expert with Raymond James & Associates, St. Petersburg, Fla. Today's average traditional funeral, according to the National Funeral Directors' Association, costs about \$4,700, excluding vault charges, and cremations average about \$1,200, she points out.

Just because people decide to cremate their loved ones doesn't mean they want to skip the services and some of the options available to those who select a full burial. Thus, there will be chapel services, visitations, and other choices more commonly viewed as going along with burials, Little notes. There is a wider selection of cremation merchandise in the types of containers used for remains, from stainless steel cylinders to necklace lockets, and a full line of crematable caskets, ranging from paper with cloth covering to wooden models.

Another trend will be a rise in the purchase of pre-need plans, she says. "More and more people want to pay ahead of time so their families aren't burdened with it. A large group of people moving into the upper age [bracket] are more sophisticated consumers and they're planning ahead." Convenience will be paramount in the future. Thomas maintains. As a result, there will be more funeral homes built on cemetery land, along with a consolidation of services including funeral and burial or cremation, all at one location. This trend of combination funeral home and cemetery facilities is occurring nationwide, with California and Florida leading the way.

Services also will be shorter, suggests Eugene Ogradnik, president and CEO of the Pittsburgh (Pa.) Institute of Mortuary Science. "People are opting for more abbreviated kinds of services, including purchasing less expensive merchandise." Many will be held without the body present, and the eulogy will reflect the life of the deceased and the loved ones they leave behind, rather than dwell on death.

This change of attitude as bringing with it a new look for funeral homes, Thomas indicates. By the year 2010, expect to see more pastels and brighter, lighter walls and furnishings inside the funeral home, with more windows and light. "Ceremonies will be more a celebration of life in the future than a mourning of death. Services will be more casual and more focused on the needs of the living."

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