

CEREMONIAL LEADERS AND FUNERAL PRACTICES:

The Role Relationships of Clergy and Funeral Directors in Newfoundland

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Abstract

In the Western Christian tradition, the primary ceremonial leader of a funeral was the local clergy. However, with the rise of the professional funeral industry, funeral directors emerged as a second group of ceremonial leaders. These individuals orchestrate the preparation and disposal of the body, and are increasingly involved in providing "aftercare" for families.

This paper analyses the conflicts which might occur between these two professions, both of which organize the marking of death in our culture. After a discussion of sociological research on this role conflict, the paper presents data from a 1999 mail survey of clergy in Newfoundland and Labrador. The survey covered the clergy's own reflections on their interactions with funeral professionals. The paper concludes with observations on how changes in one profession's terrain can influence the operation of other, closely aligned, professions.¹

¹ I would like to thank all of those who gave willingly of their time to respond to the questionnaire which forms the nucleus of the data reported herein. The survey, weighing in at about 10 pages, was rather tortuous to complete, but it has provided me (and maybe them, in the end) with a wealth of data. In addition, special thanks go to Pastor Fred Stacey and Reverend Clayton Parsons for their assistance in pre-testing the questionnaire, and to the J.R. Smallwood Centre for Newfoundland Studies for financial assistance.

Those who would do away with the chief rituals following death such as wakes, funerals and burials will pay the price of a culture with even more juvenile death-denying ways, haunted by unresolved grief, pent up anger and half-finished relationships (Cassem, 1976: 20).

The conflict [between undertakers and clergy] that exists is a very fundamental one, lying on the level of the deepest values, and reflecting the opposition of secular and religious ideals (Bowman, 1959: 61).

The funeral is not about caskets and rituals. The funeral is about mental health and healing (Doug Manning, cited in Batesville Casket Company, 1999).

One of the defining marks of our species, it has been said, is the care with which we dispose of our dead. According to Archaeologists, humans have paid special attention to their dead for about as long as there is an archaeological record of our species. Some of the early graves, for example, contain pollen from flowers which did not grow in the immediate area of the gravesite. Thus, someone brought specific flowers to place with the corpse (a finding that makes florists nod knowingly). Indeed, for many who study funeral customs (whatever their disciplinary name tag), the rituals around death can illustrate the structure and fundamental assumptions of a culture. Just as we infer from the burial sites of extinct peoples to their lived culture, the tensions and social forces within our own contemporary culture can be seen in our customs around death and disposal.

Furthermore, some have argued that such attention to funeral rituals was necessary or functional for the long-term survival of cultures (see Cassem, 1976; Mandelbaum, 1959). On an individual level, grief therapists remind us that unresolved and/or complicated grief can have significant effects on our functioning (Corr et al., 1997). Apart from meeting the obvious need to dispose of that which has begun to decompose, the funeral has clear and significant functions within cultures. But these functions, and the rituals behind them, are not static. This paper begins with the assumption that funerals are a central human ritual event. Funerals have been subject to change, not just in their form, but also in the reasons we tell each other for their very existence and importance.

The specific locus of interest in the paper is the interaction between the two major professional leaders of funerals within our culture, the clergy and the funeral services professional. Traditionally in Newfoundland and Labrador, the family, community and clergy were responsible for decisions regarding the care of the newly-dead and the burial. These decisions were often determined by prior traditions, local customs and church doctrine. But to have another player on the scene, the funeral director, is a rather new development in the province (and some regions still do not have access to funeral professionals). Due to this time-line, we can see some of the changes in the interactions between these two professional groups more clearly here than in most other regions of North America.

In the analysis of this issue, the paper is divided into four major sections, as follows: (i) a consideration of the literature on the relationship between funeral directors and clergy; (ii) the findings on this relationship from a 1999 survey of working clergy in Newfoundland and Labrador (n=172); (iii) a discussion of the functions of funerals; and (iv) the implications of

these changes in the functions/purposes of funerals. The paper then concludes by confirming that the changes we are seeing in practices a part of the general secularization process and a re-shifting of professional turf between clergy and funeral directors.

The Relationship: Clergy and Funeral Professionals

The North American literature on the clergy-funeral professionals relationship begins in the late 1950s. One of the first to publish on this relationship was Robert Fulton, who conducted a survey in 1959 on the attitudes of clergy toward funerals and funeral directors (in the US) (Fulton, 1961; Fulton, 1988). He found that clerical criticism of the funeral director and of funeral practices was both widespread and intensive. Two major criticisms were: (i) the funeral director dramatized the presence of the body while ignoring spiritual matters; and (ii) the funeral director took undue advantage of the bereaved. A third unstated (but implicit) criticism was that by preparing bodies of all faiths, and even of people without standard religious faith, the funeral director was open to a charge of paganism (Fulton, 1988: 262). It should be noted that these negative feelings on the part of clergy were not due to personal experience, but were more generalized attitudes about funeral direction as a profession.

The first criticism that Fulton noted was also recognized by another author of the time. In 1959, Bowman maintained that: "Clergymen of all faiths are often alarmed when they witness the exaggeration of the importance of the physical remains in comparison with the spiritual aspects of the funeral" (Bowman, 1959: 64). While they may seem to play complementary roles

during the funeral service, and they may act amicably toward each other, Bowman argued that there was a fundamental opposition between funeral directors and clergy. One was concerned with secular matters (body disposal) while the other was focussed on theological matters (liturgical correctness, a farewell to the soul). If, however, a family lacks any strong religious convictions, then the importance of the funeral director will be enhanced. The funeral director thus becomes the accredited expert to seek out and follow, rather than a member of the clergy.

In the mid-1970s, the US Federal Trade Commission was engaged in an evaluation of the funeral services industry. During this time they funded a variety of studies, including one on the attitudes of clergy toward funeral directors (Kalish and Goldberg, 1978). While it was a national sample, only 545 surveys were sent out, and 113 returned (a rather limited sample). The findings indicated generally positive evaluations of funeral directors and funeral practices, although there was a significant minority who provided negative comments. There was also some feeling that there needed to be more consumer protection regarding funerals, but this may be an artifact of the purpose (and funding agency) for the article. Throughout (and especially compared to Fulton's findings), there appeared to be a cautious optimism about the relationship.

Since my own survey asked a number of similar questions regarding funeral directors, it is possible to compare the findings on a number of items. In this section of the survey, clergy were asked: "Based on your experience, how would you rate the current effectiveness of funeral directors on the following tasks." Recorded below is the percentage who answered "very good" or "good" to specific funeral director skills (Kalish and Goldberg, 1978: 251).

TABLE 1: EVALUATIONS OF THE SKILL OF FUNERAL DIRECTORS

% answering very good/good	Kalish and Goldberg, 1978	Emke, 1999
Helping survivors to cope	64	77.9
Not taking advantage of grief	43	81.4
Following theological instructions	72	85.6
Making price information available	50	81.3
Permitting bereaved time	52	81.5
Giving honest and complete information	60	80.4

In general, Newfoundland respondents were much more favourably disposed toward funeral directors than the sample from Kalish and Goldberg. To tease out which variable is responsible for this difference would be well-nigh impossible. They are 20 years apart, taken in different social and cultural contexts. Maybe clergy in Newfoundland and Labrador tend to deal with family-operated funeral homes, rather than the more bureaucratic chain-operated funeral homes elsewhere. Also, the size of the community may make a difference, as small Newfoundland and Labrador funeral homes cannot afford to be seen as being insensitive or taking undue advantage of their clients. Whatever the reason for the differences, the significant fact to note is the very high evaluations of the work of funeral professionals, especially related to their ability to work within the doctrinal constraints of the clergy.

As with the current study, Kalish and Goldberg also found that few clergy either recommended a funeral home or accompanied the survivors to the home for the initial arrangement interview. The caution that does get expressed is not so much related to funeral directors taking advantage of the bereaved, but that funeral professionals cannot provide the spiritual support needed at a time of loss.

After recognizing that researchers had largely relied upon Fulton's 1959 study, Bradfield and Myers (1980) decided that there was a need for an update on how clergy were feeling about funeral directors, especially in relation to who had control over a funeral. They began by providing examples of conflict in various communities in the US from the 1930s to the 1960s. These were small-scale and sometimes denominationally-limited protests, which were dealt with locally (and none of them ever became national protests). Bradfield and Myers then asked, "who is the expert when it comes to funerals? The clergy or funeral director?" For those without a connection to a church, the funeral director clearly becomes seen as the ceremonial leader, who knows what has to be done, not only for secular government purposes, but also to show proper respect for the deceased. Even the name "funeral director," implies their position.

The data gathering of Bradfield and Myers involved sending a questionnaire (based on Fulton's earlier survey) to 275 Lutheran clergy (120 usable surveys were returned). Due to the sampling procedure (and sample size), the study is not widely generalizable. The survey found that clergy saw funeral directors as business people, or professionals and businesspeople (a dual role), but not strictly as professionals. The role conflict which did exist decreased as funeral directors became more "professionalized." About a third of the respondents had not experienced any conflict with funeral directors, but they recognized the need for more understanding and

communication to accept each others' roles. In sum, Bradfield and Myers found less conflict between clergy and funeral directors than would be suggested by Fulton's earlier findings.

Nevertheless, there was some role overlap (if not outright conflict). For example, the clergy did give advice on monetary matters (and funeral directors sometimes interpret this advice as being outside the mandate of clergy). Three of the surveys mentioned in this paper asked a similar question, regarding whether the clergy accompanied the bereaved family to the funeral home to make the initial plans (which would include deciding on which services/products to purchase). The following shows the responses in Bradfield and Myers (1980), Kalish and Goldberg (1978) and Emke (1999), to the question about whether clergy accompany family to the funeral home.

TABLE 2: DO YOU ACCOMPANY FAMILIES TO THE FUNERAL HOME FOR THE INITIAL ARRANGEMENTS INTERVIEW? (in percentages)

	Bradfield & Myers, 1980	Kalish & Goldberg, 1978	Emke, 1999
Never	20	33	23.8
Seldom	55	25	36.6 (rarely)
Usually	11	32 (occasionally)	28
Most of the time	5	11 (frequently)	7.9 (usually)
All of the time	9		3.7 (always)

Thus, Bradfield and Myers seem to be significantly different from the other two. If "never" and "seldom/rarely" are put together, this produces the following results: Bradfield & Myers: 75%;

Kalish and Goldberg: 58%; Emke: 60.4%. It could well be that the Bradfield and Myers results reflect the denominational limits of their sample (and the practice of Lutheran clergy to avoid being involved in initial product decisions).

Several years later, Bradfield and Myers (1982) again studied these role relationships, but this time from the point of view of the funeral directors. The dramaturgical studies of funeral directing acknowledge the importance of carefully managing the minister at a funeral, who is one of the "most potentially troublesome" actors. In this study, which surveyed 110 funeral directors, the findings indicated that the most conflict was over the overlapping role of grief counselling, the location of funerals, and inappropriate incursions of clergy into funeral directors' space (such as accompanying the family in casket selection rooms). According to Bradfield and Myers, clergy feel that funeral directors play only an instrumental role, whereas clergy play an expressive role in the funeral. However, funeral directors see themselves as having both an instrumental and an expressive role to play (Bradfield and Myers, 1982: 131). For example, the move by funeral professionals to do more grief counselling (an expressive role) is one that is being promoted by the industry itself, and it seems that some clergy may also be starting to accept this.

A final study to be mentioned in this survey of previous research comes from French (1985), who studied both funeral directors and clergy, but was mostly interested in the clergy's responses to changes in funeral practices. The sample consisted of 55 funeral directors, plus 28 Methodist clergy, 29 Episcopalian clergy and 18 Catholic clergy, for a total sample of 130. All respondents were from South Carolina, so the study is not widely generalizable.

The study found general agreement between clergy and funeral directors that funeral practices

were meeting the needs of people, and that current funerals were functional (they helped people cope with death). There were some differences on the purpose of embalming and the emphasis on body preparation, and some clerical criticism of the way that embalming masked death and the money-making around the death industries. However, most clergy felt that they were on good terms with funeral directors. French asks: "Is the public well-served by these good terms? Is the church abdicating its educative and pastoral roles to its parishioners, in failing to equip them with information, sometimes critical of current practice, which will enable them to make well-considered choices? Does the funeral serve its intended function?" (French, 1985: 151).

This discussion of the roles of the two professions can also be seen in the lay literature. Take as an example this comment from the National Selected Morticians' pamphlet "Endings... Reflections on Death, Grief and Funerals" which some of you may have picked up at one of your local funeral homes. In reference to funeral directors, the Right Reverend C. Brinkley Morton states:

I think the funeral director has an important ministry to the family. Most families have not experienced this, at least for a long time. The director knows what to say, and what not to say. He knows what needs to be done and how to give comfort and to help them through that process.

It is important to note here the language, and the reference to a "ministry" and to "giving comfort," both of which imply a blurring of the distinction between funeral directors and clergy. But how widespread is this gradual evolution in the roles of these two professions? The next section provides some answers in the form of findings from a 1999 survey of clergy in Newfoundland and Labrador.

Who's in Charge Here? The Clergy Speak Out

In order to update the above research findings, a survey was sent to approximately 550 clergy members who were currently working in Newfoundland and Labrador. The survey was accompanied by a letter explaining the purpose of the research and assuring the respondents of the confidentiality of their responses. The questions on the survey were divided into four general sections: (i) personal and occupational information; (ii) the roles of clergy and funeral professionals; (iii) the purposes/functions of funerals; and (iv) changes in funeral practices. There were also a number of questions at the end regarding the clergy member's feelings about her/his involvement in funerals.

Who responded: 172 clergy members from across Newfoundland and Labrador.

Their occupational position: 87.1% were ordained/licensed.

Their average length of service in NF/Lab: 13.9 years.

Denomination: As the table below shows, there was a mix of the denominations which are active in the province, with Anglicans and Pentecostals both making a good showing. While about a quarter of the working clergy in the province are Pentecostal (and this percentage is similar to what is in the sample), a quarter of the population of the province is not Pentecostal. Unfortunately, there was not a large representation of Roman Catholics in the sample, compared to the percentage of the population who are Catholic.

TABLE 3: DENOMINATIONAL AFFILIATION (n=172)

Denomination	Frequency	Percent
Anglican	51	29.7
Pentecostal	42	24.4
United	29	16.9
Salvation Army	24	14
Roman Catholic	21	12.2
Other	5	2.9

Gender: 84.3% male

Number of funerals at which they have officiated: The mean was 131, which indicates just under 10 per year on average.

Number of funeral homes they have worked with: On average, they had worked with 4.9 different funeral homes.

Thus, based on their length of service, the number of funerals they have been involved with and the number of funeral homes, the sample represented a highly experienced group of clergy.

A number of questions were included in order to evaluate the views of the clergy on their own role in the funeral, as well as the roles of the family and the funeral director. The answers to the question “In your opinion, what is the role of the clergy in the planning of a funeral?” could be categorized into three major groups, as shown below.

TABLE 4: ROLE OF THE CLERGY (n=170)

Role	Frequency	Percent
Assist family in planning the funeral	88	51.8
Assuring that liturgy/ denom. practices followed	43	25.3
Spiritual support and counselling	39	22.9

Here we see a shift which will be emphasized throughout this paper – the move from theology to psychology as the dominant guiding principle. The fact that providing assistance to the family was considered the primary role of the clergy (and this included tasks such as assisting them in griefwork, achieving closure, etc.) indicates the prominent importance of therapeutic assistance for the living (rather than care for the soul of the dead). Granted, there were still significant concerns about maintaining liturgical correctness, and in providing spiritual support to the family.

TABLE 5: ROLE OF THE FAMILY IN THE PLANNING OF A FUNERAL (n=166)

Role	Frequency	Percent
Make arrangements for the service	112	67.5
Co-operate with the clergy in organizing funeral plans	32	19.3
Carry out wishes of the deceased	15	9
Other	7	4.2

The role of the family is seen as largely one of planning, and often explicitly in concert with the clergy. It is significant, however, that most clergy did see a role for the family (thus, the funeral is not simply a standard recital of denominational ritual, but each one is somewhat unique to the deceased). The “Other” category included five clergy who said the role was to “follow the church’s liturgy” and two who argued that the family had little or no role in planning the funeral.

TABLE 6: ROLE OF THE FUNERAL DIRECTOR IN FUNERAL PLANNING (n=167)

Role	Frequency	Percent
Assist/organize in the background	130	77.8
Exhibit compassion	14	8.4
Preparation of the remains	13	7.8
No role or very minor role	10	6

The clergy did see a legitimate role set aside for funeral directors (only 10 respondents indicated that they did not have a role to play in planning). Furthermore, this role is in relation to the planning of the funeral (and not to the disposal of the body in general). While most clergy recognized that this role would be in the background, several did also mention compassion as the primary role of funeral directors in the planning of a funeral.

The questionnaire also asked about the presence of conflicts between clergy and funeral directors and clergy and family members. In addition, there were questions about how such conflicts could be resolved. These were included as a way to develop a better understanding of

the interaction between clergy and other important players in the funeral situation.

TABLE 7: CLERGY - FUNERAL DIRECTOR ROLE CONFLICT (n=162)

Type of Conflict?	Frequency	Percent
There is no conflict	67	41.4
Funeral director assumes too much control over funeral	42	25.9
Over liturgy or scriptural teachings	22	13.6
Lack of communication	14	8.6
Over committal service or cemetery	6	3.7
Other	11	6.2

Clearly, a very sizeable percentage of the clergy have not experienced conflict, or do not see the roles as conflicting. The major complaint was that funeral directors may assume too much control, and they begin to direct the funeral and make plans without consulting the clergy. Another significant concern is over liturgical matters, and six respondents specifically noted problems over protocol at the cemetery and during the committal service (whether it takes place at the cemetery and whether the casket is actually lowered into the ground as the mourners are gathered around the grave). The “Other” category included four who claimed that funeral directors took financial advantage of families and four who felt that funeral professionals did whatever the family wanted, without any attention to tradition or past practice. However, the

significant finding was the low level of perceived (or actual) conflict between the two roles.

TABLE 8: RESOLVING CLERGY-FUNERAL DIRECTOR CONFLICTS (n=105)

Form of Resolution?	Frequency	Percent
Discussing roles and expectations	80	76.2
Clergy set the boundaries	14	13.3
Compromise between the two positions	5	4.8
Other	6	5.8

As the low number of responses to this question shows, many clergy did not feel that the roles conflicted and so they did not answer this question. Of those who did answer, communication and discussion was clearly the most important strategy. However, it should be noted that clergy and funeral directors rarely communicate before a death has occurred, and they do not get an opportunity to share their own professional assumptions before they are being tested/challenged during a funeral. Thus, much of the communication tends to be after a problem has arisen. As Bradfield and Myers noted regarding clergy and funeral directors: "a great deal of the potential for conflict is built into the roles due to their socio-historical development. However,... open communication between these two principals in the death setting can produce an atmosphere conducive to 'good grief' for the bereaved" (Bradfield and Myers, 1982: 137).

The second resolution strategy, chosen by only 13.3% of the sample, was to "put their foot down" and set the boundaries that the funeral directors would have to follow. After that option

came “compromise,” although those who prefer open communication may be using this strategy as well. The “Other” category included two who said that such conflicts are not resolved and two who preferred to consult the family’s wishes and follow those.

TABLE 9: FAMILY - CLERGY ROLE CONFLICT (n=160)

Types of Conflict?	Frequency	Percent
Family makes inappropriate requests	105	65.6
There is no conflict	17	10.6
Family believes that it is in charge of the funeral	14	8.8
Lack of clergy-family communication	7	4.4
Clergy are inflexible	6	3.8

Conflict over timing and schedules	6	3.8
Conflict within the family results in conflict with clergy	5	3.1

The most common complaint of clergy regarding families is related to inappropriate requests – maybe the use of that theme song from a soap opera or the presence of a prized hunting rifle in the casket or the procession of All-Terrain Vehicles to the graveyard! Many of the respondents provided specific examples of requests which they felt were outside what was liturgically and socially appropriate. While such attempts at personalizing funerals are clearly a growing trend, clergy may not be as whole-hearted in their welcoming of such a shift. Other concerns of clergy included situations when the family thinks it is in charge of the funeral service, or when there are problems in communication either within the family or between the family and the clergy. (Sometimes the family will make changes to their participation in the funeral service without consulting the clergy.) It is also interesting to note that only 10.6% of clergy have not experienced any conflict, which is significantly lower than is the case for funeral directors. This means that clergy are more likely to experience (or perceive) conflicts with family members than with the other professional group involved in funeral planning.

TABLE 10: RESOLVING CLERGY-FAMILY CONFLICTS (n=143)

Form of Resolution?	Frequency	Percent
Discussion	69	48.3
Clergy education on church policy	21	14.7
Compromise	18	12.6
Clergy set the boundaries for family	14	9.8
Clergy are flexible	12	8.4
Conflicts are not resolved	9	6.3

As with the case of conflict with funeral directors, discussion was seen as the best option to resolve conflict with family members. The next most popular option was that the clergy provide more education for family members regarding church policies (some respondents noted that this should occur before the funeral planning stage, to be most effective). Interestingly, "clergy set limits" and "clergy flexibility" have the very same level of support (although they are somewhat contradictory solutions).

In general, as it has been noted above, the working relationship between clergy and funeral directors appears to be rather more productive than what was found in some earlier studies. For example, one question in this survey asked the clergy to comment on their working relationship with funeral directors. The result is very positive, showing a close working relationship.

TABLE 11: IN GENERAL, HOW WOULD YOU CHARACTERIZE YOUR WORKING RELATIONSHIP WITH FUNERAL DIRECTORS? (n=167)

Working relationship	Frequency	Percent
Very good	134	80.2
Good	32	19.2
Neutral	1	.6

There were no negative characterizations of this working relationship, and only one “neutral.” However, a number of respondents noted that their evaluation was based on a current working relationship, and they had had negative experiences with funeral directors in the past. (Or, they would indicate that there were a few funeral directors who were insensitive or who “didn’t fit the mould.”) But in general, this study found that clergy had a very high evaluation of the work of funeral directors.

Clergy were then asked a number of questions related to the most important services that funeral directors provided, and what qualities were particularly necessary for this professional group. Tables 12 and 13 provide the results from these questions.

TABLE 12: WHAT ARE THE MOST IMPORTANT SERVICES WHICH FUNERAL PROFESSIONALS PROVIDE? (n=159)

	Frequency	Percent
Professional expertise & facilities	75	47.2
Care for the family	34	21.4
Caring disposal of remains	21	13.2
Preparation of the body for viewing	21	13.2
Other	8	5.1

TABLE 13: IN YOUR OPINION, WHAT ARE THE KEY QUALITIES OF A GOOD FUNERAL DIRECTOR? (n=163)

	Frequency	Percent
Empathy	94	57.7
Interpersonal skills	31	19
Professionalism	17	10.4
Understands church's role	10	6.1
Other	11	6.7

While professional advice, expertise and equipment were considered to be the most important

services of funeral directors, almost a quarter of the respondents referred to “care for the family” as the most important service. This shows a shift toward seeing a legitimate role for funeral directors in “care” for grieving families. Part of the actual physical core of the work of funeral professionals (care and preparation of the body of the deceased) was acknowledged as important by a number of respondents, but this was not seen as the most important service which was provided. In a 1998 survey of funeral directors and embalmers in Newfoundland, a question was asked: "what are the most important services which the funeral profession provides within our society?" Almost half of the respondents gave an answer that was related to facilitating the grieving process for family members and friends of the deceased (Emke, 1998). Respondents used language such as "healing" and "closure," illustrating the expansion of the role of funeral professionals into quasi-therapeutic tasks. Interestingly, this answer was twice as common as the standard (and anticipated) reply that the profession arranges the disposal of the dead.

In terms of necessary qualities for funeral directors, the 1999 survey shows that empathy is the clear leader, often coming first in a list of qualities. After that is “interpersonal skills,” which often included communication abilities and also had an empathetic component as well.

“Professionalism” referred to organizational skills, bearing and demeanour. It was deemed less important, by the clergy, that funeral directors have a solid understanding of the role of the church (or, at least it was not a major contributing factor in making a person a good funeral director). This listing showed the importance of interpersonal and interactional skills for funeral directors – their job is not simply to prepare bodies and work entirely in the background, but their job is to interact closely with the living.

In her oft-quoted critique of the funeral industry, Jessica Mitford (1963) identified the conflict

between clergy and funeral directors as being related to financial factors. The clergy advocated moderation in spending, she argued, whereas the funeral directors use the purchase of caskets and other merchandise as a way of making their living. And when the clergy begin to advise families on their spending, this might be seen as an inappropriate intrusion on the terrain of funeral directors. This survey asked several questions related to whether clergy were involved in the purchasing decisions of families. Just over 10 percent of the respondents “always” or “usually” helped the bereaved in making product decisions, and another 45.6% “occasionally” did so. When asked about what kind of help was provided, 16.9% of those who answered said that they remind some families of the costs involved and urge them not to overspend. This is by no means a majority activity, but it does represent a significant group of clergy who do (despite good relations with funeral directors) try to exert some influence on funeral purchasing decisions. (Another common piece of financial advice relates to suggestions on “In Memoriam” donations, but this is not strictly related to product purchases.)

Clergy tend not to help in making decisions about which funeral home to use (but there is not a choice in many areas of the province), nor do they accompany family for arrangements meetings (only 15.3% accompany families “always” or “usually”). However, 62.4% of the clergy will “always” or “usually” accompany the family to the funeral home for the initial viewing of the deceased. (Another 22.4% accompany the family “occasionally.”) It is interesting to note that 21% “rarely” or “never” discuss arrangements with funeral directors before they are finalized (which may explain one cause of communication difficulties). Finally, as for the perceived skill levels of funeral directors, there was general support for many of them (see Table 1 above). However, there was decreased support for the skills of funeral directors in the area of aftercare.

For example, the survey asked: “Based on your experience, how would you rate the current effectiveness of funeral directors on the following tasks?” One of these tasks was “Providing the bereaved with ‘aftercare’ (or suggestions/ referrals for grief therapy.” The results are shown below.

TABLE 14: CURRENT EFFECTIVENESS AT AFTERCARE (n=116)

	Frequency	Percent
Very good	8	6.9
Good	24	20.7
Average	50	43.1
Poor	28	24.1
Very poor	6	5.2

First, note the low number of responses to begin with. Many people (22.1% of the original sample) stated that they did not know the answer or they could not judge the effectiveness of funeral directors in this area. However, of those who did answer, almost 30% stated that funeral directors were either “poor” or “very poor” at this task. This is significant, especially given the trend toward more aftercare being provided by funeral professionals. While this is, indeed, an area that funeral workers are developing (and it is an area that overlaps the tasks of clergy), it is the one area of a funeral director’s work that receives the lowest evaluation. Finally, in response to the question of whether clergy had received any orientation from funeral homes when arriving in a new location, over three-quarters said “no,” and another 13% said that the “orientation” was provided just prior to the first funeral that they worked on together. This lack of orientation suggests that clergy and funeral directors often begin their relationship under a certain amount of pressure (both are concerned that the funeral goes well, but they still do not know each other

very well nor do they know exactly what to expect of the other party).

Having considered the survey responses regarding the interplay of clergy and funeral director roles, the paper now moves to a consideration of the functions of funerals and how these might be changing. But first, some discussion of the academic and lay literature on the functions of funeral rituals.

“WHY THE SAD FACE?” -- The changing functions of funerals

In his initial article, Fulton (1961) noted that Catholic clergy viewed the funeral differently than Protestants, that they saw different functions/purposes. Catholics focussed on a time of prayer for the salvation of the soul, and a time to honour the memory and body of the deceased. Protestants saw the funeral as a time to bring peace and understanding to the survivors.

In terms of the functions of funerals, we have seen a slow move from doctrinal and theological purposes such as "preaching the gospel" or "proclaiming the promise of the resurrection" to more psychological purposes such as "closure," "healing," "coming to terms," "expressing support" or "comforting the bereaved." (This shift is illustrated by these survey results as well, as can be seen in the next section.) For example, Romanoff and Terenzio (1998) reaffirm the importance of funeral and mourning rituals to the grieving process. However, they note that current funeral practice often focusses on "letting go" rather than the process of transition (which is crucial for successful grieving). And Walter (1996) also refers to this move from theology to psychology in the area of griefwork, even among the clergy.

But to first lay some groundwork related to the functions of funerals, the following are a

number of lists of the functions and purposes of funerals. In reading them, it is important to look for the common themes, but also for what is “missing” in these lists, especially from the point of view of the clergy.

To begin, here is a list that would be familiar to the education and backgrounds of clergy themselves. This comes from a handbook on funeral sermons, and cites the work of

W.A. Poovey. The five functions of funerals are as follows:

(i) They satisfy the need of people to do something for the dead;

(ii) They help people accept the painful reality of death;

(iii) They provide a time and place for the release of emotions;

(iv) They provide an opportunity for community support for the bereaved;

(v) And, "Most important is the context that the funeral provides in which the church can concentrate on the linch-pin of its faith, the Resurrection" (Richmond, 1990: 29).

Despite the origins of this list, most of the purposes mentioned are generally secular ones. The last function is really the only one that is explicitly “theological.”

According to another source (Weisman, 1976), the functions of a funeral are:

(i) To dispose of the body ;

(ii) A rehearsal of death in reminding us of our mortality;

(iii) A reflection of the values/ expectations of the group that the deceased belonged to;

(iv) A way to honour the dead person, and to endow the situation with dignity (so that the power of death is subverted for a time);

(v) An opportunity for survivors to come together for mutual consolation.

Again, these are primarily secular functions, focussing on the living community which remains.

To look at some lay advice from the funeral industry, this is taken from "Helpful Information About Funerals," a 1996 pamphlet originally published by the Funeral Service Association of British Columbia. It refers to the values of a funeral as five-fold:

(i) Spiritual values (referring to the dimension beyond this reality, something larger, something more profound than human understanding; there is no reference to "God-talk," but spirituality, as we'd expect in secular discussions);

(ii) The value of facing reality (note that this is a common item on these lists);

(iii) The value of expression (a socially acceptable outlet for strong expressions of grief, sorrow, anger, guilt, etc.);

(iv) The value of support (a funeral re-knits a community, and brings people together);

(v) The value of human dignity (we do not let people just fall into a grave, we pay attention to them).

Throughout, all five of these are focussed on the living and what the funeral does for the living.

Here is another secular discussion from the industry, this time written by a student in funeral services, Richard Rancourt (cited in Carnell, 1998: 7-8). Rancourt refers to the value of "funeralization," and lists several reasons why people need funerals, including the following:

(i) Confirming the reality and finality of death (and providing a context and environment for mourning);

(ii) Enabling the community to pay respect (the sorrows of one are seen as the sorrows of many);

(iii) Celebrating a life lived (this can include acknowledgement of the person's faith).

Or, if we were to take a Sociology of Death and Dying perspective, there are a number of cross-

cultural functions of funerals. Three central functions are as follows (see Corr et al., 1997):

(i) Disposing of the body (this is the primary function across cultures, and most everything else is up to cultural whims and demands);

(ii) Making real the implications of death (the funeral ritual is a part of disentangling oneself from the old relationship, recognizing the finality of death and to see the body one last time, not alive and speaking, but cold and silent);

(iii) Reintegration and ongoing living (the funeral rites re-knit a community around the family and group that has lost a member, providing a renewed sense of solidarity).

To take another “insider” account, this comes from the Batesville Casket Company's comments on "The value of the funeral." They quote grief counsellor Doug Manning: "The funeral is not about caskets and rituals. The funeral is about mental health and healing." (An interesting piece of irony for a casket company, it would seem!)

But their functions of the funeral include:

(i) Declares that a death has occurred

(ii) Commemorates the life that has been lived

(iii) Offers family and friends a chance to pay tribute

(iv) Allows the bereaved to adjust to an abruptly altered life

As Batesville concludes: "Your funeral director can suggest a variety of ceremonies that will help you and your family begin the essential grieving process" (Batesville Casket Company, 1999). Here we see funeral professionals as directors of funeral ceremonies, and as being concerned with assisting the living in their grieving.

What one can see through these lists are the rather common threads in the functions of funerals,

but also the shift toward what the ritual can mean in a more secular society. Religion or spirituality may be included at some point, but it is not the central purpose (nor is the funeral to be used to remind us of the possible judgement and afterlife).

Think of what has happened to weddings, the slow changes in liturgy, in the practices, in the dress, in the activities around the wedding, the gradual removal of the church as the central institution and determiner of activities around the wedding. Maybe something similar is happening with funerals, at least in some parts of this country -- the same gradual process of secularization.

It might be useful at this point for us to remind ourselves of the obvious here -- in the Western tradition, broadly speaking, the focus of the funeral has moved from an emphasis on the health of the soul of the deceased to a focus on the living. This was precipitated by the Protestant rejection of the idea of Purgatory, a reduction in the role of the clergy during the Reformation and other assorted social changes. By focussing on the living, some have argued, this opened the gates for plenty of ostentation in funeral rituals (Litten, 1991). This shift is now complete, and currently one hears of the "function" of funerals generally in terms of what they do for the living, not for the deceased (apart from the idea of "honouring their memory," which is still something that is largely for the sake of those currently in conscious attendance).

In a 1991 article, long-time funerals commentator and researcher Dr. Paul Irion, discussed the changing patterns in rituals, associated with major faith traditions in the US. He looked at new funeral rituals/orders in Roman Catholic, United Methodist, United Church of Christ, Lutheran Church and Reform Judaism. He identified six such changes (Irion, 1991):

- (i) An integrated, more comprehensive understanding of the function of ritual (more

instruction for the clergy on the importance of these rituals);

(ii) The funeral is a community function, not a private exercise (the loss of community is emphasized; more widespread participation on the part of mourners; more congregational singing, for example);

(iii) New funeral rituals show an awareness of the importance of facing the reality of death (thus, there is not an entire shift from the deceased to the mourners, but a reminder for those still alive of their unavoidable future; also, a continued space for the body of the deceased as a central feature in the funeral, as this body is the physical reminder of mortality);

(iv) The funeral is set within the context of the mourning process (funerals are only a part of the process of grieving and coming to terms with death; there is a need for extended pastoral care);

(v) The new rituals are responsive to the dynamics of pluralism (while they maintain their denominational stance, they are also sensitive to other faith traditions, and in modern funerals, family members may come from a variety of faith traditions);

(vi) The new funeral orders recognize that there are ministries other than that of the clergy (just as a recognition of a broader level of participation, there is some acceptance of the use of non-clergy in bereavement assistance).

To further clarify the latter (and crucial in this paper) point about the legitimization of funeral professionals as a “ministry,” Irion quotes the Chicago Archdiocese Guidelines, which say: "Funeral directors provide an invaluable service to families... Individual funeral directors may perceive and conduct their work for a family as a true pastoral service.... It is important for parish staffs and funeral directors to work together in order to provide the best pastoral care for the

bereaved family” (cited in Irion, 1991: 171).

There are a number of factors which could be seen as being related to changes in the functions of funerals, including not only secularization, but also changes in values, economic pressures (competition), an increasing reliance on professional groups, smaller and more geographically separated families, changes in health care (longer life, and people die in institutions rather than at home) and demographic factors (the decrease in infant and child mortality results in a "death-free" generation which is unusual in world human history, thus providing less direct experience with death for many young and middle-aged people). However, the rise of the funeral professions is a central development which also influenced how we think about and talk about the uses of the funeral. Religious officials are no longer the only experts who tend to the needs of the bereaved. As more funeral services are held in the funeral home, and more responsibilities fall to funeral professionals, then it is only natural that people turn to funeral directors for comfort. Gomez pointed out that "It is his [sic] role as counsellor rather than the more clearly defined role as an informant, or provider of specific information, that the funeral director's job is expanding most rapidly" (Gomez, 1976: 153). In terms of language, the shift from "undertaker" to "mortician" to "funeral director" to "funeral services professional" reflects not simply a tendency toward euphemisms, but a shift in the occupational scope of those who work with the dead (Corr et al., 1997). What began in Britain as essentially a trade in the last quarter of the seventeenth century is now widely considered a profession.

One of the key processes which consolidated the power (and virtual monopoly) of undertakers in North America was the rise of embalming. I'll spare you the short course on the modern history of embalming, this being a paper for a polite academic audience and all! But suffice it to

say that what embalming offered to the funeral industry, among other benefits, was an expanded role for funeral services. No longer did they simply coordinate the disposal of the dead, but they took a central role in the restoration and presentation of the body (which became possibly the central object of the funeral process). This professionalization of funeral services also resulted in the de-skilling of family and community, at least in terms of their abilities to care for their own dead (Walter, 1996: 95). In addition, in the funerals business, possession of the body is important (Howarth, 1996), and the funeral director has that advantage over the clergy.

Funeral professionals have indeed gained power in our society. Some of this may come from the fact that they do what many of the rest of us don't think we could -- they care for our dead. But the power also comes from presenting themselves as professionals, on par with other professionals. Fulton wrote that: "It would be beneficial if the funeral director would come to be seen as a participant in a community's mental health network" (Fulton, 1988: 270).

Given these changes in the functions of funerals (and the structure of the funeral/burial industries), the final task of the paper is to provide a few details of the survey responses related to the perceived purposes of funerals.

THE CLERGY'S VIEWS ON THE PURPOSES OF FUNERALS

The 1999 survey asked clergy to respond to a set of questions regarding the purposes/functions of funerals from their own point of view, from that of the family of the deceased and from that of the funeral director. The following tables provide the results from those questions.

TABLE 15: WHAT ARE THE PURPOSES/FUNCTIONS OF A FUNERAL , FROM YOUR OWN POINT OF VIEW? (n=166)

Purpose/function	Frequency	Percent
Grieve the loss/ closure	63	38
Celebrate/ give thanks for the deceased	37	22.3
Support family & friends/ give comfort	37	22.3
Remind us of the afterlife and of God	29	17.5

TABLE 16: WHAT DO YOU THINK ARE THE PURPOSES/FUNCTIONS OF A FUNERAL, FROM THE POINT OF VIEW OF THE FAMILY OF THE DECEASED? (n=159)

Purpose/function	Frequency	Percent
Last respects for person/body of deceased	48	30.2
Closure/ griefwork	48	30.2
Support for family	32	20.1
Celebrate the life of the deceased	18	11.3
A required ritual that must be completed	8	5
Contemplation of our own mortality	5	3.1

TABLE 17: WHAT DO YOU THINK ARE THE PURPOSES OF A FUNERAL, FROM A FUNERAL DIRECTOR'S POINT OF VIEW? (n=148)

Purpose/function	Frequency	Percent
To help the family to cope	52	35.1
Business/ to make a profit	50	33.8
Respect for the deceased	30	20.3
Cannot judge/ don't know	16	10.8

These questions require the clergy member to provide a sense of the function of funerals from different perspectives. This does not mean that the actual function of funerals for families is what the clergy have noted, for example. But putting all three of these together gives a more nuanced account of what funerals mean for people today. In terms of the clergy's own point of view, we can clearly see the shift from theology to psychology of grief. The most important purpose is noted as grieving and closure (the same functions which were prominent in the secular lists of functions provided in the above section). In fact, only 17.5% of the sample gave a specifically religious/theological function for funerals -- relating to the afterlife, God and the resurrection.

In terms of the functions for the family, there is again a strong focus on closure and family/community support. However, the most common response related to the chance to offer last respects for the deceased (also a function mentioned in secular lists). A theological function (contemplation of our mortality) was mentioned as a primary function by only five respondents. In terms of the functions for funeral directors, there is more reticence to answer on the part of clergy. Twenty-four respondents did not answer at all, and over 10 percent of those who replied said that they could not judge. But of those who registered an interpretation, there was a close race for first place between "business/profit" and "help the family." The first function is a recognition of the business aspect of funeral direction – they are, after all, in the business of making money by offering a service to the public. To make a profit is accepted as a legitimate goal of businesses throughout our society, and yet there is still discomfort if this is done too openly. What this reticence may point to is the inherent tension within the work of funeral services professionals – between their role as professionals and their role as

businesspeople/salespeople. The two tasks have different goals, purposes and orientations.

CONCLUSIONS

To provide a brief summary of this paper, I have attempted to offer not only some materials from the academic and lay literature on the roles of clergy and funeral directors but also apply this background to the 1999 survey of clergy in Newfoundland and Labrador. In addition, there has been some consideration of the changes in the functions and purposes of funerals in recent years. As for the role interactions, the 1999 survey appears to show a very positive relationship between clergy and funeral directors (more positive even, in some cases, than the relationship between family and clergy). Some hesitations remain, however, especially in relation to the business/sales role of funeral directors and their abilities at grief counselling and aftercare. But responses indicate that clergy, in general, feel that funeral directors do play both instrumental and expressive roles – they not only organize and arrange funerals, but they also provide comfort, support and empathic assistance to the family of the deceased.

If the results of the survey are to be believed, then the shift in the roles of these two related professions is well underway. Some clergy have mentioned, for example, that there are many who are “unchurched” (their term) and who are thus unlikely to come to clergy for assistance. The only chance for them to receive some grief therapy or assistance might be through the funeral director, and so they would support the trend in the funeral industry to do more counselling of the bereaved. But I must add the hesitation that, ironically, this is the very area that many clergy recognized as a weakness of funeral directors.

In regard to the second issue, that of the changing functions of funerals, we can also see that the

survey provides evidence of some of these shifts. One prime example is the move from a theological orientation to a psychological orientation – from an emphasis on God and the afterlife to a focus on closure, griefwork and the personalized remembering of the deceased. Ironically, some of these changes may have resulted from the increased education of clergy, especially in relation to courses in death and dying, which are sometimes provided by faculty from outside of theology departments, and which use secular materials.

As suggested in an earlier section, maybe what we are seeing here is another tentacle of the larger process of secularization. In earlier studies (when secularization was not as widespread) there was more explicit concern over the effects of funeral directors on the functions of funerals. Now that secularization is well underway, and other ritual events (such as weddings) are already well and truly changed, then there is less concern over the contributions of funeral directors (and the ensuing evaluation of them is much more positive). Because of their nature, funerals are simply slower to become secularized. Whatever their influences and myriad causes of change, the important human rituals around the marking of our passing will remain important sites for research in the years to come.

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