

IN THE AFTERMATH

How one funeral home business fared during the pandemic.

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As we emerge from the COVID-19 pandemic, we're all being challenged to mourn, regroup and make the slow transition back to "normal." Nowhere is this struggle more personal and poignant

than in funeral homes across North America.

In my work as a consultant to funeral service, I'm privileged to be in regular contact with the owners, managers and employees of numerous funeral homes. In a recent email exchange, I asked Dave Perotto, co-owner and vice president of Bartolomeo & Perotto Funeral Home in Rochester, New York, and Walker Brothers Funeral Home, with locations in Spencerport and Churchville, New York, some questions about how his business and community fared during the pandemic. I hope his responses will provide your funeral home with affirmation of your experiences, too, as well as food for thought.

What was the COVID-19 crisis like in the particular communities you serve?

COVID had several phases, both with the rate of infection and governmental guidelines in response to the waves of the virus. In the early part of the pandemic, New York state mandates were very restrictive with funeral ceremonies. Many nursing home residents died alone, and subsequent funeral gatherings were restricted to 10 people.

This was saddest experience a funeral director will ever have to endure. Surviving family and friends wanted to say goodbye but were not allowed to. Death is part of what we do. We help heal people, and the mandates removed our ability to do that. Our role as funeral director was diminished as we complied with the restrictions. This is not an indictment of the rules, but the reality is that these circumstances are what frustrated us most. We felt drawn to the fire and wanted to help, but we could not do our job the best way we know how. I have never felt so inadequate as a funeral director and disappointed that I could not do more to help.

Thankfully, the first phase only lasted for about three months; later phases allowed for an increase in attendance at services based on the percentage of the occupancy level of the funeral home facility. Things improved, but only gradually.

Other than occupancy-level issues, state-to-state travel restrictions became a large burden as well. Residents from states with large numbers of snowbirds, such as Florida, North Carolina and Arizona, were not allowed to travel to New York to say good-bye to their loved ones. This phase was probably worse than the first.

As an example, we received a call informing us that someone from our community had died while in Arizona. Her entire family lived in Arizona. The funeral home in Arizona sent her to us in Rochester, but her family could not travel with her. We held a mock funeral at the cemetery, entirely attended by funeral home personnel. We prayed together and video recorded the service, so we could send the video to her family.

Unfortunately, this story is not unique. We had several such experiences. This was the most inhumane mandate we had to endure.

How were the three funeral homes you own and operate affected?

Our smallest facility shuttered from March 2020 until January 2021. This location still seems to be recovering from the pandemic. Our middle-size facility did fairly well during the pandemic, but during the 50% reduction in attendance struggled to make things work. Once we were placed on the 75% limit, things returned to normal.

Our largest facility struggled in the first phase, during the 10-person limit. This facility is known as the go-to funeral home for large gatherings, so its single greatest asset was reduced to an afterthought. Once the state moved to percentage of occupancy, the location was sought after by many families wanting more space to comply with COVID rules. In short, there was a great variance in how our funeral homes were affected.

In what ways did you adapt your service offerings? What were the main challenges, and how did your funeral homes respond?

The single greatest adaptation during COVID was adding remote service attendance options. Bringing people together became the single greatest need. Facebook and Zoom became critically important tools to allow both people across the country and down the street to be there in one way or another for services in funeral homes and churches, and at the cemetery. We had to do something to fill the need of people to gather, and we did the best we could to make that happen.

Did any new best practices or lessons emerge as a result of the pandemic?

For me, the most important lesson was to learn not to panic but to survey the current situation and create a plan to overcome any circumstances that were problematic. For the first time in my career, I had no control over the success of my business. This created an enormous amount of stress for me and my brother. Early on, he wisely stated, "In times of adversity, find our opportunity." We did just that and leveraged what assets we did have to allow us to weather the storm.

One example is that early on, we stopped our marketing efforts. Why market when nobody can gather? Once we could gather, we pivoted immediately. TV media buys were at an all-time low cost. We created a commercial showing how we were operating in the most COVID-safe manner and ran it. It worked. We were able to attract business to offset the loss in revenue due to many families choosing to hold no services.

What was the pandemic like for your staff?

It was obvious to us that our staff needed clear and concise leadership. We spent many hours digesting state mandates and adapting them to our operational protocols to comply and keep everyone safe. Emails and meetings were plentiful and full of details. They appreciated our thoughtful approach to keep both the public and staff safe. It gave them certainty in a clouded time. In addition, we were able to leverage the federal Paycheck Protection Program to keep 100% of our staff working. We also assured them of their economic safety with regular communication. We shared our fears but let them know that they were our priority.

How have your directors coped? Have you discovered helpful ways of processing the trauma?

The trauma was mostly in 2020 and has long since passed. Clearly, the mandates hurt the most. Not being able to help in the ways we always have was traumatic to all of us, but the team stuck together and supported one another. It just happened. We gave the lead, and they did the rest.

Going forward, what changes are your funeral homes making?

We are still seeking a better replacement for Zoom. We leaned on Zoom after trying many other op-

tions. Its reliability was the most important trait. The user experience could be better with better equipment and a different platform, and we will eventually choose one to replace Zoom. Video recording of services should become a regular offering, and this is also a priority as we move forward.

How do you think funeral service in general will or should change as a result of the pandemic? What do you hope your “new normal” will look like?

The pandemic proved that what we offer matters. Not having something can prove its worth. As they say, you don't know what you've got until it's gone.

I believe our firm should double down on getting back to normal and not seek a new normal. If we can enhance “normal” with some of these new skills, then we should adopt them. But we also relearned that when someone dies, we have a need to gather. This may be the only universal response to death.

Any final words of wisdom for your fellow funeral service professionals?

The pandemic was truly a challenge for funeral professionals, but it clearly reaffirmed to us and to the world that our work matters.

Thanks much to Dave Perotto for sharing his funeral homes' COVID experiences. His responses remind us that whenever words are inadequate – as they are at a time of death – ceremony is essential. Ceremony helps us know what to do when we don't know what to do.

There is no better time to humbly yet proudly remind the communities you serve about why human beings have held funerals since the beginning of time. This is a rare moment of opportunity because people who may not have understood or valued funerals before are now listening and open to your education. In an effort to assist you, I have provided my Ten Freedoms for Creating Meaningful Funerals, written for grieving families. You have my permission to use this list in your marketing communications. ☰

Ten Freedoms for Creating Meaningful Funeral Ceremonies

Meaningful funerals don't just happen. They are well-thought-out rituals that demand your focus and time. Keep in mind that the energy you expend now to create a personalized ceremony will help you and your family in your grief journeys for years to come.

The following list of “freedoms” is intended to empower you to create a funeral that will be meaningful to you and your family and friends.

1. You have the freedom to make use of ritual.
2. You have the freedom to plan a funeral that will meet your unique needs.
3. You have the freedom to ask friends and family members to be involved in the funeral.
4. You have the freedom to view and spend time with the body before and during the funeral.
5. You have the freedom to embrace your pain.
6. You have the freedom to plan a funeral that will reflect your spirituality.
7. You have the freedom to search for meaning before, during and after the funeral.
8. You have the freedom to make use of memories during the funeral.
9. You have the freedom to be tolerant of your physical and emotional limits.
10. You have the freedom to move toward your grief and heal.



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