

Dutko. Her findings are supported by the research. In 2019, CNN reported, "... for the first time "no religion" has topped a survey of Americans' religious identity..." and political scientist and Baptist pastor Ryan Burge has stated that more than 23% of Americans now claim no religion. According to a Pew Research Study from 2015, religious "nones" aren't just self-identified atheists or agnostics but also include a larger number who say, "... their religion is nothing in particular." Here again, Dutko shared that, "more than ever before it feels as if more than half our students aren't 'churched' when they enter the college and must work to learn the religious funeral traditions; the differences between liturgical and non-liturgical services, a Mass and a memorial service and more." This suggests celebrant training will be of much greater importance, too.

3. This next generation of funeral directors will bring unique skills and fresh ideas to the profession. You'll be glad they're on your team when your website crashes, your other directors are anxious and perplexed by your new IT systems, or, when you face software installation challenges. Leverage their skills in these areas to train the entire staff. More importantly, many of them are completing their mortuary educations passionate about the future of green burial or enhanced hospitality in more traditional funerals. Their ideas may just keep your funeral home at the forefront of what families in your community will expect in 2021 and beyond.

Barbara Kemmis

Executive Director, Cremation Association of North America

2020 was like looking both ways to cross the street and getting hit by a plane.

That is my favorite joke describing 2020. It's funny because it's true. The pandemic spread of COVID-19 came out of nowhere and changed everything and everyone. Looking ahead to 2021, it is likely that this real-time, continuous



Barbara Kemmis

risk management experiment that we are living, will continue, but we will have new tools to use, like easier access to PPE and vaccines.

When faced with uncertainty and continuous change, I have been amazed by how quickly and well CANA members have adapted, particularly in three areas that will continue to be important in 2021. Reflecting on 2020, what I observed is that death-care workers turned to fundamentals to respond to challenges.

I encourage you to make 2021 the year to shore up your foundations to position your company for success:

Technology. This is the year to upgrade your technology game. Everything from arrangements to funerals to continuing education will continue to be offered online. Invest in stable, fast internet and computers with web cameras sooner rather than later.

Setting priorities. Did you always mean to start an aftercare program? Get on it! Still not sure how to understand all of the financial data and business metrics? Set up a meeting with your accountant or take a class. Still not sure what social media can do for your business? Ask for help and try a campaign. Make relevant continuing education a priority for all of your staff and yourself. Set goals and measure progress toward them. Then celebrate your successes. This is the best way to focus on the important and not just the urgent.

Staffing. Your people are your most important asset, including yourself. You have likely been busier than ever in 2020 with deaths predicted to be 10% more than 2019. That is a lot of cases to handle with families to serve while you work within changing restrictions. What are you doing to promote resilience for your team? Is mental health, depression and burnout a topic of discussion?

We have learned to safely serve our communities through deadly viruses before, and COVID-19, too, will likely remain with us. PPE works, and – with continued engagement and creativity – we will find the tools to serve our communities and navigate 2021.

Jack Lechner

President & CEO, Cincinnati College of Mortuary Science

"The best way to predict the future is to create it!" – Peter Drucker

I do not think many will be sad to see 2020 fade into the rearview mirror. But as it does, the question now is what do we do with all of the information and experience gathered during the pandemic, what needs to return to the way it was in funeral service and what needs to change.

Thousands of grieving families were denied a choice from the full array of funeral options, forcing many to "settle" for watching a loved one's interment from the car, or being denied a visitation with family and friends, or celebrating a life



Jack Lechner

Kates-Boylston is your partner for success in 2021.

Your subscription allows digital access to all the news, trends, ideas and advice that you need to make smart business decisions right at your fingertips.

Access American Funeral Director online at www.afd-digital.com.

that was lived in his/her place of worship.

Many of those grieving individuals have internalized the pain of not being able to have the type of funeral they wanted and needed. In the face of a worldwide pandemic, they did not want to complain. Instead, they chose to serve the greater good by adhering to the protocols so that the nation could be better positioned to reduce the spread of COVID-19. The question now becomes, "At what cost?"

I am sure as we emerge from COVID-19, the sad stories of individuals with unresolved grief will soon surface. Just the way PTSD has become recognized in recent years as being real and not a sign of weakness, unresolved grief will soon take its place in the national discourse.

I believe now is the time to take a full inventory of our skills as death-care professionals. We need to focus on being able to help grieving individuals identify their needs, as they regard funeralization. And then just as importantly, identify unique ways to satisfy those identified needs.

Livestreaming: Funeral directors must also become funeral producers. Lighting, audio, angle of the picture, etc. have all become extremely important skills we've had to acquire on the run. I signed on to watch the funeral of a friend's wife online. At first, I thought the picture on the screen of the closed casket with a beautiful spray on the lid was perfect. But as the service began and the immediate family was seated, all I could see were the back of their heads. I couldn't really hear the clergy, and I couldn't see anyone speaking from the pulpit. Get the necessary training now to develop an expert skill set.

Certified celebrant: It should come as no surprise that last year the num-

ber of Americans who do not affiliate with an organized religion surpassed the amount of Americans who do belong to an organized religion. We can no longer rely on making funeral arrangements with an *insert clergyman here* attitude. For the majority of families we will serve, we must now become the focal point for the funeral. Orchestrating an environment where individuals can come together to grieve and support one another. Taking the time to learn and understand celebrant services should be high on the list of skills and knowledge to develop going forward into the 21st century.

Cremation: It is a fact that cremation is rising. When I started in the death-care profession in 1973, the national cremation rate was 5.69%. In 2019, it was 54.6% and projected to rise to 75% to 81% in 2040. I am going out on a limb here, but I think we might have a trend! Now is the time to be asking yourself, "What are we doing to make the decisions surrounding cremation value based and not just a price-point decision?" Looking for ways to add value to the family that selects cremation has to be one of our major endeavors going forward. Viewing unembalmed remains, not just for identification purposes, is one of the ways we can add value. By providing a service that includes washing the body and hair, setting features, dressing, a light application of cosmetics, and viewing the remains on a slumber bed dress in their favorite pajamas or lounging cloths – maybe covered with their favorite afghan blanket – turns a cold identification viewing of remains into a warm and personal opportunity to say goodbye to a loved one in an environment where a family can mourn together.

Hospitality: Just about every fami-

ly wants some sort of family gathering with food after the funeral service. Should your funeral home be providing that one-stop shopping experience? You would be alleviating the burden for a family by combining those offerings with the rest of the funeral arrangements. Obtaining the right primer course to learn about serving temperatures, costs, risks of serving alcohol, etc., are all subjects that should be of interest to us.

Pet loss: Many firms are involved with pet loss. When a family sees how caring and dignified your service is for their pet, they are more likely to call you when a loved one dies. It is a service that many families place a large value on today.

Collaborative arrangement platforms: When trying to make arrangements with a large family spread over several states becomes cumbersome, try using a more collaborative means of making arrangements. Passare's web-based platform allows family members to participate and bring photos, anecdotes, and stories to the arrangement conference that can be used by you to create a more personalized funeral. Often, the information and stories gathered can be built upon by a celebrant to provide a truly meaningful service.

Texting: Most of us are guilty of looking at texts and social media as soon as they "bing." We are much more likely to answer a text before answering an email, phone call or letter. Domanicare has made texting families to check in and monitor how family members are doing after a funeral easy. This type of service capitalizes on the use of texts to reach family members. Contacted on your behalf, the family member feels grateful that you care and are keeping track of how they are doing following the funeral service. A very

powerful concept that is being used by some of the more progressive funeral homes to provide an extra level of personal care.

First-call vehicles: The dignified first-call vehicle must now include everything to provide for the safety of the personnel and family served. Rubber gloves, body bags, disinfectants are just a few of the items we need to have on board the vehicle in order to successfully deal with any manner of death we encounter. COVID-19 has taught us this, and if we don't incorporate preparing our vehicles for dealing with any manner of death successfully, we are putting our most valuable assets at risk – our employees.

Facts: Death rates are predicted to continue to rise across the U.S. as the baby boomer generation ages. Cremation is on a steady rise. The number of Americans who do not associate with a formal religion has surpassed those who do belong to a formal religious group. What are you doing with these facts?

The days of cookie-cutter funeral planning is over! It used to be so predictable.

Today, the funeral director needs to help the family identify their real funeral needs and then find ways to satisfy those needs. With less dependence on the clergy performing most of the funeral service, our new roles include certified celebrant or being the focus for the service by finding a way to help the family honor the life of their loved one by telling their unique life story.

Jon Lefrandt
Co-Founder/CEO
The Domani Group

If there's one thing I've learned in 2020, it's that it's difficult to predict the future, and there will be surprises that lie ahead. Businesses and individuals need to stay agile and adaptable to be ready for whatever life throws at you.

When I look toward the future and 2021, what stands out to me is that the best experience will always win. 2020 has been a challenging year for the funeral profession and others as well. Still, we've seen that those funeral homes and funeral professionals who have focused on making their consumer experience as comforting and easy as possible are those that are winning.

At Domani, we exist to help funeral homes help their families have a better experience. Through the power of text messaging, we follow up with families and give them the support and resources they need following a loss. That great experience then leads to a positive online review and helps others looking for a positive experience to find that funeral home. It's a virtuous cycle that helps grow a funeral home's at-need business.



When it comes to preneed, the same principle holds. If funeral homes can provide the experience a family is looking for, that will be the funeral home that wins. During 2020, our preneed appointment setting team has found great success in scheduling remote appointments. Funeral homes that have been willing to adapt and find new ways to do business have grown even during difficult circumstances.

I firmly believe that technology will help us as a funeral profession provide those better experiences for families, but simply using technology for technology's sake is not the answer. We need to leverage technology to help provide personal, engaging

experiences with families. We shouldn't use technology as a crutch or an excuse. It's another way to help the ones we serve and provide them the support they need during a difficult time.

2020 has been a wild ride, but I'm looking forward to seeing what 2021 has in store.

Jill Muenich
President, Homesteaders
Solutions Group

What I'm going to be watching closely next year is shifting consumer engagement around end-of-life experiences. As a profession, we have to make credible information about death and dying more accessible and easier for client families to understand. We need to find ways to make learning more and planning ahead for loss feel a little less ominous and heavy. As the leader of Homesteaders' consumer engagement efforts, I ask myself all of the time: "How can I make this fun and provide insights that inspire action instead of fatigue?" That's a question we all need to ask ourselves as we're called on to educate and guide consumers through end-of-life experiences.

Let's be clear: Technology is the first and most important tool for increasing consumer engagement, and that starts with websites. This is the hub of all that we do, no matter your role in the funeral profession. Websites are the launching pad for social media, your blogs, videos, service details, preplanning tools and more.

