



EACH FUNERAL IS

Unique

LUCY HOGAN

AN INTERVIEW

WITH

CONI LYNN

GASCH-GRADY

Coni Lynn Gasch-Grady is a fifth generation funeral director. Her great-great-grandfather founded Gasch's Funeral Home in rural Maryland in 1858. Although the suburbs of Washington, D.C., have since grown up around the funeral home, the family continues to serve the community as they have for the past 142 years.

Coni Lynn worked at the funeral home for ten years, and has been a licensed funeral director for six years. But, having grown up in a house next door to the funeral home, with a grandfather, father, mother, aunts and siblings who are all funeral directors, she can quite honestly say that the funeral business has been a way of life her whole life. She graciously agreed to speak with me so that she could share her thoughts and experiences about the relationship between clergy and funeral directors.

Your family has seen many changes in the funeral business. How would you characterize some of those changes?

I would say that the biggest change is in relationships, both with the families we serve, and the clergy who lead the services. There was a time when we knew the names of all the clergy we dealt with. Now, with so many more people in the area, and so many clergy moving, it is difficult to develop the personal relationships that are essential to providing good,

compassionate care to families who have lost someone they love.

Another major change that makes it very stressful for funeral directors and difficult for the clergy are the numbers of unchurched people. They may not go to church, but when someone dies most want a clergy person to say some last words. The trauma is intense when we can't find someone to do it. I know that some clergy think that we are trying to take advantage of them, and that we are really just using them. But if they could see how families cry when they find out that no one will bury their mother, well, I think they would understand how central clergy are.

It is difficult to do a funeral for someone you have never met.

Oh, we understand that. We make every effort to put the family and clergy person together before the funeral. In fact, clergy should insist on that time. If the funeral director won't do that, you shouldn't do funerals for them.

Clergy and funeral directors should talk about every funeral that they do together. One thing that I always say is that no funeral is average. Every single person and family has to be treated as though this is the worst trauma of their life—because it is. Unfortunately, when you are dealing with so many people week in, week out, you have to work against treating them as routine.

It sounds as though "pastoral care" is an important part of a funeral director's job?

Absolutely! When someone dies we are usually the first person that they call. They have one question on their mind, "What do I do?" In a very short time we need to develop a relationship with that person or family, and conduct a lot of business while at the same time moving them into this very difficult time. In addition to all of the legal, safety, and health issues associated with death, we also have to treat people with compassion and sympathy.

But this is a business.

Yes. There are many times when we would like to do a funeral for free. We have had people come with fists full of money, lay it on the table, and tell us that is all they have to bury their father. We do try to give them the best funeral for what they are able to spend—but it does cost a lot to run a business where we must be available twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, three-hundred-sixty-five days a year.

Do you think people feel pressured by some funeral directors to spend too much money?

I have no doubt that happens, and if you are helping a family who feels that pressure, you should go to another funeral home. No reputable funeral director will do that. I would like to say, though, that I

have seen the reverse. I have seen clergy talk a family out of the casket and services that they wanted, telling them they shouldn't spend so much money. I will say that the family regrets it on the day of the funeral. Remember, you can only do a funeral once, and it is terrible when a family feels, "I only wish we would have..."

That reminds me of something that I would like clergy to encourage families to do. Many people are afraid to look at the person who has died, especially if there has been a trauma. But I find that many people are very upset later if they didn't look, and regret not having said goodbye. They don't have to have the casket open during the viewing, but if they at least look once, they have that in their memory. We are also willing to take pictures if they don't want to look directly.

What other things would you recommend?

Get to know the funeral directors you work with frequently. They may even be willing to take you out for lunch! It is important to get to know one another because good communication is crucial for any funeral to run smoothly. And not only will it go smoothly, but also good communication can keep funeral costs down. For example, if we are doing a funeral and the service goes longer than anticipated, it may mean getting to the cemetery later than we thought and that could mean additional charges from the cemetery staff. So, tell your funeral director how long you think the service will be.

Overall, timing is very important, and the clergy are crucial to keeping everything on schedule. Also, when a funeral director calls to inform you of a death, please call as soon as possible. We are waiting for your call because we cannot schedule anything else until we have a firm commitment from you as to when the funeral will take place. We also appreciate it if we know that more than one clergy person will be involved in a funeral. If one person does the service and another does the graveside service we need to know that. We also want to talk to all the clergy involved to set up the cues for when things will begin.

Let us know in advance how you will get from the funeral home or church to the cemetery. We are happy to take you in a limousine or the hearse, but we need to know your preference. If you decide that at the last moment you want us to take you, we may have to leave a staff person at

the church. Sending a person to pick them up is expensive. And if you want to drive your own car, make sure you are parked where you can get out first—nothing will happen until the clergy person is there.

We also appreciate anything that you can tell us about the family. We certainly don't want you to break confidences, but if you can indicate that there may be some challenging family dynamics, we appreciate hearing that. Likewise, we try to alert the clergy if we sense there may be some problems.

Encourage families not to give special keepsakes or mementos to the funeral director for safekeeping. We have so many things to keep track of, we would not like to misplace some important family heirlooms.

We are there to help both the family and the clergy. If you need something to happen during the service or at the graveside, we will help you see that it gets done. The important thing is to talk to us.

Is there anything else you would like to share?

I guess just two things. Clergy should know that many funeral directors are happy to come and talk to their congregations about a variety of topics—planning your funeral, funeral traditions, social security issues. We appreciate having the opportunity to educate the public before the need arises.

We also want people to know that most funeral directors are not in it for the money. If you are, you won't stay in business.

Thank you for sharing your concerns with our readers.

We are here to be a service to our clients as well as the clergy who minister to them. We are eager to work together in this important task. I appreciated having the chance to talk to you. Most of the time we are never asked. Thank you. □

Lucy Hogan is associate professor of preaching at Wesley Theological Seminary in Washington, D.C. She is the co-author of *Connecting with the Congregation* (Abingdon Press, 1999)



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