

My Parting Thoughts

by Daniel M. Isard, MSFS

IHAVE BEEN BLESSED. I have worked my lifetime doing what I love and with people I respect as clients or co-workers. Truth be told, I can't believe I earned a living. It was not work but a pure joy ... most days. Now, I get to ride out of Dodge on my own horse, sitting upright. This is my last column, for I am now retired.

The company that I founded, The Foresight Companies, and have reinvented for four decades, is continuing in the hands of my partners, Chris Cruger and Doug Gober. In fact, Chris will continue to provide thought-provoking ideas in this space going forward.

In my swan song of a column, I would like to thank the members of the cemetery profession and all ICCFA's members. More than that, I would like to beseech you to go on a path for the future, one I hope will protect this profession and provide care to the community for which you serve.

My thanks are simple. You as a community embraced me and allowed me to try and influence your business operations to maximize profit without sacrificing the care and stewardship of the human remains entrusted to you.

I started writing in this periodical when this organization was the ACA. I watched as the organization added funeral homes to its membership, causing a name (and therefore abbreviation change) to ICFA. The advance vision of the association embraced cremation to cause new stationery once again to be printed.

ICCFA always has been an organization that focused on business. Its leaders were not always popular personalities, but they were respected businesspeople. The executive team supervised the organization in a hands-off fashion. The educational offerings and conferences of ICCFA are focused on business-needed subjects. Keep it up! Profit is not a dirty word. Advance sales are critical to profit, and we need profitable cemeteries in each of these three groups.

A History Lesson

With over four decades of experience working with cemetery management and



ownership, I have learned a lot about the history of cemeteries in America and the Stewards of Society who are tasked with perpetual care of many of these cemeteries and their inhabitants.

Cemeteries in American towns and cities have a rich and varied history that reflects the country's cultural, social, and religious diversity. The earliest colonial settlements established graveyards close to churches or in community spaces. These spaces, like the King's Chapel Burying Ground in Boston (1630) or the St. Augustine National Cemetery in Florida (est. 1565), serve as testaments to some of the oldest cemeteries in America.

During the 18th and 19th centuries, with urbanization and population growth, public health concerns spurred the establishment of larger rural or garden-style cemeteries. Mount Auburn Cemetery in Cambridge, MA (1831), is one such example, recognized as the first landscaped or garden cemetery in the United States. These cemeteries were designed not just as burial grounds but also as picturesque landscapes, inviting people for leisurely strolls and contemplation.

As America grew and diversified, so did its cemeteries. Different cultural and religious groups developed their burial traditions and spaces. For instance, New Orleans' St. Louis Cemetery No. 1 (1789) showcases unique above-ground tombs

influenced by the city's French and Spanish heritage, while the Touro Cemetery in Newport, RI (est. 1655), is one of the oldest Jewish cemeteries in the country.

The Civil War marked a significant period for cemetery development. The establishment of national cemeteries, such as Arlington National Cemetery in Virginia (est. 1864), memorialized soldiers and civilians, emphasizing a sense of national identity and sacrifice.

Throughout the 20th century, cemeteries evolved in response to changing cultural attitudes toward death and burial. Memorial parks emerged, featuring flat grave markers and manicured lawns, reflecting a shift toward simplicity and easier maintenance.

Today, cemeteries continue to adapt to changing needs, incorporating technology and offering a variety of burial options. They remain vital spaces for remembrance, reflection, and honoring the legacies of those who came before us.

The Stewards of Society

In the development of our country, one of the ways towns formed and evolved into cities was contingent upon the development of a cemetery. Farmers could bury their dead loved ones on a section of the farm. But as people began to occupy apartments or small homes, these settlers didn't have the space to allocate for their dead. So, these hamlets or towns would create an area on the edge of town for a cemetery. The parties responsible for the care and maintenance of the cemetery were often volunteers.

In major metropolitan areas, the responsibility for caring for public cemeteries often falls on various entities, including government bodies, private organizations, or nonprofits. Historically, many older cemeteries were managed by religious institutions or local community groups. Over time, the management and maintenance of cemeteries have shifted hands due to changing demographics, urban development, and administrative needs.

Cemeterians must find ways to be more creative in attracting the cremation consumer for permanent placement and to provide stewardship for cremated remains.

Many civic groups sprung up; and as part of their mission statements, they included the care of the dead—like the International Order of Odd Fellows. In larger towns, the cemetery could be a city-purposed place.

In other cases, municipal or county governments oversee the maintenance and operation of public cemeteries. They allocate resources for groundskeeping, infrastructure repairs, and managing burial records. Arlington National Cemetery, managed by the Department of the Army, is an iconic example of a government-administered cemetery.

Private companies or corporations also manage cemeteries, especially in more modern settings or in areas where land value is high. These entities often run cemeteries as businesses, offering various burial options, maintenance services, and sometimes additional amenities like mausoleums or crematoriums.

Nonprofit organizations or cemetery associations play a significant role in preserving and restoring historic cemeteries. Groups like the Association for Gravestone Studies or local historical societies often lead efforts to conserve gravestones, maintain landscapes, and document cemetery histories. They may rely on volunteers, fundraising, and partnerships with other organizations to fulfill their missions.

Moreover, the care and preservation of cemeteries in major cities increasingly involve collaborative efforts between different stakeholders. Partnerships between government bodies, nonprofit organizations, and community volunteers have become common, aiming to ensure the upkeep and cultural significance of these spaces while respecting the needs of diverse communities.

In recent years, there has been a growing recognition of the importance of cemetery preservation as part of cultural heritage. This has led to increased advocacy, funding opportunities, and educational programs focused on the significance of cemeteries in the broader context of a city's history and identity.

The Religious Driven

The most famous of cemeteries that had to be repurposed after the founding church failed is the protestant cemetery associated with the downfall of the Chrystal Cathedral. There were hundreds of followers who owned interment rights expecting to be interred near the founder and had their future paradigm upended.

The Chrystal Cathedral, initially a symbol of opulence and architectural grandeur, faced a significant decline and ultimate failure, reflecting a complex combination of financial mismanagement, shifting societal values, and organizational challenges.

Founded by Reverend Robert H. Schuller in Garden Grove, CA, in 1955, the Chrystal Cathedral gained fame for its unique architectural design by Philip Johnson, featuring a striking glass exterior. The cathedral's "Hour of Power" television program, hosted by Schuller, garnered a wide audience and financial support, allowing for the construction of the impressive building in the 1970s.

However, the seeds of the Chrystal Cathedral's downfall were sown in its ambitious expansion and financial decisions. The cathedral incurred substantial debt in the process of constructing its iconic building, which was estimated to cost around \$18 million but ended up over budget due to design changes and overruns.

As societal attitudes toward religion shifted and mega-churches faced scrutiny for their opulence and lavish spending, the Chrystal Cathedral struggled to maintain its relevance. The decline in attendance and donations exacerbated the financial strain, leading to further debt and challenges in meeting operational expenses.

In 2010, the Chrystal Cathedral filed for bankruptcy due to its overwhelming debt, which was estimated to be around \$50 million to \$100 million. The bankruptcy filing included plans to sell the property to address the financial crisis. Eventually, the Roman Catholic Diocese of Orange County purchased the cathedral in 2011, renaming it Christ Cathedral.

The failure of the Chrystal Cathedral serves as a cautionary tale about the pitfalls of unsustainable financial practices, overreliance on donations, and the changing landscape of religious engagement in modern society. It highlights the need for religious institutions to adapt to evolving societal values, exercise prudent financial management, and remain connected to the communities they serve to ensure their long-term sustainability and relevance.

The Profit Driven

I remember being in a meeting with a large acquisition company, as our client was interviewing all the biggies. The company founder enters the room and greets my client. The only empty chair in the room was next to me. He sits down and leans over and whispers, "Dan, what is your client's hot button?" I reply, "He wants the most money and cares about nothing else." He chuckles, smacks me on the shoulder, and says, "I love an honest man!"

Cemeteries are a business. They need to be run like a business. Cemeteries that get in trouble are usually poorly run. A cemetery needs to have a balance between at-need sales and advance sales. The quantity of advance sales should be greater than the number of at-need sales.

In Parting

Cemeterians must find ways to be more creative in attracting the cremation consumer for permanent placement and to provide stewardship for cremated remains.

Yours is an important ministry. The importance is known at the time of an interment and countless times after an interment. Remember that. ☒



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