Cultural Diversity in Funerals

Cultural Awareness

One (1) CEU

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Creating a service or burial that adheres to the ideals and values of various nationalities can be difficult at times, especially if a funeral director isn’t familiar with the family’s customs.
While services are tailored to each individual and can differ from generation to generation, most religious groups have certain rituals that do not change significantly with each generation.
Cultural Diversity in Funerals

- This program covers some of the more unique features associated with the various cultures that may be present in your community.
In the Buddhist culture, the decedent is usually dressed in ceremonial garments. Often they will choose traditional cultural clothing consisting of multiple layers. Grains of rice or a gold coin is often placed in the mouth of the decedent. The casket is surrounded with wreaths, candles and sticks of incense that burn during the viewing and funeral service.
In Buddhist tradition, the service generally takes place as soon as possible, but can be delayed if necessary to allow for family members who must travel a distance to attend. The visitation and funeral typically last an hour or two.
If the services are being handled in your location, space is needed for a table or two for the use of incense that will burn throughout the viewing and service. Space should also be provided for gifts of food.
As part of the committal service, once the hearse has reached the cemetery, a monk leads the procession chanting religious hymns and another person will throw paper (symbolizing money) into the air until they get to the gravesite.
Buddhism

- A steel container will be needed at the gravesite which will be filled with more paper money and personal items. These items are then burned at a point during the service until they turn to ash.
In the Chinese tradition, the decedent is often dressed in multiple layers of clothing. The family will generally number each article of clothing in the order in which it is to be placed on the decedent. Like the Buddhist culture, grains of rice or a gold coin is often placed in the mouth of the deceased.
Frequently there are various items placed into the casket, for example; additional articles of clothing, money, stock certificates, personal items, etc.
Space needs to be considered when setting up for a Chinese service. Multiple tables for incense and food offerings are required.

Generally the floral arrangements will be large standing easels which again, will require space consideration. Expect large floral arrangements which will typically include a ribbon with condolences written in Chinese.
Chinese

- Cultural holidays such as Chinese New Year, play a roll in scheduling services. Also, monks will read celestial indicators for good days for viewing and service.
There are 2 types of Chinese services

- **Buddhist**
  - This type of service will last all day for one or several days. The service itself can be several hours long.

- **Christian**
  - This service is usually a shorter private time for family (30-60 minutes) with a 30-45 minute funeral service.
Chinese

- The services that are traditional burial will always conclude with a committal service. The funeral procession often will travel past the decedent’s place of business and/or family home. In both cases, the procession is stopped and the back door of the funeral coach (hearse) is opened for a few moments, releasing the decedent’s spirit.
Chinese

- Upon arrival at the gravesite, the casket is lowered into the grave, and flowers are distributed to everyone in attendance. Attendees will be instructed to toss flowers into the grave, family members toss flowers, hair ribbons, veils and armbands into the grave and all will depart immediately. There is no lingering at the gravesite.
Chinese services that conclude with cremation being the final disposition requires that the family accompany the decedent to the crematory and the eldest child will often start the cremator.
Chinese

Regardless of the type of service, all attendees are given an envelope containing a “quarter” (to “pay” them for their time to attend), a piece of hard candy (to remove the bitter taste of death from their mouth) and a thank you note from the family.
Greek Orthodox services are very similar to other Christian services in that they generally will have a visitation the day prior to their services in church. Where they differ are in the rituals performed during the visitation at the funeral home as well as the church.
Visitation – generally the casket will be accompanied by candles positioned at the head and foot of the casket as well as a Greek orthodox cross positioned behind the casket in a similar fashion as is with a Catholic service.
During a Greek Orthodox visitation, the family will place an “icon,” sometimes a family heirloom, on the front left corner of the casket. It is customary for visitors to kiss the icon during the viewing as well as the final goodbye at the church.
Greek Orthodox

- For the viewing at the funeral home, a Trisagion (see following slide) service is held during the evening viewing. Incense is part of this service and it is helpful to have a stand for the incense burner.
**Greek Orthodox**

- **Trisagion Service**: Before the funeral service itself, the brief Trisagion or “Thrice-Holy” Service is served at the place where the deceased lies. This service derives its name because it begins with the familiar prayer, “Holy God, Holy Mighty, Holy Immortal, have mercy on us,” repeated three times. After the initial prayers, four hymns are chanted asking the Lord to give rest to the deceased among those who have already been perfected in the faith. A litany follows and is concluded with a prayer that includes again the petition to the Lord to grant rest to the deceased and asks for the forgiveness of sins. Before the service is concluded, the faithful sing, “May your memory be eternal.”
Greek Orthodox

- The church service will begin with the priest leading the casket into church. It is customary that the casket is moved up onto the altar, therefore it’s imperative to have a second church truck available. The casket is then turned perpendicular to the altar. Again, candles will be positioned at the head and foot of the casket along with an orthodox cross.
At the end of the service the congregation will pass by the casket to once again kiss the icon and bid their farewell. The casket will then be turned away from the congregation at which time the priest will anoint the deceased during prayers, the casket will be closed and the priest will lead the casket and mourners as they process from church.
Greek Orthodox

- At the conclusion of the committal service at the cemetery, it is customary that everyone passes by the casket and places a flower on the casket. This is generally led by the family.
Jewish

The Jewish family is often unfamiliar with what to do at the time of death and is totally dependent upon the instructions from their Rabbi. The funeral director should always defer to the Rabbi as to his/her preferences for the timing of the various rituals performed as they often have varying ideas.
Jewish

- Burial services for someone of the Jewish faith are generally conducted 24 – 36 hours after death. A “viewing” is not customary however there are rituals that are followed to prepare the body for burial.
- The Shomer or “watchman” stays with the deceased from the time of death until funeral and burial.
- The Chevra Kadisha will perform the Tahara or ritual bathing of the body, male members will handle a male death and female members a female.
When the *Tahara* is complete, the deceased will be placed in a shroud provided by the funeral home. They are generally made of pure white linen and symbolize equality. The deceased will then be placed in a casket. Tradition calls for a simple wooden casket, made without metal parts. Traditional caskets ranging from an unfinished pine to a solid plank walnut are generally used. Again, this is something the family will decide upon privately, and any casket they select will be the appropriate and correct one.
Other rituals performed during a Jewish funeral services are prior to or after the services, the mourners perform the ritual of *K'riah*, the rending of the garment. This ancient custom is symbolic of the tear that's in the mourner's heart. Traditionally the clothing is torn, but many people today use a black ribbon (*K’riah ribbon*) that is attached to the outside of the clothing. When people see the ribbon, or the tear in the clothing, it symbolizes that person is a mourner.
The ribbon is worn, or the clothing cut, on the left side of the person if they are mourning the death of a parent. For all other Kaddish relatives, the ribbon or clothing is cut on the person's right side. This is to acknowledge that the relationship with a parent is different, and, therefore we observe the difference by performing the K'riah, on the side closest to the heart. The cut or “tearing” of the ribbon is done using a K’riah knife.
We accompany the deceased to their final resting place. The tradition is that the mourners recite the Kaddish prayer, however it is not recited until after the casket has been lowered, and the grave filled. The mourners, as an act of love, participate in the filling of the gravesite by placing dirt back into the grave using their hands or a shovel if provided.
Glossary of Terms

- **Chevra Kadisha** – “the sacred society” – a group of pious men and women who ritually prepare the deceased by performing the Tahara.
- **Tahara** – means of purification/bathing and shrouding the deceased.
- **K’riah** – the rending (tearing or cutting) the garment symbolic of the tear that is in the mourner’s heart.
- **Kaddish** – prayer recited at the grave after the casket has been lowered.
- **K’riah knife** – knife used for the rending of the garment or ribbon.
- **K’riah ribbon** – a black ribbon worn by the mourners or relatives on the outer garment that will be symbolically torn or cut.
- **Shiva** – *Shiva* means seven and is the period of mourning immediately following the burial. Tradition is that the day of burial counts as the first day of *Shiva*, which continues for seven days.
- **Yahrzeit** – The annual anniversary of the death of a person is called the *Yahrzeit* and is traditionally observed based on the Hebrew calendar.
Korean

- Korean funeral customs dictate that the funeral is generally held the third day after the death.

- Prior to the funeral the body is washed with incense water and dressed in clothing that has been especially prepared for the burial. The ears and nose are plugged with cotton, coins are placed over the eyes and rice placed in the mouth. A quilt is often placed over the body.

- Depending on the wishes of the family, an extra set of clothing and possibly a bible is placed in the casket.
For the funeral service an easel will be needed to hold a photograph of the deceased that will be draped with a black ribbon.

During the funeral service, condolences will be paid individually to the family members and then by bowing to the picture of the deceased 2 times, then they will bow once to the chief mourners.

There is generally a table or altar placed near the casket that will be filled with symbolic offerings such as fruit, rice/rice bowl, incense, boiled eggs and various other items.
Muslim services are generally conducted sooner rather than later and typically within one to three days. It can often be the same day the death occurred if everything can be accomplished to allow for it.

Visitation hours are reasonably short but the service can last one to two hours.
Muslim

- Preparation: Generally there is no embalming, the deceased is shrouded in linens provided by the family.

- The shroud is tied at the head and feet with a piece of cloth from the same shroud in such a way that one can differentiate the head from the feet.

- Generally an inexpensive cloth covered casket or an orthodox casket (without the Star of David) is often used.
The casket is very often placed in front of the congregation. Those praying divide themselves into rows facing Mecca with the prayer leader in front. The entire funeral prayer is done while standing.

Some sects will require the casket be placed on the floor so that people can walk all the way around it.
If burial is the final disposition, mourners walk in front of or beside the casket and each person present shares in filling the grave by pouring three handfuls of soil into the grave.
The information in this presentation serves as a general resource. Always check with the clergy or organization regarding any specific issues or restrictions related to the delivery of services, including removal, preparation, visitation and/or funeral service, etc.

This concludes our online course on *Cultural Diversity in Funerals / Cultural Awareness.*