

Know Your Community: Build Your Business

by Sheila Anderson



The 21st century is changing North American life in many ways. There are more of us, and more different kinds of us, than ever before. Our traditions are numerous and varied, and, in many ways, the marketplace shifts to address this new reality. No facet of our culture is immune to this transformation—and certainly not the way we want to memorialize loved ones who have passed on. Funeral directors Archer Harmon and Erin Whitaker addressed the need to adapt to changing times in their joint address to the Cremation Symposium this past February in Las Vegas. During their presentation, **Meeting the Cremation Needs of a Growing and Diverse Population in North America**, the pair showed how change can work for traditional funeral homes facing new and different clientele. Their valuable insights on this topic appear below.

Part One: Archer Harmon and Fairfax Memorial Funeral Home

I want to discuss diverse population and how it will continue to affect our businesses, expanding on this symposium's theme of "Going Beyond the Box." It's easy to get in a rut, to fail to see how the diversity of our population is changing and how it will affect our business. This presentation addresses how we're not going to just get by and hope for the best but embrace the changes that are coming whether we like it or not.

A lot of you have cremation rates of 60-80%, but there are many populations out there who want ceremonies. If you try to discuss direct cremation with them, they just don't get it. How do you locate, serve, and track these groups for whom direct cremation is not an option?

Stepping Out of the Box Can Pay Off

To begin with, if you don't know your past or your history, your future can be uncertain. I want to share our story with you. The cemetery, Fairfax Memorial Park, opened in 1957. It was opened by Cornelius Doherty and now it's run under the leadership of Mike Doherty, who is the third generation. Fairfax Memorial Park has 128 acres and last year they did 647 burials.

Fairfax Memorial Funeral Home is adjacent to the cemetery. We opened in 2003, so we're relatively new. Within a couple of miles on either side of our funeral home there are well-established funeral homes in Northern Virginia that have been there 60, 70, 80 years. So it was a pretty big risk for the Doherty family to open a funeral home in 2003 when

cremation rates were skyrocketing. But they stepped out of the box and the risk paid off for them. Last year, in 2014, we ended with 887 families served for a funeral home that's only been open since 2003. If you're willing to step out of the box and do the right thing, it can really pay off for you.

Our highly trained staff includes twelve licensed directors, five apprentices, and twenty-one incredible support staff that help us get our job done. Most of our staff is young. They came to us as funeral assistants or apprentices. A few of our staff fall into the Baby Boomer generation, but most of us are Gen X or Millennials. We see things differently than Boomers. Most of my directors and apprentices embrace cremation, and they will probably select cremation for themselves.

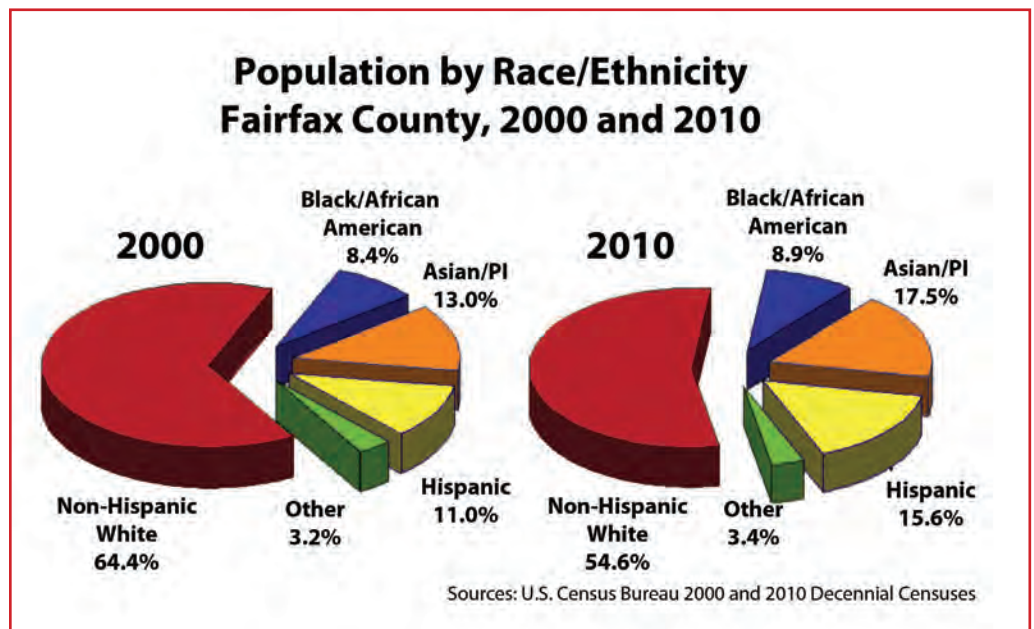
We have two crematories in our building. We use them all the time. They're in service seven days a week.

Know Your Data

We're located in Fairfax County in a suburb of Washington, D.C., eleven miles from the border of the District of Columbia. Washington, D.C. is a very, very diverse community. Government jobs bring people there, embassies bring people there, a booming economy brings people there. In a very short time, in the ten years between 2000 to 2010 (*see charts below*), the non-Hispanic white population has decreased in Northern Virginia by 10% percent, and it's been replaced by an Asian population of 12.5% and a Hispanic population of 4.8%. Having happened in just ten years, that population change is incredibly rapid.

I'll be interested to see what the next decade's statistics show about how diverse we've become. I got these data off of websites from Fairfax County, the federal government, and the media. This information is free, it's readily available to you, and it's a

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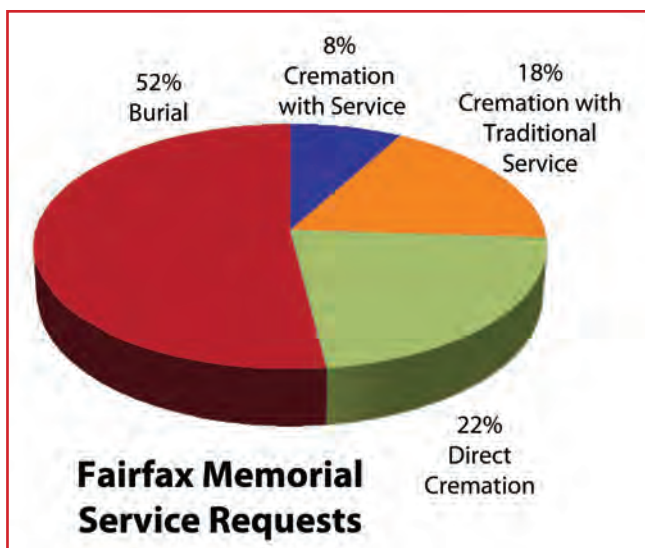
road map for you to understand what's going on and why your business is changing. You can look at these data and see where your business is going to go.

Although, according to CANA's latest statistics, Virginia's cremation rate is 36.8%, Fairfax Memorial's cremation rate is 48%. This is because we are actually in a tri-state area. We border the District of Columbia and Maryland, and we're close to Delaware and some other places, too.

I was surprised to learn that some funeral homes don't track their data. I just assumed everybody did it. At our funeral home the software we use tracks everything. Our directors and apprentices are trained that there are specific things that are entered into our computer program. I can tell you where our deaths come from, the ZIP code, the average age, I can tell you the race—I can tell you all of this with just a few requests through the software program.

Here's how our business breaks down (*see chart below*). Eight percent of our cremations take place with services, which means someone who chooses cremation wants to use our facilities for visitation, or have a memorial with services in our chapel, or they want us to take the cremated remains to be at graveside at Arlington—whatever the case may be. It's an additional service.

Eighteen percent want traditional services. This means they purchase the casket, they want visitation, they want services, but, ultimately, the disposition is cremation. Twenty-two percent want direct cremation. The rest of our business, 52%, is burial. Again, we're in a military market, and a significant amount of our business goes to Arlington National Cemetery, either full-body burial or cremation.



The other thing that's driving cremation in our area is that everyone who's eligible wants to be interred at Arlington National Cemetery. At Arlington, if you are not a career officer, Purple Heart, or Silver Star, you are not entitled to a full body burial. People who don't meet those qualifications can choose cremation and they're welcome to Arlington in one of the columbariums. That has a significant influence on our cremation rate, too.

A Cultural Demand for Cremation with Services: Buddhists, Hindus, and Sikhs

There are several different groups we serve for whom cremation is not just disposition—they want services, too.

The first group is the Buddhists. A Buddhist service will last about two to three days. There are two days of visitation and the third day is the service, prayers, and cremation or burial. Chinese Buddhists and Vietnamese Buddhists from the northern part of Vietnam choose burial. Vietnamese from the southern part of Vietnam choose cremation. It's just a cultural difference.

A Buddhist service is an event. After the funeral, they will have additional ceremonies, thirty days, ninety days. A funeral is something very important to them. It's like a wedding. It's a celebration.

Hindu and the Sikh funerals are very similar. They want our visitation parlors, and we provide white sheets and put them on the floors for them. The deceased is embalmed, dressed, and placed in a casket. A lot of times we use Orthodox caskets because we can take the tops off. Hindus and Sikhs want to see the full body from head to toe. It's very important to them. I don't have photos because it's not a custom at these funerals to take pictures and it would be inappropriate to do so.

The family is seated on the floor. The guests come in and take their shoes off and they're seated. The services usually last about forty-five minutes to an hour. Their priest brings a sitar. There's incense. They bring flame, because flame is part of the trilogy.

After the services, the guests lay flower petals on the body, then the family lays petals on the body as well. After that, everyone witnesses the cremation. Sikh and Hindu funerals are very, very large funerals. We'll have hundreds of people in attendance at our funeral home.

Hindu funerals are very similar to the Sikh version, but modernized. Hindus will use our chapel and the priest will

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come. The religious services are very brief and sometimes they're held privately, before the guests arrive. During the funerals, there are a lot of eulogies where the family and friends speak. The same thing happens at the end. The guests lay the flower petals on the body, the casket is open from head to foot.

With Hindus, ghee butter—clarified butter—and almonds are very important to the culture, and so is the coconut. Often those things will be placed into the casket. After that, the guests and family witness the cremation.

In these cultures, the oldest male child in the family—and if there's not an oldest male child, it's usually the oldest grandson or a nephew—is the one who will ignite the crematory for us. After the cremation, the cremated remains are taken back to India and scattered in the Ganges or one of the other rivers. We assist the families with the paperwork and everything they need in order to get the cremated remains back to their country of origin without any hassles.



There are some variations in Buddhist set ups in the funeral home. The family will bring in their home altar. With a traditional Vietnamese set up, there are banners from a local temple in Virginia (*see photo, top left*). The monks and nuns bring those banners in. All the rest of the items, the bell, the incense, the tables, the red table cloths, the picture of Buddha, all of that belongs to the funeral home. We have several different variations of Buddha pictures—we have a red Buddha, we have green Buddha. The Vietnamese adhere to the Chinese version of Buddha. Our investment in these items is about \$300 each, and we have three sets of them so we can have three Buddhist funerals going on at the same time.

There is a low table that is the deceased's table; the higher table is Buddha's table (*see photo, middle left*). The family will bring in food offerings and put them on the altar, and also candles and incense. We provide candles and incense as well.

After a Vietnamese funeral, if they cremate, they also want to pick relics from the cremated remains (*see photo below*). The Vietnamese have been cremating for thousands of years in their country. Just because they relocate to the United States, their traditions are not going to change.



We will ask our Vietnamese families if they want to pick relics, and they're often surprised that we're aware of the custom. When we offer to help them with other parts of the ceremony, they can start to feel that we know more about their celebrations than they do. It's our business to know these things. All of our directors are in tune with what's going on.

When we hire a new director, especially if they've come from another area, it can take a while for them to acclimate. I see them sometimes, just standing there wondering, "What's going on here?" But in six months to a year, they're fully immersed into Buddhist, Hindu, and Sikh traditions.

If there is a request to pick relics, we will sweep up the cremated remains and the family will come in with chopsticks that we provide. What they want is to select bone fragments for the home altar. They will put them in small urns or other things that have meaning to them and keep them on their home altar. They pray there. It's part of their daily life.

The other thing that Vietnamese look for are bones that are discolored. These are considered a great blessing. They pick through the cremated remains, they take what they want, and we process the rest so they can take them to a temple where the remains will stay, or they'll have them buried in a cemetery. They'll do a variety of things with them. A lot of Vietnamese will take the cremated remains back to Vietnam.

The Laotian Funeral

I think most of the directors at my funeral home agree with me that the Laotian funeral is one of the most interesting funerals we do (*see photos, right*). When we first opened in August of 2003, I was at the funeral home and we had a Laotian family walk in. They wanted to have a funeral. They liked our chapel because it was big and could accommodate 200 people. It was our first Laotian funeral and we didn't know anything about a Laotian funeral. They helped us and they were very kind. To this day, we still have Laotian funerals and I still see some of the same people who were there for the original funeral service. We did something right the first time, and it has paid off, so we have the Laotian funeral business in Northern Virginia.

Laotian funerals include a group of novice monks, or "monks for the day." What that means is that they are related to the deceased and they take the great honor of being a novice monk. However, the caveat to that is that they have to shave their heads and they have to shave their eyebrows.

In addition to the novice monks, there are also actual monks from the local Laotian temples. They are the ones who do the chanting for the deceased during the ceremony. Services are very beautiful. The Laotians bring in their own Buddha. It's a Thai Buddha and it's very thin. It doesn't have the Chinese characteristics to it.

After the funeral has ended, the monks from the temple hold a rope. The rope is tied to the casket, and they lead the casket out our chapel door, through our front door, and throughout our entire funeral home. They make their route to the crematory where they witness the cremation.

As part of the procession, there's a family member behind the casket with a bowl of money that's wrapped in foil. The packets are thrown up in the air, and if you are the funeral director or funeral assistant or apprentice on



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that casket, you will get pelted with money. The family throws the money to distract the attention of the evil spirits away from the deceased so the loved one can be cremated and move on to the next world. The rope signifies the monks pulling, and the indirect route taken to the crematory is meant to confuse the spirits.

The family also helps pull the rope. That is the front entrance to the funeral home and they're on their way to the crematory. Please note that in the Asian culture, white is the color of mourning.

There are wreaths carried by family members with money attached to them. The family folds paper money into triangles and attaches it to the wreaths. This is for the temple monks. At the end of the ceremony, if there are fifteen monks, twenty monks, however many monks there are, there's a wreath for each monk. It's alms. And alms is essentially an offering to the monks, thanking them for their participation in the journey of the loved one from this life into the next life. The last Laotian funeral I had, there were ten wreaths. I counted one wreath and it had over a thousand dollars in twenties folded in triangles, and there were ten wreaths. Each one of them was presented to the monks, so that is their form of payment, thanking the monks for what they have done for the family.

If you ever have the honor to serve a Buddhist family and they give you a tip, take it. If you don't take the tip, you've insulted the deceased and you've insulted the family. It's the same as the alms for the monks. The family is thankful for everything that you do for them.

Learning to Listen

It's interesting to talk to people about their different cultures and religious traditions. It's similar to the way people share food recipes. They want to share these things with you, and the more interest you have, the more they will tell you. And that's how we've all become experts in this. Listening to the families we serve and putting it back together for them and giving them everything that they want.

In Northern Virginia, we have a huge Asian population. There's a section in Fairfax County called Annandale, and, for whatever reason, Koreans started coming over in the early seventies and eighties. Annandale is where they settled. The church is very important to them. The Vietnamese came in the seventies and settled in Arlington. We serve a huge Korean population of Christians and Buddhists, but most of the Koreans are Christians because they came to this country through missionaries—from Presbyterian churches, Methodist churches—so they converted from their Buddhist practices to Christianity.

In these cultures, cremation is a practice that's been done for thousands of years. Sometimes the Koreans choose burial, sometimes they choose cremation. We can accommodate them, in the same way as the Vietnamese, with whatever their needs are.

The Importance of Outreach

What all this means for our industry is that with our shrinking profits and growing cremation rates—and how diverse we're becoming as a population in North America—you have to reach out to specific groups. For example, we've created packages tailored to a specific temple that uses our services. When we first opened, I met with the funeral preparer for a local temple. She came to us to inquire about using our funeral home because it's close to where the population served by her temple lives. She helped me get set up with all of our Buddhist equipment and helped me to tailor a package to accommodate the needs of her families.

You have to have an outreach program for various groups so you can have a dialogue with them. You need to have a way to tell people what you can do for them.

The other way we reach out to a particular population is through our website. The populations we are talking about are very savvy with technology, and our website is very important to our business. We include specific religious and cultural key words to help people find us. That way, when someone in Northern Virginia Googles "Buddhist funeral," "Hindu funeral," whatever the case may be, our information pops up. We are in the number one position with this.

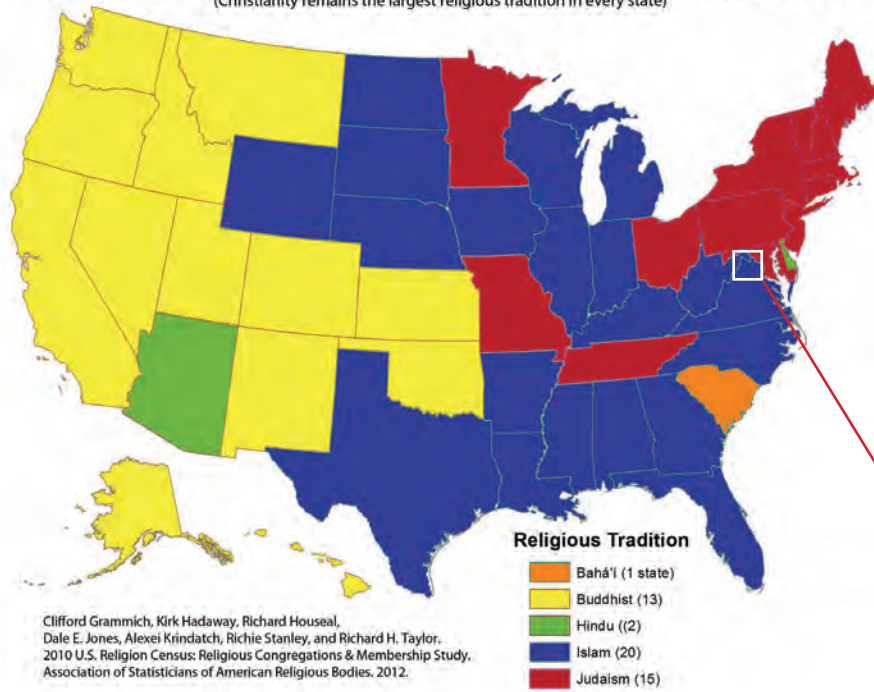
We partner with our website company, FuneralNet. They're the ones that helped us achieve this and it's worked very well. FuneralNet also introduced us to Co-Pilot, a program that helps you with your Facebook page. That's been very efficient for us as well.

I found a map that shows an overview of what the United States looks like by the fastest growing religions (*see page 14*). The map was put together by a reliable source, a religious association. There was another map with the same information at the county level. When I saw this map, it was an "Aha!" moment to me. It illustrates the meat and potatoes for what I'm talking about. This is amazing information and I didn't have to pay for it.

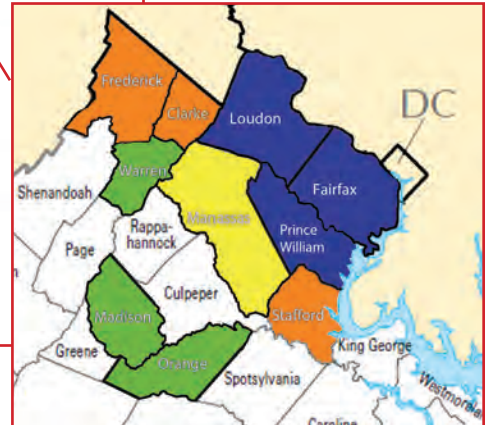
You can see a portion of the Virginia map by county below. The green (Buddhist) and yellows (Hindu/Sikh), that business I've been talking about, that's where all that business comes from. When I saw that information and compared it to the ZIP codes of the families we serve—it's spot on. Buddhism is the fastest growing religion, and you don't have to be Asian to be Buddhist. So if you have a family member tell you that they're Buddhist and they look like me, don't be surprised by it.

Second Largest Religious Tradition in Each State, 2010

(Christianity remains the largest religious tradition in every state)



Clifford Grammich, Kirk Hadaway, Richard Houseal, Dale E. Jones, Alexei Krindatch, Richie Stanley, and Richard H. Taylor. 2010 U.S. Religion Census: Religious Congregations & Membership Study. Association of Statisticians of American Religious Bodies, 2012.



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Looking at the information on the national map, if I owned a funeral home or crematory in Washington State, Nevada, Arizona, and California, I would be knocking on the doors of these temples saying, “I have a funeral home and we’re here to help.” A picture is worth a thousand words.

Part Two: Erin Whitaker and Whitaker Funeral Home



Archer Harmon is a licensed funeral director and embalmer and the General Manager of Fairfax Memorial Funeral Home. With over 25 years of experience, Mr. Harmon is well versed in many funeral traditions, including military funerals and state funerals for dignitaries. He has attained a vast amount of invaluable knowledge regarding the funeral customs of highly diverse populations. Mr. Harmon serves on CANA’s Board of Directors.