

Morris-Baker Funeral Home and Cremation Services Johnson City, Tennessee

Supporting Clergy To Meet the Grief Needs of the Wider Community

Filling in a Resource Gap

One day at my Rotary Club, I asked everyone, “Who in this room has been to a bad funeral?” Every hand went up.

Today, clergy members are called upon to support and shepherd their congregations in all the steps of their lives. Many clergy are called upon to “pinch hit” by officiating services for a deceased person they had little to no connection with. Often, the death involves a tragic loss like gun violence, suicide, or overdose.

Some clergy do not attend seminary for training, and for those who do, seminary training commonly involves significant time developing a high competence in theology but little or no time on the practical aspects of officiating funerals or navigating the grief that surrounds them. Thus, clergy members are faced with searching on their own for guidance and education as they develop, hone, and expand the skills they need to officiate funerals and support grieving families.

As two clergy members told me when researching this project, the clergy do the best they can. With little to no training in navigating these tragic moments, and often with little knowledge of the family, the clergy member will naturally drift toward their area of competence—scripture—and often miss the opportunity to meet the moment.

We, as a company, saw the opportunity to provide a resource to the local clerical community to help them fill this gap.

A Program that Supports, Strengthens, and Provides Tools and Resources

Personally, two of my greatest influences on how to run an effective and meaningful service have been Dr. Thomas Long, author of *Accompany Them With Singing: The Christian Funeral*, and Glenda Stansbury, Co-Founder and Dean of InSight Institute Certified Celebrant Program. Dr. Long’s work showed me the meaning behind the liturgical aspects of funerals and encouraged me to talk to people about the meaning behind those liturgical aspects so they could engage more in those elements. Glenda Stansbury taught me how to listen to families and to acknowledge, respect, and affirm who and where they are. They often exist on opposite ends of the formal faith and liturgy spectrum, but they both pushed me out of my comfort zone and taught me to extend myself further and try to give a deeper meaning to services.

After I attended a lecture in October 2019 by Dr. Long, hosted by a local Christian seminary (Emmanuel Christian Seminary at Milligan), I walked out the front doors of the church and immediately thought of Glenda Stansbury presenting to the same group. From the church parking lot, I called Glenda to ask if she would be willing to partner with me if I could establish a relationship with our local seminary. Glenda agreed, so I contacted the seminary.

Nearly four years and a global pandemic later, we were invited to host a day of learning as part of their course on pastoral care in times of grief and loss.

On May 9, 2023, Morris-Baker hosted thirty-six seminarians, chaplains, and local clergy for “The Sacred Journey: A Conversation Between Clergy and Celebrant in Partnership.” The workshop provided a deep dive and conversation among professionals about the needs of people in grief, the value and power of the funeral process, and how to develop the skills to create healing and restorative tributes for their members or those they serve, as well as developing collaboration and communication with funeral professionals.

With a mixture of video, lecture, and discussion the seminar addressed:

- The issues of current funeral practices and the reality of the “nones” (those who do not consider themselves religious)
- The importance of the funeral process and the implications of unresolved grief
- The power of presence and “getting in people’s buckets” (meeting their needs where they are instead of telling them where they need to be)
- Developing the skill of stories and the power of the celebrant/family meeting.

The day ended with an “Ask a Funeral Director” open forum with me and Glenda.

Benefits to Our Community

Rather than providing promotional materials or other things to other members of the caregiving community, our funeral home has focused on providing educational events that support them in their life’s work. For years, we have done this by providing high-quality grief seminars for chaplains, therapists, social workers, and clergy. This event was unique in its focus on the clergy, a group underrepresented at our grief events, and we believe it is the beginning of regular events in support of local clergy.

The discussions in the room were more challenging and academic than our past grief events, but the growth from the challenge was the goal. Previously, our community hosted Dr. Long for “Caring for Humanity and Nurturing Faith through Christian Funerals.” The content of our May 9th training was meant to share the unique experience of a person who has provided thousands of funerals for people on the other side of the religious spectrum from Dr. Long. The intent was not to say that either way is “correct” or the only way but instead to encourage each clergy member to find where on the spectrum their own ministry is best suited. Our hope is that having exposure to more resources and training will allow each person to find and use the tools they need to go beyond scripture and meet the moment they find themselves in.

Strengthening Partnerships in Service

As stated earlier, I came up with the idea for this training after attending a wonderful lecture by Dr. Thomas Long in 2019 as part of a lecture series coordinated by the Emmanuel Christian Seminary at Milligan.

Following the event, I reached out to the seminary and several local pastors to ask their opinion on the need for increased funeral training in seminaries at large. The feedback is best summarized by one minister who said, “I don’t know how many good funerals I have done, but I know I’ve done a bunch of bad ones.”

In the end, the seminary joined us in partnership by incorporating the program into their doctoral program residency and by helping us promote the day with their master’s students, alumni, and the clerical community.

Understanding the Impact, Investing in the Future

After the event and the return of attendee surveys, I was able to connect with the Professor for the doctoral program. I talked about our goal to expose his students and other attendees to the spectrum between formal liturgy and the celebrant approach so they could explore where they see themselves and their ministry. He congratulated us on our success and described the following day in class at the Seminary which started with an unplanned three-hour discussion/debate about the seminar and the follow-up project it spawned.

I was so pleased to hear about the conversation, and we hope it is only the beginning. Morris-Baker, InSight, and the seminary all plan to learn from this inaugural effort, build upon the constructive and positive feedback, and offer an event annually.

After the training, we sent out an evaluation for the attendees. Positive feedback for the event included:

- “The info was practical, relevant, needed and given in love.”
- “The presenter has great experience dealing with grief and loss. Many younger clergy do not have this experience and there is only so much one can get in seminary. Exposing them to the candid truth and importance of being a compassionate part of the grieving process is very significant.”

When asked, What did you like best about the seminar? respondents wrote:

- “The fact that it addressed common problems [and] provided satisfactory solutions.”
- “...the honest look into walking with people through the grieving process.”
- “Opportunity for discussion with colleagues about the changing needs in our community”

When asked, How will this seminar affect your ministry or the way you lead funerals? respondents wrote:

- “In thinking about the amount of time needed to commit to planning it.”
 - “It can serve as a framework for building the content.”
- “It reaffirmed the call to be a servant and to allow a family to begin their grieving process in a more gentle way. The instruction to listen to the wishes of the family helped shed new light on the purpose of a funeral vs. providing a worship service during a time of grief. Loving people where they are keeps the door open for further ministry down the road after a funeral service is over. The analogy of the “full bucket of grief” made a lasting impression on my service going forward.”
- “I want to be more intentional about having conversations with congregational members about what they want for their funeral before they die.”
 - “Gives me greater confidence in what I am doing.”
 - “Appreciated the resources for thinking about new ways to address topics, phrase parts of the service, etc. I’ve been officiating funerals for 24 years, but always grateful for new ideas, new language, etc.”
 - “With more than 30+ years ministry experience, this affirmed my approach to working with families who experience loss.”

Although our effort has truly just begun, I’m proud of what this program accomplished in its first year. It took several years to realize the vision from that day in 2019, but we see potential in funeral directors working in partnership with seminaries, celebrants, and clergy because we all share a common enemy, bad funerals.