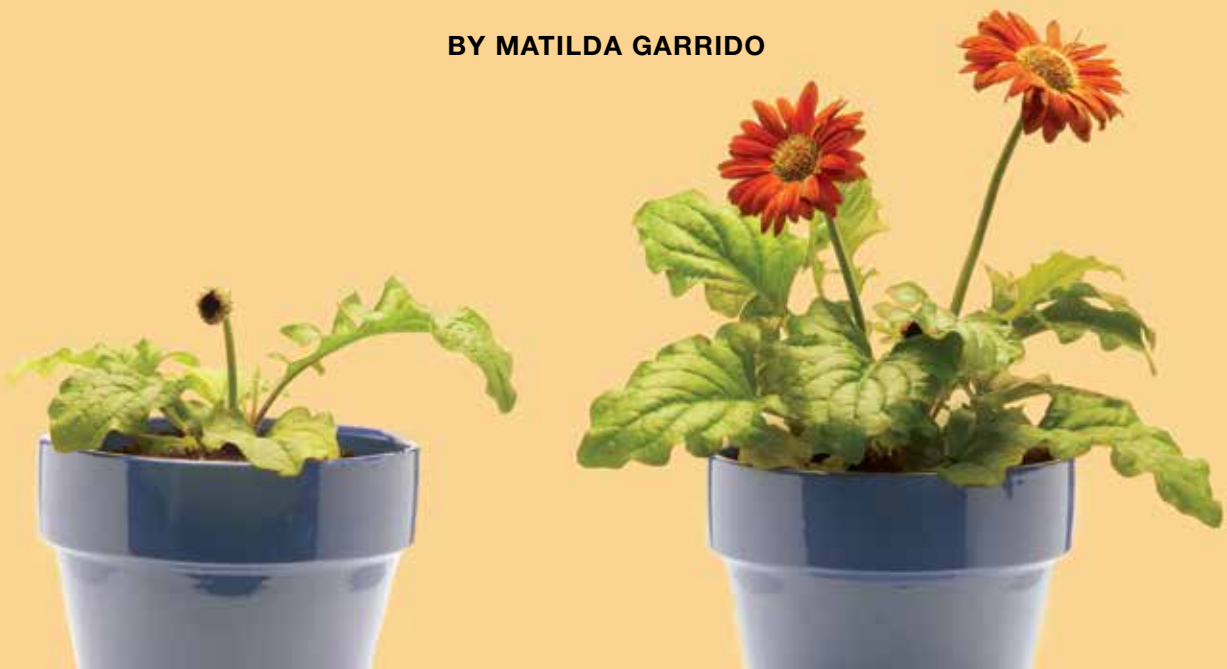


How The Nones

Can Help You Better
Serve Families and
Grow Your Business

Adding celebrant services to your offerings provides a unique opportunity to capture a growing population.

BY MATILDA GARRIDO



Is this a familiar scene? A grieving family calls on you to care for their loved one. Unaffiliated, or perhaps disillusioned, with a particular religious tradition, they may have no established rituals for memorialization. They may want to rush through the days following the death, opting against a service simply because they don't know where to begin. Creating a service from scratch amid all the logistical details they face might be overwhelming. Without your help and direction, they may bury or cremate and try to move on without the benefits a funeral or memorial service can offer.

The numbers for this group of religiously unaffiliated and/or disillusioned, the “nones,” are growing exponentially. In 2024, Pew Research Center estimated that 28% of Americans consider themselves unaffiliated with any traditional religion, a number that has risen steadily over the years (up from 16% of Americans in 2007). It does not, however, mean that nones are not spiritual. In fact, the majority believe in a higher power but consider themselves unaffiliated because of a negative experience with organized religion or what they see as restrictive doctrine and expectations.

This means that following a death, they do not typically participate in established religious traditions that bring comfort to many who are observant – from benefiting from the involvement and support of a congregation to actual concrete guidelines on how to mourn, how long to mourn and when to begin to return to the world. While they don't necessarily have prescribed rituals for marking a death, this doesn't mean they don't want or need funeral services – they may just not know how to create them.

This group is more individual and prefers more individualized memorial services rather than prescribed liturgy. Understanding the needs of this population is crucial for funeral homes that want to serve every family in their community.

Enter the Funeral Celebrant

A funeral celebrant is an individual who is specially trained to design and conduct both secular and nonsecular funerals and memorials. Their role is not just to officiate but to work closely with family and friends, sometimes fol-

lowing the directions the deceased has specified, to create a personalized service.

Unlike a standard religious service, a celebrant's service is highly individualized. They may be the sole speaker at a funeral or memorial, taking on the role a religious leader might otherwise fulfill. Other times, they may serve almost as a master of ceremonies, ensuring a smooth and well-organized event.

Celebrants are also taught to pay tribute to and craft meaningful memorials for socially difficult deaths, such as those who died by suicide or drug or alcohol abuse, or who experienced (and perhaps caused) family rifts. Because of their training, they can design bespoke and unique services for everyone, thus meeting every family's needs.

Celebrancy as a unique profession was born in Australia in the 1970s amid a rising need for highly trained individuals to officiate at such civil ceremonies as weddings and funerals. Doug Manning brought the movement to the United States in 1978 and founded InSight Institute (insightbooks.com), which trains celebrants to serve and work in the funeral industry. Today, InSight Institute conducts certified celebrant trainings at local and national NFDA conventions throughout the country. Manning's recent autobiography, *The Spiritual Journey of a Recovering Baptist*, was published this year and he has now passed the InSight mantle to his daughter, Glenda Stansbury.

The Celebrant Option Serves Families

Matt Bailey, owner of Bailey Funeral Homes and Connecticut Life Tributes, partners with Stansbury for many training sessions throughout the year. I spoke with Bailey after InSight



concluded its preconference training at the most recent NFDA convention in New Orleans. He is passionate about the benefits of offering the celebrant option.

“Offering secular celebrant services to families fills the traditional role a minister or rabbi would serve in leading a funeral or memorial service,” explained Bailey. “Without options for the unaffiliated, we risk disenfranchising those who would prefer something more individual and less religious in nature. If we don’t present celebrants as a possibility, families might leave the funeral home feeling that ‘there is not an option for me here.’”

Jennifer Muldowney, owner of Muldowney Memorials, a memorial planning company that also offers freelance celebrant services to funeral homes, echoes Bailey’s thoughts. Said Muldowney: “We are denying families choice if we do not offer celebrants as a service. Including them as part of a package leaves the option with them but conveys the message that you are trying to meet their needs.” This sense of responsibility and care for all families in your community can set your firm apart.

For families that may not be aware of the celebrant option, a discovery of this kind of support can be a source of great relief. “Families deserve to sit back, fully experience the service and focus on grieving. With the celebrant option, the burden of structuring a program and writing remarks is removed from them,” said Bailey.

“Being religiously unaffiliated, they may not know how to begin to put together a funeral or memorial service without the assistance of clergy and standard liturgy. Or, they may desire a less religious service than their place of worship can offer. It can be a great relief to them to know that an option at your funeral home works for them, too.”

The Celebrant Option Serves Funeral Homes

In addition to better serving families, offering a celebrant option can help you grow your business. Unaffiliated or disillusioned families may initially consider just a direct cremation unless they know there are other possibilities for them at your funeral home. If they like the idea, they may elect a complete service on the premises or off using your celebrant, which can boost your bottom line, too.

Notes Muldowney: “As part of a package on



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your GPL, celebrants bring in extra revenue not only for their services but for add-ons like flowers, etc.” A package that includes disposition, a celebrant and a service can be presented to all families as a standard offering, with the celebrant and room charges removed if they bring their own clergy or have the service in another location. The key is to give families the choice, so they feel they have all the options.

Many will feel great relief knowing they won’t have to assemble a service themselves if not connected to specific clergy or place of worship. Packaging the viewing, service room, celebrant, flowers, etc., is one-stop shopping for decision-fatigued families. A family whose needs are acknowledged in this way – especially if it comes as a pleasant surprise to them – will likely spread the word, creating additional referrals for you.

A family’s use of a celebrant rather than a family member or friend also gives you much more control over the service. As mentioned, celebrants are trained to write and deliver services that proceed smoothly and are, above all, orderly. If you have multiple funerals happening on the same day at your funeral home, or if you are scheduled to be at back-to-back services off-site, a service that runs overtime (this frequently happens if family or friends are putting together

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the service) can be stressful for you and your staff, as well as cause real logistical difficulties. Working with a celebrant ensures that you'll better understand how long the service will run.

Nuts and Bolts of Getting Started

InSight Institute's three-day, intensive certified celebrant training program is offered at local and national NFDA conventions throughout the year. Muldowney Memorials is also launching a hybrid celebrant training program in partnership with Continuing Vision (whose aim is to provide quality and affordable continuing education to funeral professionals) that will take place online, with occasional in-person options. The Celebrant Foundation & Institute, among others, offers fully online training. All these trainings are open to funeral directors and non-funeral directors, so an entire staff can benefit. Consider training yourself alongside your staff for a seamless approach.

Because of their training, celebrants can design bespoke and unique services for everyone, thus meeting every family's needs.

Bailey trains all his licensees to serve as celebrants, believing it increases their confidence and skill in working with families. In addition to their experience crafting individualized services, celebrants also receive extensive sensitivity training focusing on working with families that have recently suffered a loss and may be in deep grief. This heightened awareness improves all interactions with customers and potential customers, so training your staff as celebrants will make them better at all aspects of their jobs.

Ideal candidates will enjoy working with families and be comfortable (or willing to learn to be comfortable) with public speaking. A staff member active in community life is a good choice as it will offer peace for a family to know that someone they and the deceased know or have known in the past will guide them.

So that the celebrant can concentrate on the family on service day, it is a good idea to train

someone who would not otherwise be on active duty to be a celebrant. This could be an administrative person, one of your greeters who would be off that day, your assistant (if you'll be covering the service) or even yourself, if you have backup.

If you'd prefer to investigate freelance celebrants in your area, you can use the internet to search. If you choose this option, try to interview the candidates and ask for a sample service to better understand their work. You can come to whatever arrangement is mutually beneficial for both of you, whether they offer you a referral fee, you pay them and take a percentage of the charge, or they work by contract, etc.

If you decide to use freelance celebrants, Muldowney pointed out that they will be a good source of information about the family you might not otherwise receive. "As a 'second friend,' an independent celebrant may hear both positive and negative things about how your funeral home handled their loved one," she said. "This kind of raw feedback is invaluable."

Growing your business model to include celebrancy services – on staff or freelance – not only increases your service menu but also potentially opens up new populations to whom you can market your firm. Announcing this new service is also a great opportunity to remind your community about your funeral home and all you have to offer to all families.

Training staff or contracting with a freelance celebrant is not time-consuming, and given the growing number of Americans moving away from more organized religious practices, it is time and money well spent. It will result in wider exposure, a more satisfied clientele and increased business opportunities for your firm. ☰

Matilda Garrido, MS, CT, holds a Master of Science degree in thanatology (study of death, dying and bereavement), a Master of Science in bioethics and is certified in thanatology by the Association for Death Education and Counseling. She has extensive experience working with the dying, families of the dying, and the bereaved and is focused on normalizing the experience of grief and reducing death fears through education, focused action and increased community supports for the dying and grieving.