Cultural and Religious Considerations During A Mass Fatality and/or Pandemic Event
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Show me the manner in which a nation cares for its dead, and I will measure with mathematical exactness the tender mercies of its people, their respect for the laws of the land and their loyalty to high ideals

~William Gladstone
Logic vs. Emotion

Many times, the process of grieving is not a “logical” process. In other words, to those not directly affected by the loss, the thoughts and actions of those most affected do not seem logical. This topic, Cultural and Religious Considerations, is a very difficult topic because we are dealing with human emotions. Thus, while necessary, developing a “Standard Operating Procedure” may meet resistance when it is implemented due to a mass fatality or pandemic event.

For example, while many would say that the dead human body is devoid of life and only a shell, and it is not logical to spend resources and time on such planning, why then does the United States Government spend Millions of dollars to repatriate fallen soldiers remains back to the United States?
A Decent Burial and Disposition

Our society is founded upon the belief that every person is entitled to a “decent burial or disposition”. This includes individual rites and rituals. In the event of a mass fatality or pandemic event, how this occurs may be limited by time and location.
DEALING WITH GRIEF DURING MASS DEATHS

When there are massive numbers of deaths as was the case in the 1918 pandemic, proper, or even individual, burials may not be possible. This will cause a great deal of stress and intensify grief. Helping the citizenry to deal with grief will also be difficult initially. During quarantine, it may be at a distance, through telephone or email contact. Should “mass burials” or “common trenches” be used, one cannot underestimate the impact of such a decision upon society!!
True or False: Cultural and Religious Considerations Need to be Acknowledged?

**TRUE!**

Thus, why we are talking about them! Whether one believes in a higher deity or not, one cannot dismiss that our society, especially the State of Alabama is VERY religious. Hence, a brief overview of some of the major considerations.
Religious & Cultural Overview

“All of the world’s cultures attend to the proper care of the dead and each has developed its own rituals to implement this care...Religious convictions are important to consider in this discussion, because for centuries the funeral has been an essentially religious ritual, is certainly so within the Judeo-Christian Tradition, and is so within all of the world’s religions”

Is this really that complicated? How many religious/fraternal groups could there possibly be?

The Basic Liturgical Protestant Funeral Rite * The Episcopal Funeral Rite * The Lutheran Funeral Rite * The Basic Non-Liturgical Protestant Funeral Rite * The Roman Catholic Funeral Rite * The Orthodox Jewish Funeral Rite * The Conservative Jewish Funeral Rite * The Reformed Jewish Funeral Rite * The Orthodox Funeral Rite * The Buddhist Funeral Rite* The Muslim Funeral Rite * The Hindu Funeral Rite * The Mennonite Funeral Rite * The Amish Funeral Rite * The Christian Science Funeral Rite * The Mormon Funeral Rite * The Japanese Buddhist Death Ritual * The Jehovah’s Witness Funeral Rite * The Military Funeral Rite * The American Veteran’s Organizations Funeral Rites * Fraternal Organizations Funeral Rites * The Atheist/Secular/Agnostic Funeral Rite * And many, many more!!!
Racial and Cultural Differences

One cannot dismiss the differences between basic racial funeral practices. In general, Caucasian funerals are held within three days; African-American funeral rites may be between three to ten days; Hispanic funeral rites vary depending on place of burial, most want to be returned to their ‘homeland’; and Asian rites also vary, but are similar to Caucasian.
Ok, we know there is a difference in cultures and religions, so what do we do?

Begin preparing the general congregations now for the possibility that someone other than their own clergy staff may be ministering to them in a pandemic. Not all clergy will be available. Some will chose not to move about. Some may not be allowed to do so. Military chaplains, especially Reserve chaplains (and some of your clergy are among these) may be ordered to duty in a pandemic.
Viewing and Visitation

Viewing and Visitations may have to be abbreviated or eliminated due to several reasons:

• The total number of deaths may dictate visitation schedules

• Staffing of funeral and cemetery personnel, clergy, and volunteers might be reduced due to the mass fatality event or the pandemic influenza

• In the case of a pandemic event, mandatory closing of public places such as funeral homes and churches may be declared

• Fear of infection, real or unreal, must be considered (Will public officials mandate no visitation and/or will the public attend even if offered?)
Final Disposition Rituals

Just like visitations, the actual funeral or final disposition rituals may be limited due to the same reasons. While every effort will be made to respect local, cultural, and religious preferences, the reality is that in a pandemic event, public health will be paramount. Even so, the emotional affect of such actions on society cannot be diminished. Hence, support groups, such as clergy and therapists will be a key factor to overcoming what may be inevitable.
Local Funeral Directors, Clergy, and Emergency Personnel Must Have a Plan!!!

While some very basic suggestions about visitation and funeral services were mentioned, this presentation is not intended to tell you what you will do, that is your job!!! The key is that we MUST have a plan, a workable plan, before the time of need!!!
Here it is good to recall the words of Dr. Anthony Fauci of the National Institute of Infectious Diseases at NIH, “it is not a question of whether, it is question of when.” It is part of our professional responsibility to try to overcome this head-in-the-sand attitude. “An ounce of prevention is better than a pound of cure. Or in this instance “AN OUNCE OF PREPAREDNESS IS BETTER THAN A POUND OF PANIC.”
Resources:

* Your local clergy
* Your local funeral director
* Your local cemetery
* Religious associations, conferences, boards, etc
* Civic leaders
* Fraternal organization leaders
* Local mortuary schools
* County and state officials
Last Thoughts...

*Funeral Directors and Clergy usually have a very good working relationship; in fact, many funeral homes employ clergy as part-time personnel. Thus, in an pandemic event, the funeral home must anticipate a reduction in staffing due to the clergy acting in his/her professional role.

*By tradition and religious conviction, many people expect to be buried in his/her cemetery lot with family members. Should a common cemetery for burial be mandated, we must consider the relocation requests, the health consequences, and the emotions relating to these events!
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