

# BEYOND

Issue 7 - October 2023

The Bereavement Authority of Ontario magazine



TOM THOMSON  
LANDSCAPE PAINTER  
DROWNED IN CANOE LAKE  
JULY 8 1917. AGED 39 YEARS  
11 MONTHS 3 DAYS  
JAMES BRODIE THOMSON  
DIED 1883 AGED 9 MONTHS  
17 DAYS  
KENNETH MATHISON  
DIED 1879 AGED 72 YEARS

## p10 | **Grave concern for Tom Thomson:**

The unofficial Group of Seven painter's burial location draws interest in Canadian history and its cemeteries

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Biodegradable shrouds**

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examines religious rituals**

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### About *Beyond*

*Beyond* is an all-digital, family focused magazine providing useful and interesting stories about the bereavement care industry and why it matters to you.

It is the magazine of the Bereavement Authority of Ontario, a government delegated administrative authority focused on protecting and informing families.

[www.TheBAO.ca](http://www.TheBAO.ca)

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## BAO exploring solutions to increase the number of funeral directors

By Jim Cassimatis,  
Interim CEO/Registrar,  
Bereavement Authority of Ontario

**A**s I continue in an interim role, I have heard loud and clear the concern about labour shortages facing our profession in Ontario.

Labour shortages are a result of attraction and retention factors. While the retention matters are more appropriately addressed by those employing funeral professionals, I believe the regulator has a role in addressing the factors that may attract more people to become licensed professionals.

I have had many discussions with bereavement sector associations, colleges, and a number of individual funeral and cemetery professionals. While these shortages are not limited to the funeral profession, we are actively



exploring an array of solutions to shortages in the number of funeral directors (FDs), particularly in rural and northwestern Ontario.

I am working with our licensees and education providers to have:

**Short-term improvements** to support better services to grieving families and relief for overworked funeral directors.

**Long-term improvements** in access to education for modern needs of people wanting to enter the profession – including those younger and more mature.

Solutions could include expanding work practices of assistants to

free up directors for responsibilities that require a licensed FD, and greater accessibility to college funeral director programs.

Here's what's happening in the sector to address this issue.

## **Actions for short-term results**

### **More hybrid learning**

As the bereavement sector regulator in Ontario, we are promoting and supporting an increase in online education at Humber College in Toronto and Collège Boréal in Sudbury, offering education in the French language.

The reach of the college programs could be greatly extended into northern Ontario and everywhere/anywhere by offering much more funeral director education through online learning. Post-secondary education institutions have become nimbler during the two-years of COVID-19 restrictions when online learning temporarily became the norm. Humber and Boréal already know how to do this – and do it well – in a hybrid model of online and some in-person learning.

Fixed-place, old-school formats have been part of the problem for more remote communities and smaller ones in Ontario for getting

access to the programs. This issue applies to recent high school graduates and people seeking a second career.

The distance-to-education barrier can be minimized through hybrid online and in-person learning – with a bias favouring more online/virtual learning. Hybrid learning will provide:

- More convenience
- Lower cost to students, and
- Greater accessibility to FD programs

'The sooner the better' is our message to our educational partners. We support and applaud their efforts to address this issue.

### **Apprenticeships**

Apprenticeships at funeral homes, local to each student, would also be a big plus for anyone looking to enter the profession. Different from internships, these apprenticeships will provide much more direct experiential learning in a funeral home from the early part of the programs, in addition to the pre-existing internships.

We have started discussions with an existing apprenticeship program and the Ministry of Colleges and Universities to establish an apprenticeship program in Ontario. These are early days but appear promising so far.

## Professional mobility

We will continue to recognize the qualifications and licensing from another North American jurisdiction to enable and encourage funeral directors from other jurisdictions to work in Ontario. This is contingent on each such person passing the BAO's jurisprudence exam in order to work in the province as FDs.

## Expanded role for non-licensed staff

An expanded role for funeral director assistants (FDAs) would enable funeral directors to provide more licensed services to grieving families.

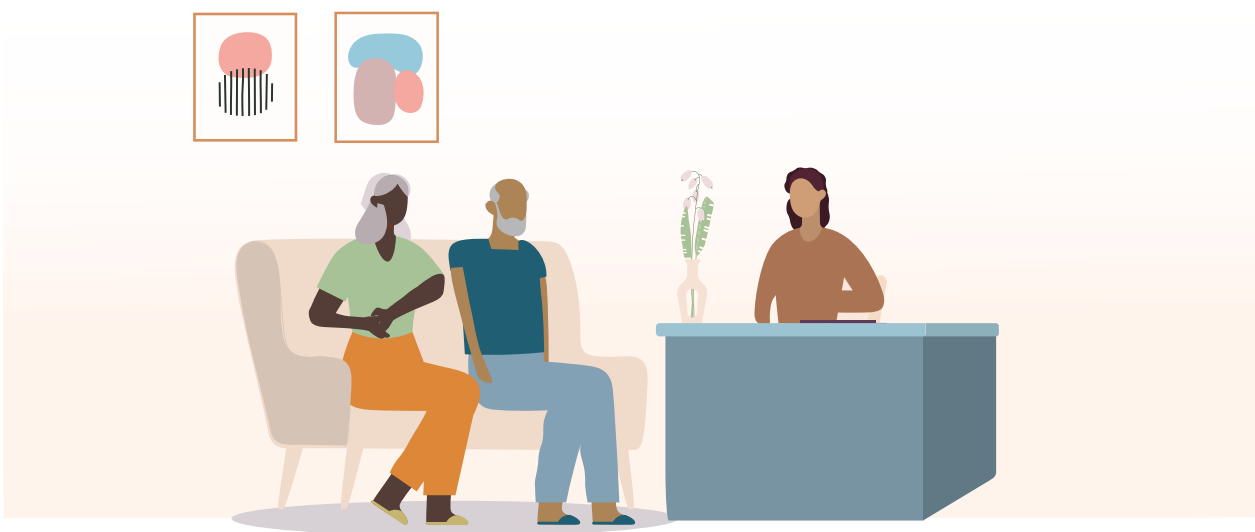
This would involve changing how the non-licensed FDAs work in our sector. The expanded role would see FDAs conducting funeral rites and ceremonies, which are

currently part of many funeral directors' standard practices. (Celebrants already fill this role at various funeral homes.)

For the last several months, we've had a funeral home in Ontario piloting this idea. I look forward sharing with the sector what has been learned in the pilot in a future article.

More broadly, funeral homes could make greater use of their non-licensed staff to do non-licensed work. This would add some efficiencies to day-to-day operations – again freeing up funeral directors to provide care and services requiring a licensed FD.

I recognize that, on its own, this idea wouldn't solve the problem. But it could be part of the solution in the short and long term.



## Actions for long-term sustainability

### More colleges offering FD programs

Actions for the long term, to sustain the number of FDs, require changing how we welcome and retain the professionals we license and regulate.

The BAO has had discussions with another college in Ontario, which has been considering the development of a new funeral director education program. Currently, such program offerings in Ontario are limited to Humber College and Collège Boréal.

Having more colleges recognized by the BAO to provide the FD programs in other parts of the province would make the profession a more practical choice for younger people and those considering a second career.

### Sustained teamwork

It's important that we at the BAO, as the regulator, keep working with and supporting our partners to address this issue that is so important to families, our licensed FDs and people interested in joining the profession.

It will take our sustained efforts as a team to implement the solutions.

## About The BAO

The Bereavement Authority of Ontario (BAO) is a government delegated authority and not-for-profit corporation administering provisions of the *Funeral, Burial and Cremation Services Act, 2002* (FBCSA) on behalf of the Ministry of Public and Business Service Delivery. Responsible for protection of the public interest, the BAO regulates, ensures compliance with the law, and supports licensed:

- Funeral establishment operators, directors and preplanners;
- Cemetery, crematorium and alternative disposition operators;
- Transfer service operators; and
- Bereavement sector sales representatives across Ontario.

The BAO is wholly funded by licensee fees (not tax dollars).

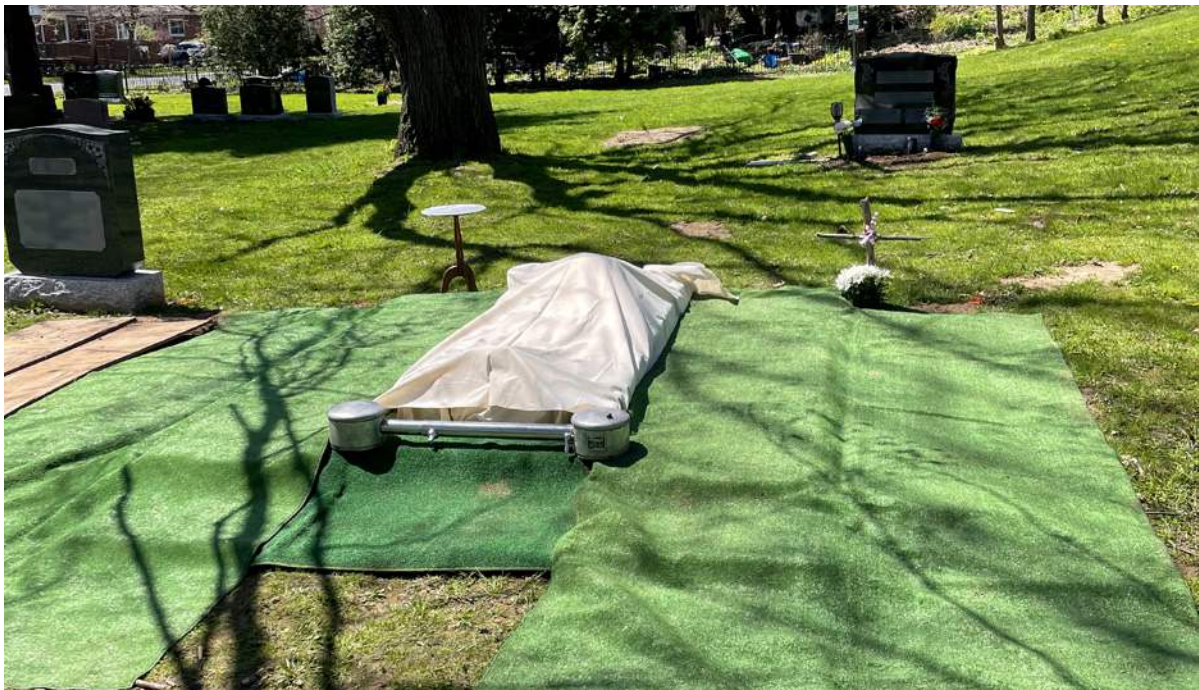


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# GREEN BURIALS:

## What is the biodegradable shroud?

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*The green shroud near a graveside*

**J**eff Robinson, funeral director of Guelph's Passages Eco Conscious Cremation and Burial, always aimed to create a conversation on the importance of natural or green burials in Ontario.

"Everyone has their own idea of what a green burial is," Robinson says. "When people ask us about our eco-friendly approach, we mention the biodegradable shroud

as one of our funeral options, as opposed to the overprocessing of traditional caskets."

### **Shroud composition**

Biodegradable shroud burials involve the deceased wrapped in a garment of natural fibres with no chemicals or dyes, in preparation for being returned to the Earth naturally. The shroud is sewn to proportionately fit the body and

# What is a green burial?

There is no legal definition of a green burial, but the increasingly popular practice is legal.

Deputy Registrar of the Bereavement Authority of Ontario (BAO) Michael D'Mello says green burials are allowed under the law, the *Funeral, Burial and Cremation Services Act, 2002*.

“Green burials can easily comply with current legislation,” he says.

D'Mello says aspects that may make a burial 'green' in the eyes of those interested include:

- An unembalmed deceased human
- A biodegradable casket, container or shroud, without a vault or grave liner
- Location on a designated or undesignated 'green' section of a cemetery
- A grave dug by hand, rather than motorized equipment
- A grave covered with indigenous vegetation, not requiring pesticides or chemicals
- Grave marking using something natural, such as a rock with a hand-chiseled name on it

Being a more recent practice in Ontario, many cemeteries may not yet have a separate section for green burials.

The BAO reviews and approves cemetery bylaws to ensure families aren't being misled and that they understand what a green burial may be.



*Wide view of the shroud*

create an intimate experience for a family, he says. In viewings, the deceased person is dressed in clothing made of natural fibres and placed into a container made of biodegradable materials.

## Increasing popularity

Robinson says the shroud is becoming more popular in municipalities across the province because of consumer interest. While not traditionally being well-known in North America yet, Robinson says that the excitement is palpable in Ontario, where places like Hamilton have heard, and have been receptive, to family requests for the shroud.

“The proof is out there,” Robinson says. “The [death care] industry is responding to these requests, and I think that’s absolutely fantastic that this conversation is being had.”





## A meaningful burial choice

Grief and bereavement coach Krista Brenner, who also works with Passages, says that she learned a lot about the process of creating shrouds from multiple communities across Canada, such as a Mennonite group in Kitchener, Ontario. She recalls an experience with a family, in which the shroud

provided dignity to an undignified death.

“The mother of a 22-year-old man, who died by suicide, purchased a shroud and took it home prior to her son being wrapped in it. She provided her son’s friends with a Sharpie, and allowed them all to sign the shroud, which resulted in an incredibly beautiful experience for the family once the young man was finally wrapped,” Brenner says.

“It’s about the personalization that the shroud offers, which creates a moment that suitably honours a life.”

***“She provided her son’s friends with a Sharpie, and allowed them all to sign the shroud”***

*-Krista Brenner*



*Biodegradable shroud wrapped in a second layer of material*





# Have you discovered an abandoned cemetery in Ontario?

*Introduction by*

*David Brazeau*

*BAO Communications Manager*

**P**eople with an interest in graveyards is nothing new, but their value is increasingly recognized by us at the Bereavement Authority of Ontario (BAO).

More and more people now enjoy looking through areas where forests or just shrubs have reclaimed land humans had once used for settlements and graveyards.

It's a fascination for some and makes for a good outdoor hobby on a day off.

Their 'hobby' coincides with the

BAO's interest in discovering, or rediscovering, such abandoned cemeteries toward restoration through the licensing process.

That's what we do at the BAO. We license and regulate the services of people and organizations as operators of cemeteries, funeral homes, crematoriums, hydrolysis facilities and personal licensees, who are the professionals at these places caring for grieving families.

The licensing process, which we oversee, means that some Canadian history and heritage can be preserved and maintained to properly provide the respect the

dead deserve.

Many graves abandoned to time can be reclaimed and enrich people's family history going back to confederation in 1867 and earlier.

In some cases, BAO staff have had the responsibility and privilege to ensure gravesites of the Underground Railroad in the 1800s are restored and licensed with local municipalities. Such gravesite discoveries have led to restoration and maintenance of cemeteries relevant to the Black community and Canadian history itself – as this magazine has chronicled.

In abandoned gravesite discoveries, contacting the BAO can lead to the licensing process. Licensing of forgotten cemeteries ensures that someone becomes responsible – often a municipality – and that regular maintenance takes place to keep the cemeteries accessible, safe and demonstrating respect for the deceased, their descendants and communities.

There is a growing number of cemetery hobbyists – for lack of a better word – in Ontario pursuing quests in their spare time to find and document old and abandoned graveyards.

One person sharing this keen

## Calling all cemetery 'hobbyists'

Have you come across what looks like an abandoned cemetery and maybe taken a few photos? Contact the BAO at [Inspections@TheBAO.ca](mailto:Inspections@TheBAO.ca). We will look into it.

### Look, don't touch

The Bereavement Authority of Ontario reminds people that you can look, but you can not touch.

More specifically, the Ministry of Citizenship and Multiculturalism states that:

"Surveying, digging or excavation in any manner to attempt to find human remains is considered archaeological fieldwork and may be considered a burial or cemetery investigation; this work may only be undertaken by a person holding a professional class licence under the Ontario Heritage Act.

Failure to comply with the Ontario Heritage Act and the regulations made under the Act is an offence. Pursuant to section 69(1) every person who contravenes the Ontario Heritage Act or the regulations and every director or officer of a corporation who knowingly concurs in such contravention is guilty of an offence and on conviction is liable to a fine of not more than \$50,000 or to imprisonment for a term of not more than 1 year, or to both. If a person is convicted of contravening section 48(1), or a director or officer of a corporation is convicted of knowingly concurring in such an act by the corporation, the maximum fine is \$1,000,000."



interest is photographer and blogger Chantal Larochelle. Read this condensed version of one of her blogs, accompanied by her photographs.

## **Mother and daughter search for the grave of legendary Canadian painter Tom Thomson**

*By Chantal Larochelle  
Cemetery Photographer & Blogger*

My 80-year-old mother joined me on a camping trip last summer. It had been about 40 years since she last went camping, so I made sure

we did all the fun camping things: sleeping in a tent; cooking on a fire; and making s'mores.

There were a couple of other things on our to-do list: visit Canoe Lake; search for Mowat Cemetery; and find the grave of storied Canadian artist Tom Thomson.

Thomson is often referred to as the Canadian Vincent van Gogh for his use of color and thick strokes vividly bringing the northern landscapes to life on canvas and wood.

### **Group of Seven**

Thomson spent a lot of time painting and fishing in pristine Algonquin Park. His love of the area must have been contagious as he soon had other painters joining



*Tom Thomson's gravesite at Mowat Cemetery, Canoe Lake, Algonquin Park, Ontario – Photo by Chantal Larochelle 2023*





*Tom Thomson's gravesite at Leith United Church Cemetery, Leith, Ontario –  
Photo by Chantal Larochelle 2023*

him on his excursions. They even had a name for themselves, the Algonquin Park School of Painters, who became better known as part of the Group of Seven.

Unfortunately, the Claremont-born Thomson didn't live long enough to join the Group of Seven and see the accolades of his work for creating about 400 oil sketches on small wood panels and another 50 or so larger works on canvas.

He died at age 39 mysteriously 106 years ago when his body was found floating in Canoe Lake, Algonquin Provincial Park, Nipissing District. His legend then grew – exponentially.

His body was reported to have bad bruising on his face and head, when found on July 18, 1917, with a fishing line wrapped around his left or right ankle, depending on which account you read. In most accounts, the fishing line is seen as an indication of foul play. But the cause of death was officially listed as an accidental drowning.

## **Thomson's body now at Canoe Lake or Leith?**

There are two gravesites said to hold the artist's remains.

Upon the discovery of his body, Thomson was hastily buried at Mowat Cemetery, sometimes referred to as Canoe Lake

Cemetery. This is not what his family wanted. They wanted him brought home.

So, his remains were exhumed the next day and transported to Leith, a hamlet on the eastern shore of Owen Sound Bay. There his remains were buried once again, and a proper headstone was erected. The official record states that his body is buried at Leith United Church Cemetery.

But over the decades people have claimed that his body was never moved from Canoe Lake, and that they have seen his ghost there.

## **Mom and daughter search**

Our search for his grave began on the morning of July 17, 2022, which just so happened to be the 105th anniversary of Thomson's burial at Canoe Lake Cemetery.

We drove into Algonquin Park that morning, and after stopping in to check on our campsite at Tea Lake we decided to try and find the cemetery. I had been planning this trip since the early spring of that year and had been researching how to find the hidden cemetery.

Thomson often frequented Mowat Lodge. Today, all that remains of it is the cemetery and a few cement foundations.

The Canoe Lake Cemetery itself



is very small, with only a handful of grave markers. But people still seek out his grave.

There is one field stone, and two engraved headstones within the picket fenced enclosure. There's also a white wooden Latin cross that marks the gravesite of Tom Thomson. It is thought that the cross was placed by the CBC in the 1960s for a documentary. There appears to be a depression in the ground at his grave adorned with a few items – a small electric tea light, some paintbrushes, and a fishing lure.

## Enjoying history

We tried to imagine what the cemetery would have looked like in 1917 when he was laid to rest. We speculated on what might

have happened to him and whether or not he was currently on that hill. My mother was adamant that he was still there at Canoe Lake.

It was one of the more challenging cemeteries to find, but it was a beautiful place to visit and photograph. My mother enjoyed this trip immensely. She was a bit leery at first, but the rich history drew her in.

She talks about our trip often. Coincidentally, I started writing this blog post on what would have been Tom's 145th birthday, Aug. 5, 2022. My mother shares his birthday.

*Read more blogs and view more cemetery photos by [Chantal Larochelle on her website.](#)*



*Mowat Cemetery, Canoe Lake, Algonquin Park, Ontario – Photo by Chantal Larochelle 2022*

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# A day in the life: Get to know Ontario's cremation professionals

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In early 2020, essential workers were given nothing short of praise and admiration in the face of an unthinkable public health emergency. Their perseverance in dealing with the emergence of COVID-19 was hailed around the world.

But for some working in death care, maintaining that dedication while overseeing a significant phase of the human experience was particularly onerous. It was, and remains, a challenge for many crematorium operators, who rise to the occasion amidst glaring challenges. *Beyond* magazine spoke to cremation professionals to learn about what they face day to day.

## General responsibilities

The staff at St. John's Dixie Cemetery and Crematorium in Mississauga know how vital it is to fulfill family wishes, even amidst



*Crematorium operator Rick Whittingstall at St. John's Dixie Cemetery and Crematorium*



*Cemetery grounds of St. John's*







challenging times. Sandra Aguilar, general manager, and Rick Whittingstall, family service advisor explain a normal day for operators involve several components. “Our day starts at 6 a.m., where we inspect machines and environmental equipment, preheat machines, and start our first three cremations,” says Whittingstall, who also works as crematorium operator.

“Everyone here is cross-trained on procedures, technology and environmental standards,” Whittingstall says. “Crematorium staff know how to use the audio video equipment in our chapels, cemetery workers, and myself in the office can work in the crematorium. We try to make sure that everyone can cover for someone else if needed.”

Kenn Saunders, transfer service



*Kenn Saunders, transfer service coordinator at London Cremation Services and Ontario Cremation Services*

coordinator at London Cremation Services and Ontario Cremation Services, says that it is his job to ensure all family requests are considered, and communicated to an operator. “Families want to know what their options are when they look at cremation,” he says. Saunders is typically asked two questions:

1. Where can families scatter cremated remains?

You can scatter cremated remains on Crown land or in your own private land, such as your yard. See Page 13 of the [BAO's Consumer Information Guide](#) for more information.

2. What happens to artificial limbs before cremation of the human body, and can those be returned to the family if requested?

“Yes, they can be returned to the family if requested,” Saunders says.

## **Mental health impacts**

Aguilar says that cremation work eventually takes a toll. However, she stresses the importance of using all available resources, such as group therapy or meditation rooms, and asking for help without hesitation. “Some may think that we may reach a point of desensitization by doing this for so long,” Aguilar says. “It’s impossible to



*St. John's Dixie Cemetery and Crematorium*

become desensitized when you receive a baby's casket, or a casket full of written messages from the deceased's family."

Erin Hogle, funeral and cremation director at Toronto's Cremation-Care, says in her 35 years of experience that she doesn't see herself loving any other job. "I think a lot of this has to do with speaking to so many people from all walks of life, from so many countries," she says. "Hearing their stories about their loved ones makes this work for us so motivating."



*Sandra Aguilar, general manager at St. John's*

## Strength in numbers

The staff at St. John's and Saunders cherish the internal and external support for their respective teams. Saunders also explains how the BAO provided guidance during the pandemic "The BAO was great in offering insights and supports to us as crematorium operators, especially at the height of COVID-19," Saunders says. "Education helped us, so that we could help lead families in the right direction."

Aguilar says that cremation work requires a certain level of grit and responsibility. "It's stressful, as all first responders know, and our [cremation] operators work so well that it becomes invisible to the public sometimes. But everyone here understands that we never go less than above and beyond for these families, as the deceased deserve a dignified end."

For more information on cremation and death care, read the BAO's free [Consumer Information Guide](#).



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# Religious burials: Catholic funeral traditions and celebrating a deceased follower

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*Beyond* magazine continues its feature series on religious burials and traditions. This time we explore Catholicism and how the faithful are honoured within this denomination of Christianity.

## Catholicism

**F**ather John P. Comiskey, V.G., moderator of the Curia and Bishop's Delegate at the Diocese of London, Ontario, explains that after a Catholic passes away, the parish, which is a section of a Church district in the care of a priest or minister, is contacted and arrangements are made to meet with the deceased's family. In relaying this information to the family, expectations of the Church are also discussed.

"To accompany the grieving process, we pray for the deceased and are commending them to God, but we also pray for those who are grieving the loss of this person," Comiskey says.

### Three distinct services

Comiskey explains three separate services that occur over the course of a Catholic funeral:

- The wake begins the process of a final farewell. With mourners in attendance, it may involve a



*Archbishop celebrating Mass*

scripture service or intercessory prayer led by a priest, deacon, or a lay person, the latter of whom is not ordained by the Church. Oftentimes, the body of the deceased is brought to the wake to allow worshippers to pray and pay respects.

- Following the wake is the funeral Mass, which is always led by the priest. The body is brought to the Church in a casket covered by a pall, cloth symbolic of Baptism and removed at the end of the Mass. The Mass is focused

on the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is centred on the Catholic belief that the deceased participates in the death of Christ and will participate in His resurrection.

- The burial, or Rite of Committal, is led by a priest, deacon, or lay person and occurs at the cemetery or mausoleum where final prayers commend the deceased to God.

Eulogies are a key part of the funeral process, Comiskey says. “Words of remembrance can



happen at the wake and they can be said following the funeral service or at the burial,” he says. “The Mass is not the time to focus on the person,” he says. “On a practical level, eulogies occurring outside the Church allow the speaker to feel more comfortable.”

Amy Profenna, director, marketing and public relations of the Archdiocese of Toronto, Ontario’s Catholic Cemeteries & Funeral Services, says that while burials in cemeteries are the main funeral arrangement, the Church has accepted cremation since 1963.

It’s a fairly new practice for the denomination and specific details are required, Profenna says. “When, for legitimate reasons, cremation has been chosen, the ashes of the faithful must be laid to rest in a sacred place, that is in a cemetery or, in certain cases, in a church or an area set aside for this purpose, and dedicated by the bishop,” she



*Amy Profenna, director, marketing and public relations of the Archdiocese of Toronto, Ontario’s Catholic Cemeteries & Funeral Services*



*Father John P. Comiskey, V.G.*



*Holy Cross Catholic Funeral Home*





*St. Mary's, Mount Hope Cemetery, Chapel of St. Joseph, Arrangement Room, Christ the King, Mass at Assumption Cemetery*



explains. “According to Church teaching, scattering cremated remains on the sea, in the air, on the ground, or keeping them in the homes of relatives does not display appropriate reverence.”

It is crucial to honour Catholics with proper funeral arrangements, Comiskey says. “Whether it is the body itself, or cremated remains, both are treated with respect. As Catholics, we believe that through Baptism, we receive the Holy Spirit that dwells within our bodies.”

“The importance of doing funerals well is vital and we provide opportunities for grief and sorrow, but, at the same time, we always offer a message of hope and eternal life.”

***“The importance of doing funerals well is vital and we provide opportunities for grief and sorrow, but, at the same time, we always offer a message of hope and eternal life.”***

*—Father John P. Comiskey, V.G.*



*Mausoleum photo*



*Cross*

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# We're here for you

We provide consumer protection and information – free for your family.

Read our [BAO Consumer Information Guide](#) on death care sector services provided by professionals we license and regulate:

- Funeral establishment operators, directors and preplanners;
- Cemetery, crematorium and alternative disposition operators;
- Transfer service operators; and
- Bereavement sector sales representatives across Ontario.

The BAO is wholly funded by licensee fees (not tax dollars).







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# Saving lives at end of life through organ and tissue donation

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[www.beadonor.ca](http://www.beadonor.ca)

**O**rgan donation has saved thousands of lives across Ontario – but there are still nearly 1,400 people on the transplant waitlist. Every three days, one of them will pass while waiting for their life-saving organ.

The question is: why aren't more people planning to become organ and tissue donors when they die? Age alone does not disqualify someone from becoming a donor and medical history doesn't prevent registration. So, if given the chance to save a life, wouldn't most people?

They would, actually. In fact, 90 per cent of Ontarians are in favour of organ and tissue donation. Yet only 35 per cent of eligible Ontarians have actually registered to become a donor.

This lack of registered consent can have a profound impact on what next of kin decide to do when

they are approached to confirm their loved one's wishes regarding organ and tissue donation. When an individual has registered and families are made aware of this, they almost always proceed with donation. In the absence of registration, families consent less than half the time. This is why both registering to be a donor and discussing your wishes with your family are equally important.

When broaching these topics with your loved ones, consider asking them if they too have registered to donate. Although talking about death may be uncomfortable, these conversations can ensure everyone's wishes are honoured and help foster a culture of organ and tissue donation across Ontario.

Learn more about organ and tissue donation and transplantation and register to become a donor at [www.beadonor.ca](http://www.beadonor.ca).



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# What is a celebration of life?

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*Celebration of Life setup*

**T**raditional burial processes and rites incorporate sophistication, community and culture into the proceedings. While funerals are more formal, a creative alternative to these events is becoming more common.

Celebrations of life are a unique memorial event that usually occur after a burial or cremation. The deceased's family and friends come together to commemorate and hail their loved one's achievements, personality and story.

## Structure

Mixing the formal and informal together is at the core of a celebration of life event, says Karin Schuett, licensed funeral director and president of Circle of Life Cremation and Burial Centre. She says that these events are generally upbeat and customizable.

“Families control the event, compared to the traditional funeral proceedings where the funeral director was in charge of visitation,” Schuett says. “Some families bring in flowers or create a slideshow of the deceased’s life to make the event more visual, while others put a focus on catering, where different dishes favoured by the deceased are served to guests.”

Celebrations of life events do not need to be held at a funeral home, Schuett says. This was practical during COVID-19 restrictions. While that may have proved viable for some families, Schuett says that funeral homes are more than happy to host the event when requested.

## Cultural and religious dynamics

With complete customization up to the family, Schuett explains that it leaves a lot of room for culture to be at the forefront. “An Indigenous family once incorporated smudging in their



*Karin Schuett, licensed funeral director and president of Circle of Life Cremation and Burial Centre and her dog Emma*



*Comfort dog Emma*





*Celebration of Life setup*

celebration of life at our funeral home, which benefitted me as I learned so much,” she says. “If there is a religious or non-religious clergy member needing to conduct a service, or if one is needed, we always support in locating one,” Schuett says.

Richard Barnes, managing director and president of Barnes Memorial Funeral Home in Whitby, says many cultural and religious components remain a key aspect of a celebration of life event. “Everyone has their own version of what a celebration of life is, so we try to give them what they request as it fits under that title,” he says. “Catholic families may incorporate a

mass, for example, but some may choose a celebration of life with no religious connection.”

## **Moving with the times**

Schuett says that in her experience, celebrations of life are timeless and here to stay. She notes that newer generations may forego traditional funeral servicing, and choose something more meaningful to the deceased. “With a decline in the pomp and circumstance of your usual proceedings, formal funerals may not be of interest as they once were,” Schuett says.

Barnes agrees, and believes the days of a monotone facility



***“Families control the event, compared to the traditional funeral proceedings”***

*-Karin Schuett*

keeping an open or closed casket for visitations is becoming less appealing. “From the hearses, to the limousines or cortege, these are options that won’t be in the business, as future funeral options will be very fragmented,” he says. It’s a trajectory that Schuett says

will only shift again when the times change in the next 10 years. “Just like how we’ve had to adjust to technology’s impact on funeral servicing, knowing what families want out of their loved one’s end-of-life event ensures we remain socially and culturally relevant.”



*Stained Glass Urn*



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# Digitally rethinking a funeral service: A look at technology's impact on the death care industry

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*Honouring a young man's last wishes via drone footage. Photo credit: Bill Denning.*

**A**dopting new ways of facilitating old practices oftentimes results in hesitation, and apprehension. In the aftermath of COVID-19, many funeral homes across Canada developed new means of supporting families in times of loss and grief through technology.

Bill and Brett Denning, brothers and licensed funeral directors running operations at Denning Funeral Homes, have not only

implemented technology into their organization's services, but have noticed increased consumer demand for them all around.

"The reality is that the pandemic pushed everybody to become comfortable with technology in our industry," Brett says. "This creates new conveniences where people are out-of-town and still wish to participate in a funeral service, or if they're feeling sick and can't go into public places."



*Bill Denning, Denning Funeral Homes*



*Brett Denning, Denning Funeral Homes*





*Josh Denning, head of media at Denning Funeral Homes*

## **Innovation makes ceremony meaningful**

Before the pandemic, Bill says that emerging technology was a key part of Denning Funeral Home’s strategy, as a way of shaking up a ceremony structure. Combining traditional ceremonies with digital technology originally arrived in pre-planned arrangements, but also led to using audio and video tools to capture an individual’s story. Josh Denning, head of media at Denning Funeral Homes, and brother of Bill and Brett, says that digital storytelling inevitably led to new ways of capturing those moments using tech.

“We got very comfortable with livestreaming even before COVID-

19, for example, but it allowed us to hit out stride in using tech when the demand for it grew during the pandemic,” Josh says. “Many people who grew up with a lot of this tech are getting to the point where they’re making funeral arrangements for their parents [or grandparents]. If that trend continues as it is right now, that demand I mentioned will only

*Bill Denning discusses the origins of Denning Funeral Homes using simple tech for storytelling.*

Watch this clip by clicking [here](#).



*Brett Denning provides insight into emerging tech used at Denning Funeral Homes.*

Watch this clip by clicking [here](#).



increase in the future.”

## **Traditional servicing remains the norm**

Despite all the digital tools facilitating funeral services at Denning Funeral Home, Bill explains that the usual ways of servicing families

isn't going away anytime soon.

"The ability for folks to browse, purchase, and negotiate items online is a tool in the toolbox," Bill says. "I don't think it will ever replace the face-to-face interactions of clients sitting down with funeral services." Paul Needham, licensed funeral director, manager, and owner at Northview Funeral Chapel and Cremation Centre in London, Ontario, echoes a similar feeling when it comes to hybrid servicing.

"We haven't noticed a huge increase in families seeking out pre-arrangements online," Needham says. "We're returning to normalcy here in London, and while it's not a huge factor right now, my guess is that it [demand for online services] will accelerate with time."

## AI

Looking into the future, Brett says that there are many technologies available that he refers to as 'the tail wagging the dog,' where tech's mere existence does not imply an immediate need to adopt. Artificial intelligence (AI) or augmented reality could be successfully adapted into funeral services, Brett explains, but the overall need to use it should not alter expectations.

"I don't see this as a threat, since there's always a need for human warmth and compassion in trad-

***"We got very comfortable with livestreaming even before COVID-19"***

*—Josh Denning*

itional funeral settings," Brett said. "We're excited and are currently exploring how AI can be used in the industry, but its potential to permanently disrupt does not scare us one bit."



*A drone test run at Denning Funeral Homes*



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