

Social restrictions make care and prayer for the dead look and feel very different

The COVID-19 pandemic has not only affected the way we take care of the living, but also how we take care of the dead.

“It certainly has been a challenging time for funeral homes and families alike trying to come up with creative, yet very safe, ways to serve families,” said Aimee Anderson, the director of Catholic relations at Connelly-McKinley Funeral Home in Edmonton.

Since the cancellation of public masses as a COVID-19 precaution, funeral homes and cemeteries have been challenged with creating services that are respectful, faith-based, and that don’t involve crowds of more than 15 people – the limit set by public health officials in Alberta.



Aimee Anderson

Connelly-McKinley serves 1,700 to 1,800 families per year. Of the most recent deaths, none are confirmed to be as a result of COVID-19, although a few cases were suspected at time of death.

They’re also livestreaming more of their services than ever before. Since the outbreak, Anderson has handled funeral services for two religious sisters and an Oblate priest.

Connelly-McKinley prepared the remains and set up the casket in a chapel with a camera for livestreaming so that mourners could view the body and pay their respects remotely. The funeral services included a full liturgy, except for Communion which has been suspended as a COVID precaution. Those same options are open to the laity.

For the funeral service of one religious sister, her small congregation conducted a prayer vigil, including Gospel readings and hymns, which was livestreamed in real time.

“We’ve had a variety of different services for people to tune in and watch, ranging from full liturgies to just arranging a camera on the casket so people could tune in for one hour and reflect and pray on their own,” Anderson said.

“We’re trying to do whatever is meaningful for a family or a congregation we’re serving at that time. We can do whatever a family requires or requests as long as we’re adhering to the safety guidelines and the numbers.”

In cases of cremation, many families have requested that the urn remain in storage until after the COVID-19 crisis has ended and they can have a proper Mass with family and friends.

“It’s pretty hard for people to determine which 15 are allowed in. We’ve had some situations where it’s been very painful and we’ve had situations where people have decided they’re not doing anything until such time that they can do it with everyone together,” Anderson said.

“The death of a loved is always your worst day. And then to come into a funeral home and find out, yes, you can have a service, but you can’t have more than 15 people, it just makes a bad situation even harder. But I’m really pleased we’ve been able to offer creative options.”

Anderson said the COVID-19 restrictions are to protect their clients as well as the staff at the funeral home. Employees have been working in split shifts and avoiding close contact.

In spite of those accommodations for families, Anderson said the restrictions on crowd size – and for Catholic families, the absence of the Eucharist – have been difficult.

“What’s missing is that sense of community that we have when we come into the church, being together, the sense of being close, being able to hug and console one another in these times,” Anderson said. “That is hugely missing and you can’t get that online.”



Roxanne Burton

At Edmonton Catholic Cemeteries, crowd restrictions forced the cancellation of monthly masses as well as Father's Day and Mother's Day barbecues for families at Holy Cross Mausoleum. And there are fewer visitors both inside and at gravesites.

"The mood with the families that we're dealing with does appear to be more sombre than before," said Roxanne Burton, the office manager at ECC, which includes the cemeteries of Our Lady of Peace, Holy Cross, St. Joachim's, St. Anthony's and St. Albert.

Since the COVID-19 outbreak, Burton said arrangement of burials is by appointment only.

Family advisers don't have the same personal interaction with clients as they did when they could meet face to face, and ECC has seen the effect of the economic shutdown to all but essential services

"Our pre-made, non-essential sales are considerably down, and a lot of that I would say is has to do with the fact that people have lost their jobs or they're anticipating losing their jobs," Burton said.

"It's unpredictable times in terms of people's finances."

Anderson predicted that uncertainty will remain for long time, even after the COVID-19 restrictions.

"It's going to take a little while for people, especially who are immuno-comprised, the elderly, to feel safe even when the doors open again. I think for some people it's going to take a very long time for them to feel safe to come back out in community. Community has become very, very scary, especially

with masks and so forth.”

Nevertheless, Catholic families in particular are looking forward to celebrating Mass.

“For many of us, the sooner we can return to what we once did, especially coming together in the church, having Communion, being together and not watching it on TV or a computer, that will not only be welcome but I think it’ll be embraced with an appreciation that we’ve not seen, because it’s been taken away from us,” said Anderson, a parishioner at St. Joseph’s Basilica.

“All the masses I’ve ever attended, not once have I been on my way back from receiving Communion pondering what it would be like not to be able to receive Communion.”

