

FCA REPORT

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FCA-GKC



Annual program on end-of-life decisions

► New date: April 8 ◀

By Diane Etzel-Wise, FCA-GKC board member

We humans tend to put off hard decisions about what would be important to us as the end of life approaches and afterward. In our death-denying society, myths, fears, and barriers create anxiety around these important topics, but we need not be bound by them. Imagine knowing that your loved ones are aware of and fortified with documents that advocate for your preferences if you were unable to do so for yourself.

You had the opportunity to read about Therese McKechnie in our fall 2021 newsletter, as we had planned our annual program—with her as featured speaker—for November. Because of challenges including COVID uncertainties, we postponed the program and have rescheduled it for April 8. Therese, an Overland Park licensed clinical social worker, will share her years of experience as the keynote speaker:

Making, Sharing & Recording Your End-of-Life Decisions

All Souls Unitarian Universalist Church
4501 Walnut St., Kansas City, Mo.

2:00 to 4:00 p.m. Friday, April 8

In-person and live streamed

Register at www.funeralskc.org

In this workshop, Therese will guide us in exploring three broad areas of end-of-life planning: **deciding, documenting, and discussing**. These skills go beyond the typical list of advance directives that every person needs by including:

- Your personal voice expressed in short letters or narratives;
- Skilled management of digital files;
- Storage that makes paper documents

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Making the case for 'green' burials



The positive outcomes of a “natural,” or “green,” burial comprise a long, fascinating list that raises intriguing questions. On Sunday, Feb. 20, two area natural-burial advocates gave a virtual presentation on this subject through the All Souls Unitarian Universalist Church’s “Sunday at the UU” forum.

Presenting were **Steve Nicely**, board member of the Funeral Consumers Alliance of Greater Kansas City and a retired *Kansas City Star* journalist, and **Sarah Crews**, founder of Heart Land Prairie Cemetery in central Kansas. This first prairie restoration natural cemetery in Kansas is located on land donated to the project by The Land Institute of Salina.

Here we share key points from the presentation and some intriguing photos. When people view images taken during natural burials, they invariably notice that the mourners are also in a more “natural” state, relaxed and even joyful. Green burial is a form of ritual that effectively bridges the chasm our culture has created between the living and their dead.

FACTS AND HISTORY

Every year US cemeteries bury 29 million board-feet of hardwood; 104,000 tons of steel in caskets and vaults; 1.6 million tons of

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reinforced concrete in vaults; and 827,000 gallons of embalming fluid. The processes consume an untold amount of energy and result in staggering amounts of atmospheric pollution.

The goal of green burial is the complete decomposition of the body and its natural return to the soil. Our living bodies are fed by the earth until the day we die. In green burials, they return to the earth and become nutrient-rich soil—truly “earth to earth, dust to dust”—ready to support new life.

Criteria for most natural burials include no vaults or concrete grave liners; burial at only three or four feet, the depth at which most decomposing microbes are found; burial in biodegradable containers of wood or cardboard or a shroud; no embalming.

For 10 years, the FCA-GKC could find no area cemetery that would allow natural burial. Then we discovered the **Highland Cemetery of Prairie Village**, in the 5000 block of West 65th Street. It was founded in the 1860s, when *all* burials were green. Highland’s aging sexton was ready to retire, so three FCA-GKC board members and two others formed a non-profit corporation and assumed management in 2015. At that time Highland had 150 grave sites available for sale. By 2020 all were sold, mostly to people seeking natural burial.

Why, at that point, would no other cemetery in the Kansas City area allow natural burial? Why was there so much resistance? Some funeral providers admitted that there was less profit in a natural burial, foregoing as it does embalming, steel caskets, and vaults.

Others pointed to increased maintenance costs. The stability of vaults allows packing of the earth, sodding, and immediate mowing. With natural burial, a mound of dirt is left to settle with time. Those mounds can’t be mowed over.

Still others insist that there’s no call for natural burial—but the rapid sell-out of grave sites at Highland, and the increasing willingness of cemeteries to work with families toward green burial, disproves that argument.

EXPERIENCES WE’VE WITNESSED

Donyce Moore Perelman, of Shawnee, wanted a natural burial. Her son, Kevin Moore, saw that she got one in 2017. Her body was buried in a cardboard casket he ordered from a website for \$200. The funeral home charged \$1,000 for the direct burial and body refrigeration. The grave and digging costs were \$1,220, for a total of \$2,420.

Steve Nicely’s childhood friend **Nick Dalano** was buried at Highland in a large-sized shroud purchased



Dennis “Boog” Highberger was the motivating force behind Oak Hill Cemetery’s natural burial section in Lawrence, Kan. Sarah Crews stewarded into existence the Heart Land Prairie Cemetery near Salina, Kan.



from a website for \$600. It contained a board for stability with three handles on each side. His grandson and others helped fill the grave. “After it settled, we leveled and seeded Nick’s grave,” Steve said. “It wasn’t much trouble.”

Steve’s friend **Terry Woodbury** wanted a plot at sold-out Highland and managed to purchase one for \$2,500 from an owner who had one to spare. Some have paid more than that for the opportunity of natural burial.

It was a cold day in 2020 when the body of longtime FCA-GKC board member **Lyle Van Vleet** was buried at Highland in a cardboard casket—a decision he and his family had chosen rising out of his work with our organization and the knowledge he’d gained from it.

Randy Jobe, husband of FCA-GKC past president Nancy Jobe, died suddenly of a heart attack in 2012. He had wanted a natural burial, and Nancy found Oak Hill in Lawrence. Their nine grandchildren decorated his cardboard container with their hand prints and the inscription “We love you, Grandy.” They later posed for a photo on his grave marker, a natural boulder. Nancy said, “It gave me so much peace. It was way more personal, almost healing, and this way is better for the earth.”

Modified natural burial occurs when an open concrete vault is turned upside down and placed over the casket in the grave. Some cemeteries that do not allow natural burial will allow this because the fill dirt can be packed down, reducing maintenance costs.

The body of **Ron McGill**, husband of FCA-GKC past president **Bev McGill**, received the first modified natural burial at Resurrection Cemetery in Lenexa in 2017. Bev, who died a few months ago, was buried next to Ron, also with a modified natural burial. Bev and Ron, Steve’s neighbors in Shawnee, had 11 children and lots of

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grandchildren who wrote messages on the lid of Ron's plain pine box.

OTHER CEMETERIES WELCOMING GREEN BURIAL

Elmwood Cemetery, 4900 E. Truman Road, Kansas City, Mo. In 2020, the trustees of Elmwood Cemetery relaxed its policy of requiring vaults and now once again allow natural burial. All burials at Elmwood were natural when it opened in 1872. Its 43 acres contain 33,000 burials so far. Elmwood is the resting place of many of Kansas City's early leaders and builders.

Longview Cemetery in south Kansas City (See article to the right.)

Oak Hill Cemetery in Lawrence, Kan. City commissioner and former mayor Dennis "Boog" Highberger proposed the natural area at city-owned Oak Hill Cemetery for green burials in 2008. Oak Hill was the first in this area to do so and one of the first cities in the nation to offer it on an unrestricted basis. Oak Hill has sold 181 of its 251 green burial plots and has had 33 burials.

Mount Muncie Cemetery in Lansing, Kan.

Heart Land Prairie Cemetery near Salina, Kan.

Sugar Creek and Green Acres cemeteries near Columbia, Mo.

Jewish and Muslim cemeteries do welcome natural burial, but are not open to the public

ALTERNATIVES TO NATURAL BURIAL

Cremation by fire

Cremation now comprises 55 percent of all funeral choices locally. When comparing cremation's average \$1,700 cost to \$10,000 for a standard funeral, cremation by fire is economical. It's convenient: Save the ashes for a memorial service later, scatter them, mail them, keep them. Skip the cemetery or not. Cremation providers claim it is a green process relatively speaking, because the energy involved in the manufacture of steel caskets and concrete vaults is much greater than cremation. And the burial of embalming fluids is definitely not green. But *cremation is not earth-friendly*. The fossil fuel consumed and piped into the atmosphere would drive a car 750 miles at 25 mpg.

Cremation by water

This process, known as "aquamation," is a much newer body disposition choice. Please read the article on page 6.

In summary, the benefits of natural burial—emotional, spiritual, familial, ecological—are deep and strong, and worthy of your consideration. Many more articles about the topic appear on our website, www.funeralskc.org. □

A recording of the presentation is available at www.funeralskc.org.

See page 7 for inspiring photographs.

Green burial now at Longview Cemetery

By Steve Nicely, FCA-GKC board member



Bridget Anaya is pleased that Longview Funeral Home & Cemetery now offers natural burials, as shown on the left.

The Longview Cemetery, at 12700 S.E. Raytown Road, has opened a natural (green) burial section, offering a second public cemetery option in the Kansas City area. For the past two years, only Elmwood Cemetery, at 4900 E. Truman Road, offered it. Jewish and Muslim cemeteries do, but are not open to the public.

"More than anything, we want to give people options," said Bridget Anaya, general manager of Longview Funeral Home & Cemetery. "We have to be forward thinking and give people what they want."

The price for a natural burial gravesite is \$3,500, the same as for other types of burial, Anaya said. The charge for opening and closing the grave is \$1,595, also the standard price. Add \$300 if a family wishes the grave to be dug by hand.

Burial depth will be three feet, the optimum depth for natural burial because most microbes that enhance a body's decomposition are located in that area. The fill dirt will not be packed down upon the body's container, unlike the standard procedure for burials with vaults. A mound of dirt will be left on the surface to settle with weather and time.

Burial in shrouds and cardboard and wicker caskets with no hardware will be allowed. Steel caskets and concrete vaults will not be allowed.

"Embalming will be discouraged unless it's done with green chemicals or under special circumstances," Anaya said.

She noted that the green space of the natural-burial section will be maintained but not manicured. It will not be mowed as regularly as other parts of the cemetery, and paths for walking will be created. Grave markers of natural stone or granite will be allowed but not required. Bronze markers or vases will not be allowed.

Depending on the gravesite selected, families may plant trees on their sites. □

The big picture

By Kate Sargent
FCA-GKC President



“Who lives? Who dies? Who tells your story?”

All you “Hamilton” fans instantly recognize that line from the brilliant mind of Lin-Manuel Miranda, speaking for Alexander Hamilton in the hit Broadway play.

How does this fit into the theme of our rescheduled annual program, now being held April 8, about “Making, Sharing & Recording Your End-of-Life Decisions”? Truth is, none of us needs to be a giant of history to embrace and shape how our story gets told, especially in our own family and circle of friends. So, how, once we have passed on, will we be recalled at those kitchen tables or holiday meals that honor the passing of our dear ones?

There is a special niche reserved for those who have helped clear the way through the strange resistance of Americans to discussing death, made decisions about our end-of-life details, and expressed them to our families and friends. Doing so will make it OK for loved ones not to feel isolated or confused about our memory. Instead, they will likely experience a glow of gratitude when they look back on what we modeled and taught.

If you could listen as your people tell your story, you might hear something like this:

“You know, I just think it is so much simpler to talk about what we want done like (insert your name here) did. That was a gift that (your name) gave to us. It helped us define who we are as a family and navigate those weird conversations about death.”

It’s because you brought them tools: knowledge of how to negotiate loss and grief in a way that minimizes confusion and disagreement. They will be buoyed up by an openness that draws everyone into safety by your generous modeling.

A growing body of work was summarized in a *New York Times* report dated Dec. 26, 2019, by Gina Kolata. In it, she elaborates on the mental health benefits of openness and information surrounding death.

Advocacy groups have encouraged families to have difficult conversations about end-of-life care before life’s end, she explains. Two interventions have consistently been shown to help patients live their final days in accordance with their wishes. They are *earlier conversations* about their goals and *expanded palliative care* services, which emphasize symptom control and psychological and spiritual wellbeing.

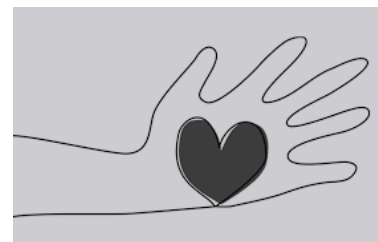
Patients who engage in care planning are less likely to die in the hospital or receive futile intensive care. Family members have fewer concerns and less emotional trauma if they get to discuss their loved one’s wishes.

That’s what our annual program April 8 is all about. Be sure to read the details on page 1 of this newsletter. Through Zoom or in person, we hope to see you there! □

Saluting our donors

The FCA-GKC board of directors expresses sincere thanks to the following donors, who contributed a total of \$5,500 between October 2021 and February 2022. Because this is an all-volunteer, tax-deductible, not-for-profit organization, we couldn’t do our work without you.

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Simplicity in death, a Quaker principle

By Jon Shafer, FCA-GKC board member

Editor's note: Jon Shafer is a member of the Religious Society of Friends, also known as Quakers. Here he shares the organization's practices and beliefs concerning death and dying.

Quakers, or Friends, generally have no uniform statement of beliefs. Rather, Quaker groups have different versions of a Book of Faith and Practice, with values to apply in their living and dying. These values are simplicity, peace, integrity (honesty), community, equality, and stewardship (Earth care). They form the acronym SPICES.

Applying simplicity to death and its practices led one group of Quakers to state, "...friends ought to avoid extravagant and expensive funerals and memorial stones."

Another group included a more specific application of simplicity: "Friends should be encouraged to avoid a display of flowers."

The most detailed Quaker guidance on death issues is *Dealing Creatively with Death: A Manual of Death Education and Simple Burial*, by Ernest and Jenifer Morgan. It gets to the point by stating, "Simplicity doesn't happen by accident," and goes on to stress the need for planning but not pre-paying for funerals.

"Simplicity in arrangements can effect great economy, but even more importantly it can help center attention on spiritual values and the life of the person who has died, rather than material things," the manual states.

"Preparing for Death" is the title of a chapter in the Faith and Practice book of Northern Yearly Meeting. (A Yearly Meeting is a regional grouping of Friends with similar beliefs.) As a person approaches the end of this life, the members maintain close communication with the person. This might involve holding Meetings for Worship with the person in the home as travel becomes difficult. Visiting Friends may read favorite books or poems, or play favorite music, even after talking becomes difficult. They work with the dying person, family, and friends to complete planning for a memorial service or funeral. They provide spiritual support and discuss issues of reconciliation and forgiveness if needed. They give the dying person an opportunity to share concerns about the dying process. They might also assist in a special Meeting for Worship if requested, perhaps using Zoom or other social media for those in distant places.

The Iowa Yearly Meeting—Conservative states Quaker responsibilities clearly:

"Friends are called to aid the dying, both in providing them comfort and in helping them let go. The dying in return may comfort and teach those assisting them. For the bereaved, Friends can offer a helpful presence: listen, prepare meals together, care for children, run errands, pray, and otherwise be supportive. When



As an active Quaker, or Friend, Jon Shafer is deeply acquainted with the faith's beliefs and practices about dying. All of them are tied to a dedication to the value of simplicity.

the bereaved are surrounded with love and care, God's sustaining power can bring courage and comfort to all."

In some cases, the right to die may need to be discussed so the wishes of the dying person are clearly known and carried out. Many legal and moral issues are involved and the matter deserves spiritual consideration. The "Right to Die" chapter in *Dealing Creatively with Death* provides 10 pages of advice and references for organizations including Americans Against Human Suffering and The Hemlock Society.

When the Quaker goals of simplicity, equality, community, and stewardship are taken into account, the extravagance of a fancy funeral is difficult to justify. The thousands of BTUs consumed in cremation is also a concern because natural burial and aquamation are much more earth friendly, as is avoiding the use of poisonous embalming fluids. Aquamation involves dissolving of the body in a basic solution of water and chemicals, but there are yet no facilities for it locally except for pets and medical schools. (See article on page 6.)

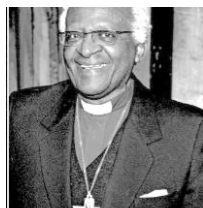
The final function of a Friends memorial committee is often the writing of a "memorial minute" describing the person's life and accomplishments. Sometimes this is expanded into a pamphlet or a biographic book. The minute is usually read at the quarterly meeting and the next yearly meeting. It can be kept by the family and friends as a solace and memory aid.

The *Faith and Practice* of the Intermountain Yearly Meeting group sums it up:

"Our Quaker experiences have, ideally, made us sensitive to the varieties of suffering that occur throughout life, and can, again ideally, help us make meaning of death and the diminishment that occur with aging. This sensitivity also allows us to release all that we love. Loss of independence—when we have to stop driving, leave our homes, or accept basic care for ourselves—strikes hard. Chronic pain or life-threatening illness challenges us utterly. Together, Friends may help us deal with many losses—our dreams and hopes, our mobility, our sight or hearing, our memory and mental acuity..." and our lives. □

‘Aquamation’: More eco-friendly than cremation

By Steve Nicely, FCA-GKC board member



Anglican archbishop Desmond Tutu chose aquamation before his recent death. The tubular equipment uses water, alkali, and heat.

Aquamation is cremation by water. The Mayo Clinic has done it for years. And last month, the remains of Desmond Tutu, the South African anti-apartheid leader and Anglican archbishop, underwent aquamation, an eco-friendly alternative to traditional cremation. It was his last act as a champion of the environment.

The process is officially called “alkaline hydrolysis.” In it, water, alkaline chemicals, and heat are used to accelerate the decomposition that takes place in nature. The body is placed in a stainless-steel tank filled with a 250-gallon mixture of 95 percent water and 5 percent alkali, then heated and circulated for eight to 16 hours. After the used water is drained into the sanitary sewer system, the remaining bones are dried, pulverized, and returned to the family.

Unlike the large amount of natural gas burned in fire cremation, water cremation does not use fossil fuel except for the small amount required in the generation of electric power used in the process. It is said to be 90 percent more energy efficient than standard cremation.

There are no water-cremation facilities for human bodies in this area, but Jared Hammond has operated Heartland Pet Aquamation for 18 months at 1414 Wyoming St. in Kansas City, Mo. Pet aquamation uses different equipment than that used for human bodies, allowing for multiple pets in a single process.

The closest water cremation facility for human bodies is operated by Hughes Funeral Alternatives in St. Louis, Mo. H.T. May & Sons Funeral homes in Booneville, Columbia, and Sedalia, Mo., accept bodies from affiliated funeral homes in western and central Missouri. H.T. May transports them to St. Louis and returns the remains to families, often by mail. The price, \$1,095, is less than the \$1,763 average cost of a flame cremation listed in the latest FCA-GKC funeral price survey.

Thomas May, of H.T. May, said the company averages seven to 10 aquamations per year.

“It’s new and a lot of people just don’t know about it yet,” he said. Contact H.T. May at 573-443-2273.

The spent water containing the remains of loved ones is nutrient rich. Some object that it is flushed into sanitary sewers when it could possibly be used to water and fertilize plants and gardens. But funeral homes also flush human blood into sanitary sewers when it is replaced with embalming fluid, yet no one thinks of using it as fertilizer. Time will show how people adjust to the idea. □

Our digital outreach

By Carol Condon, FCA-GKC board member

During 2018, I was comfortable in retirement and had just stopped being a “granny nanny” for my youngest grandson, who was headed to preschool.

One day I got a call from my son-in-law’s father, who was on the FCA-GKC board. Would I do the organization a favor and consider helping with its website? The FCA-GKC had received a grant from the Sisters of Charity of Leavenworth to enable the non-profit to grow in the social media world and expand its outreach.

To tell you the truth, I had never heard of the Funeral Consumers Alliance of Greater Kansas City. My husband and I had just finished our estate planning, but I’m not sure now whether I ever *really* thought I was going to die; I would just travel and see the world! No one wants to think about dying.

We did travel, and over the next few years I also ended up redesigning and updating the FCA-GKC website, learning about the group, becoming a digital volunteer, and now serving on the board. This year FCA-GKC celebrates 60 years of service. We’ll continue to grow through social media in a digital world and in the middle of a pandemic. Some primary ways we serve:

- The number-one information tool of the FCA-GKC is still its **Funeral Price Survey**. The survey is the only place in which the prices of all Kansas City-area funeral homes are provided in one place: www.funeralskc.org. We now have an interactive survey format through which the survey can be updated and printed on the fly with only the information *you* want and need. Knowing the range of prices is important especially to families whose finances may be unstable.

- FCA-GKC produces **twice-yearly newsletters**, spring and fall, in digital and print forms. The newsletters provide articles, news of the industry, editorials, and much more. To receive the newsletter in digital format, send your email address to fca.gkc@gmail.com. To receive the newsletter in print format, send us your mailing information. On our website, our archived pdf newsletters are available for the past 10 years along with articles of interest and the links to them.

- In 2022 we are in the process of **updating and digitalizing** public relations items and records that every organization needs: member information, presentations, acknowledgements, forms, and donations. We’re also making some updates to the website.

FCA-GKC is an all-volunteer organization. Consumers, whether they live locally or across the world, pay nothing for our information and services. Our mission is to educate, support, and help people make informed decisions about death-related services. □



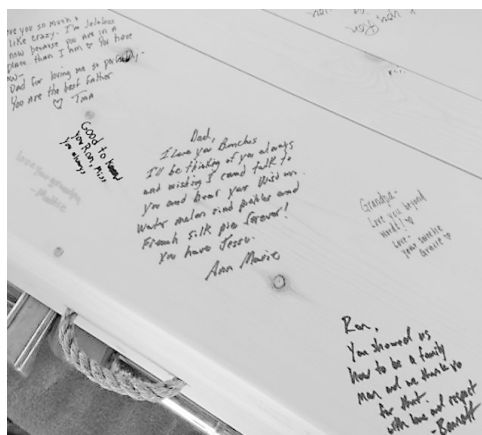
Carol Condon

The joy and normalcy a green burial makes possible



Nick Dalano chose Highland Cemetery of Prairie Village for a natural burial. Before his death he talked happily about that decision. At right, Steve Nicely and other friends/family help and witness the filling in of Nick's grave.

Writing loving messages on Ron McGill's casket brought his children and grandchildren into a non-fearful contact with death. The same was true for the grandchildren of Randy Jobe, who gathered atop his natural-boulder grave marker.



Sarah Crews was inspired by the Mark Harris book *Grave Matters*. He wrote that green burial achieves what the modern funeral industry tries to prevent, the decay of the physical body, and gives "back to the earth some very small measure of the vast resources it drew from it in life, and, in the process, perpetuates the cycles of nature, of growth and decay, death and rebirth, that sustain all of us." Sarah founded Heart Land Prairie Cemetery near Salina, the only exclusive natural burial cemetery in our region. In natural burial cemeteries and set-aside sections, fill dirt is heaped atop the grave to settle naturally.



On a winter's day, longtime FCA-GKC board member Lyle Van Vleet was buried in a cardboard coffin, surrounded by family and caring friends.



Terry Woodbury found someone who'd sell him his own plot at highland. Here Terry checks out the fit!

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easily accessible; and

- Establishing a strategy for reviewing and revising these decisions over time.

With these actions you will empower your surrogates and lessen the possibility of family conflict. Your colleagues, clients, and circle of family and friends will benefit from your experience and coaching, as you support them toward information and closure for themselves.

Program objectives

Participants will gain knowledge about and skills for:

- Reviewing the three broad areas of end-of-life planning: deciding, documenting, and discussing;
- Encouraging and motivating people to put their decisions about their final wishes in writing;
- Identifying the cultural values, faith beliefs, and age-related and family dynamics that play a role in these decisions; and
- Learning about innovative efforts being made in other communities.

Continuing education credits for ►FREE! ◀

Two hours of continuing education credit will be provided to social workers, licensed professional counselors, physicians, registered nurses, and licensed practical nurses. FCA-GKC will charge **no fees** for the event itself or for continuing education units. It's our gift to the metro area to share Therese's message and resources.

Logistics: The in-person program will also be live streamed to those who register on the FCA-GKC website, www.funeralskc.org. For our planning, we encourage you to register online whether you will attend in person or through streaming. Therese's book, *The Last Chapter: Documenting Your Pre- & Post-Death Decisions*, will be available for purchase at the in-person workshop, or order the book at www.lastchapterbook.com/order. □



Therese McKechnie, an Overland Park licensed clinical social worker, will share her experiences with end-of-life decision making at the rescheduled FCA-GKC annual program on Friday, April 8.

Embalming is *not* necessary after a COVID death!

Recently Sally King, past FCA-GKC president, communicated with Joshua Slocum, executive director of the national FCA. Sally explained that the father of a friend had just died of COVID and the funeral home told the family that they must either have a closed coffin or allow embalming. She asked Josh for the facts.

"There is almost zero risk of getting sick from a corpse," he replied. "Do we have to embalm because someone dies of flu? Of course not. This is just nonsense."

Josh expands on this subject in an article on page 8 of our spring 2020 newsletter, available at www.funeralskc.org.

In summary, he says, "There is currently no known risk associated with being in the same room at a funeral or visitation service with the body of someone who died of COVID."