

Resistance to natural burial shows remarkable solidarity

By Steve Nicely
FCA-GKC board member

Our spring newsletter ran a story with the headline, "Catholics revisit natural burial," reporting that Catholic Cemeteries of Northeast Kansas (CCNK) was reconsidering its ban on natural burial at one of its six cemeteries in Johnson and Wyandotte counties. The CCNK advisory board was to discuss it at its May meeting and make a recommendation to Archbishop Joseph Naumann, said CCNK executive director Robert Chenoweth.

Nothing has been decided, Chenoweth said when I asked about it in early September. He was to visit a cemetery in Douglas County and would call me back "next week." It didn't happen and I'm not holding my breath.

The non-action is typical of a remarkable solidarity in the funeral and cemetery industry in this metropolitan area of nearly two million residents. Not a single cemetery among some 60 cemeteries open to the public offers natural burial, which involves no embalming, no grave liners and burial in biodegradable containers.

Why? "Ain't no money in it," I was told by a funeral industry insider I won't name. I can see the truth in his blunt answer. Not much money in a shroud or cardboard or wicker or pine container compared with a fancy steel casket. No money at all for embalming or for grave liners.

This newsletter has reflected our board's endorsement of natural burial for several years as the most earth-friendly, environmentally responsible choice compared with cremation and traditional burial. The one pollutes the air and the other pollutes the ground, whereas the earth-exposed natural body decomposes into fertile soil. Meanwhile, the growth of cremation has reached nearly 50 percent in our area, which represents a portion of profits taken

largely from cemetery and funeral sales.

Local residents can drive to Lawrence or Lansing in Kansas, or to near Rocheport in Missouri, to find cemeteries offering natural burial. Here is the latest on each:

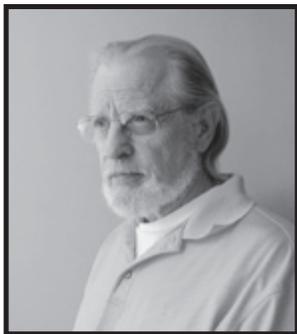
Green Acres near Rocheport is the choice of the Becker family of Blue Springs, featured on page 5. In its four years of offering natural burials, it has sold 12 spaces, including four burials. "It's been slow, but that's to be expected," said Bill Goddard, a partner in the cemetery. "It's not going to be for everybody."

Goddard said a few local funeral directors threatened to sue him because he wasn't a licensed funeral director. They claimed it was illegal for him to offer advice about how to cut costs by avoiding the services of funeral homes. FCA-GKC advised the Beckers about how to do that. I wonder if we'll get sued.

Mount Muncie in Lansing opened a natural burial section last year and got no takers for several months. Now it has one burial and two more sites sold. "Green burial is coming," said Gene Kirby, Mount Muncie's manager. "It started on the coasts and is working its way inward."

Oak Hill Cemetery in Lawrence opened its natural burial section in 2009 and has seen the most action. The city-owned cemetery has sold 37 natural burial sites, including 10 burials.

The grand total is 52 grave sites sold in all three cemeteries over the past four years, which doesn't sound like much of a threat to the funeral business in this area. It would tend to confirm the excuse made by Chenoweth a couple years ago that Catholic Cemeteries didn't offer natural burial because there was insufficient demand for it. On the other hand, the outright banning of it by CCNK and virtually all cemeteries in this metro area trumps and traps



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Gene Kirby, manager of Mount Muncie Cemetery in Lansing, at the cemetery's natural burial section in November.

demand. Demand is frustrated without opportunity.

Is the industry worried that natural burial will gain a foothold, as Gene Kirby predicts, like cremation did years ago? I suspect so. Oddly, it may be cremation that finally cracks the wall of resistance here. As the percentage of cremations rises to the 60 and 70 percent levels found in other places, and as people become more aware of its negative environmental impact, cemeteries may begin offering natural burial as a responsible alternative. The profits won't be as great, but better than no profit at all when people cremate and scatter ashes in streams, on golf greens and to the wind.

Undignified Dignity?

Dignity Memorial has sent me three emails with "The Pre-Planning Information You Requested." Dignity is a marketing brand of Service Corporation International of Houston, the largest chain of funeral home, cremation and cemetery properties in the world including the McGilley group here. If I schedule my pre-planning appointment today, I can "lock in today's prices" and "get exceptional service from a trusted advisor."

I wonder what list of seniors they bought to obtain my address. I wonder why they presumed that I requested their pre-planning information. Did they hope I was so forgetful, I might think I actually did request it?

The emails are from Cory Bragg of the Dignity Memorial network. I think I'll reply with a copy of this newsletter and refer him to the item on page 2, "FCA cautions, don't pre pay."

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