

Getting Started

The purpose of this section is to orient individual pastors, secretaries or administrators who are encountering the management of a cemetery for the first time. This handbook is not intended as a policy manual but a guide and reference. Study, experience and prudence are the most important tools for any person involved in cemetery management and maintenance.

1. Familiarize yourself with the layout and history of the cemetery. Begin by walking the boundaries and identifying the major features of the cemetery. It is vital to review any existing maps, plats or architectural drawings as well as burial rights (titles), receipts, and cemetery policies. Make an appointment to speak to the previous person who was responsible for cemetery management and maintenance. Do not rely simply on one source of information. Be prepared for a certain amount of inconsistency in cemetery records since it is likely that several individuals have undertaken the position you now have. If maps or drawings do not exist, consider having a professional (surveyor, draftsman or architect) prepare a clear plan. Do not destroy any existing documents, maps or drawings since they may be useful in reconstructing the history of a particular burial place. Please consult the diocesan architect for the names of professionals who may assist you in this area.
2. Familiarize yourself with your existing cemetery procedures in terms of sales, (review sales contracts and/or easement documents), price lists, maintenance (who is responsible for upkeep of the cemetery), insurance requirements for contractors, work permits, etc. Develop a working relationship with the funeral directors and contractors who do most of the work in your cemetery.
3. Develop a working knowledge of canon law and cemetery law. Materials contained in Sections 6 and 7 will assist you. Familiarize yourself with cemetery terms and definitions contained in the Glossary in Section 11.
4. You may receive a request for a burial and/or purchase on your first day. Prepare yourself as best you can to anticipate this eventuality. Determine which tombs, mausoleum crypts or niches are available for sale and their respective prices. Locate blank copies of the most common documents you might need at a moment's notice. Death waits for no one.
5. If possible have a knowledgeable person walk with you through your first few sales. Do not hesitate to call experienced cemetery managers for advice.
6. Obtain or develop a contact list including cell phone numbers of experienced cemetery managers, monument companies, funeral directors, and maintenance personnel. Give your contact information to those who most need to contact you. A list of cemeteries and church parishes in the Diocese of Lafayette is contained in Section 10 - Resources.

7. Understand that when families contact you they are often experiencing a major trauma. It is important to be patient and understanding. You will likely need to explain some information several times and in different ways. For some people this may be the first time they are handling cemetery issues. Never be sharp or condescending. You represent the Church and her healing ministry. Misunderstandings are bound to occur if you remain in this position long enough. Remain calm and reasonable at all times. If you encounter a situation which is becoming out of control or you need more information, contact your pastor or regional vicar.
8. Never assume or rely on verbal agreements. Fill out forms completely. Obtain all necessary signatures and dates. Explain all documents verbally before receiving a signature. Be certain that the owner's name is correct. Date every document or payment received. Do not rely on memory; write it down. Develop a checklist of actions necessary for every burial and sale.
9. You must physically and personally verify the location of a particular burial place before burial. Do not make assumptions based on memory. Pick up an umbrella; put on galoshes and confirm with the authorized family member that the burial place is correct. Mistakes in this regard often cause unnecessary emotional trauma to family members.
10. It is recommended that each parish establish a Cemetery Advisory Board which reports to the pastor. Suggestions on how to form a Cemetery Advisory Board can be found in Section 5.
11. In whatever you do, think long term. Generally burial rights are considered perpetual (cf. burial rights and abandonment procedures). Someone will follow you in this position. Consider the needs of those who will follow you. When recommending and/or creating policies, think in terms of coherence and consistency.
12. Consider membership in cemetery organizations such as the Catholic Cemetery Conference and the Louisiana Cemeteries Association, Inc. to keep abreast of changes in the industry. Information on these two organizations is contained in Section 10 - Resources.
13. Obtain a copy of your particular cemetery policies or rules. Consider that different sections of the cemetery may have different requirements. If a parish cemetery policy does not exist, give serious consideration to drafting one. Copies of cemetery policies should be a part of the documents which accompany every sale. When cemetery policies change give sufficient advance notice. Post copies of policies in the parish church, and website. The two most important factors in developing cemetery policies are advance communication and reasonableness. Copies of cemetery policies should be forwarded to the archives of the Diocese of Lafayette. Policies are intended to protect the dignity of the cemetery, give clarity to families and prevent unnecessary litigation. For assistance in developing your Rules and Regulations, see Section 3, *The Elements of Rules and Regulation for Catholic Cemeteries*, Samples of policies for large, medium and small cemeteries can be found in Section 4.