

Q&A

Did You Know...

Presently, Robert Seelig is CCC's Director-at-Large for the Western Region of the U.S., Western Canada & Oceania Including Australia until October 2016. Prior to embarking on a career in the business of cemeteries, however, Robert's goal was to become a university professor. He was a Political Science major and planned to earn a doctorate. "I really enjoy working with young people and those young at heart," he said.



CCC Director, Robert Seelig, CCCE

Robert has been involved in the Catholic Cemetery ministry for nearly 14 years. He was Director of Cemeteries for the Diocese of Oakland 2002-2006 at which time he also became Executive Director of Catholic Funeral and Cemetery Services of the Diocese of Oakland, a position he still holds. Robert took on the additional role of President and CEO of Catholic Management Services in 2011 and still serves in that capacity.

"When I retire or move on from working for the Catholic Church I can see myself starting up a non-profit. I am not sure what the company would be, but I like the challenges of building organizations especially if the results help make the world a better place."

Robert describes his journey — how and why he became a cemeterian ...

In December of 2001, I was approached by the Chairman of the Board for Catholic Cemeteries of the Diocese of Oakland to see if I would be interested in leading a turnaround of the cemeteries. At the time, they were losing over \$1 million a year.

Having a background building businesses and also wanting to find an opportunity to connect my faith life with my work, I gave the Bishop of Oakland a five-year commitment to the turnaround. Within two years the cemeteries were profitable, and he decided that we should add funeral and cremation services to provide Catholics with more end-of-life services.

In 2006, we formed Catholic Funeral and Cemetery Services of the Dioceses of Oakland. In 2010, I was asked by the Bishop of Sacramento to lead a similar turnaround of their cemeteries. Because of this, **Catholic Management Services (CMS)** was created in 2011 as a nonprofit formed by the Bishop of Oakland at the request of various bishops to allow our staff to work in numerous dioceses around the country. As the President and CEO of CMS, I continue to serve as the Executive Director in Oakland, as the President of CFCS Sacramento, and on various Catholic cemetery Boards within the 16 dioceses in which we work.

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"Having a high emotional IQ is very important. I lost my father at a very early age and coming to work in the cemeteries made me really explore that loss. I think we can draw upon our own experiences of loss to let us know when we are being emotionally drawn into a situation. This is so important so that you know how to remain objective."

My professional background prior to becoming a cemeterian included a range of business experiences.

From 1989-1997 I served as Vice President, President, and owner of Smith Industrial Supply Company a third-generation, family-owned wholesale industrial distribution business. During that time I started a manufacturing company, Bio-Blast, and opened offices throughout the western United States. In 1998, U.S. Filter, a publicly owned company, purchased the two businesses and I served as Vice President in charge of the Western United States distribution business. I gained a tremendous amount of experience developing business strategies, building teams, and integrating businesses.

As I look back now, I realize that I was an entrepreneur at heart who was looking for a way to integrate my Catholic faith in my work. I had good people skills and a strong background in understanding finance and business, but what I learned most was how to motivate people and build teams that want to make a meaningful contribution in their work.

The qualities I think are needed to be successful as a cemeterian include:

To start, I think that you need to have a high emotional IQ – sympathy, empathy, and compassion to see the importance of service to families who are experiencing loss. I equate this also with being Catholic Christian where a faith dimension needs to be actively put to work in this business ministry. You need to have strong people skills like communication and honesty, as well as the integrity to deal with both the public and the complex organization of the Catholic Church.

More critically, I think a cemetery executive today has to have strong critical thinking skills capable of leading an organization through uncharted waters where finance, sales, customer service, and operational efficiency are all key drivers to growing cemetery businesses that are stagnating or declining in the face of a changing culture and aggressive competition.

GETTING TO KNOW ROBERT ON A MORE PERSONAL LEVEL ...

“I am an avid backpacker, left handed, and my family is the most important part of my life. I became a grandfather for the first time a few weeks ago in January at the age of 50!

One day I hope to hike the El Camino in Spain and the PCT on the West Coast with my wife.”

He is also a pretty good golfer, taking his team to 1st Place in the recent golf event at the 2015 CCC Convention in San Diego.

What did I expect this position to be like? What has been the reality of the work?

I was told that being a cemetery director was a 9 - 5 job where you could take time to play golf on Fridays. I have found it to be the exact opposite. Your work is never done if you are thinking about what we should be doing to serve families.

When I consider where I started, I could have gotten very comfortable running cemeteries and making sure that we make enough money to cover the cost of our operations. What bothered me about this is the fact that you can't help but see how much more can be done to serve families if there are resources (usually money) to fund additional programs. This meant that being open to funeral homes, crematories, and getting actively engaged in our parishes, meant that I had to re- envision the organization I was put in charge of.

The most important part of the cemetery ministry for me would have to include ...

... the faith dimension in our work. I was told that it was the burial of the dead, but this neglects the reality of our lives as Christians. We are all actively in the process of both living and dying. As a cemeterian I think our responsibility is to help families see the connection of death to their faith. This means that we need to be actively out in the community helping people plan for their eventual departure from this life.

Identifying some of the more difficult aspects of this position and how best to overcome them, Robert spoke from an organizational viewpoint.

I think we have to overcome *complacency*. I see a lot of staff members that get tired of their job or don't think they can make an impact. When this becomes the dominant factor in the culture of an organization, it can be very hard to not get worn down.



Robert Seelig with his wife Annette during CCC's 2015 convention in San Diego.

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In most cases, I think that the emotional toll of working in cemeteries is the issue and we need to tend to our staff as we do other caregivers. They need support, counseling, and praise much more than the average worker.

I also think that working in the Catholic Church can take its toll, because we are such a unique organization. Many of us have stories of the difficult priest or the passive/aggressive secretary at a parish. Often I think we have to work extra hard to overcome the frustration that can set in.

On the other hand, the most rewarding part of being a cemeterian and working with grieving family members would have to include:

Dealing with a family that has received poor service at a time of loss is both the worst part of the job and the best. Often times this has been the greatest opportunity to help a family through emotional loss. While we often are to blame for a mistake, I find that families want to forgive. Often a groundskeeper or a family service counselor can be the focal point of a family's complaint when they are just projecting their feelings of loss.

I have always found it most challenging and rewarding when I am able to find a solution that really communicates that we care. So often a complaint turns into a demand for money, but I have never met a family who felt that money would rid them of their grief. Spending time with a family and taking the extra steps to show that you sincerely hear them has always been the first step in building relationships.

I think it is privilege that we get the opportunity to serve families, because when we do this well I think we are sharing the Gospel.

How have I been able to separate my own feelings from those of the bereaved and remain objective while still performing my duties?

I mentioned earlier that having a high emotional IQ is very important. I think

that our job requires us to do some personal exploration of our feelings about loss. It is good to allow yourself to feel grief when dealing with a grieving family, but at the same time we are the witness of faith to the family.

For someone considering a future in the cemetery ministry, Robert offered the following advice ...

I highly encourage people to consider working for the Catholic cemeteries. This is actually a growth business ministry. I continue to see some cemetery organizations having a decline in revenues or burials, but the good news is that this means that there is most likely a business opportunity for growth and expansion.

Having spent 15 years working with Catholic Funeral and Cemetery Services (CFCS), we are seeing annual growth averaging 15% in most Catholic cemeteries. I think this is a great opportunity especially for professionals who have worked in the secular world and are seeking a work environment where their faith and talent can be put to work. Whether it is a family service counselor position, a funeral director position, or management, I don't think that someone needs to come from the industry to be successful. I think the Catholic Church has an advantage in recruiting people because we offer something that a secular competitor can't, which is the shared faith experience that is part of our services.

Any interesting events or happenings in the cemeteries I have served? Well, yes ...

There are so many interesting stories, but I don't like to focus on those that seem sensational or macabre. The story that always comes back to me is one where a family lost their son to an illness when he was four years old.

The reason I got involved was that the family purchased a grave and the son was buried in the wrong location, close to where they had purchased. We had

just built this new section next to a chain link fence separating our cemetery, Holy Sepulchre, from our local Catholic high school. The family chose the grave because it was very inexpensive, but were distraught when they discovered that they had gone through the committal without noticing the mistake.

We had made a number of offers to the family to try to appease them but nothing seemed to give them peace. On the day I was preparing to meet with the family, our manager came to me and told me that the family had changed their mind. He told me how they were visiting their son's grave and when they arrived there was a baseball that had landed on his grave since there was the baseball field on the other side of the fence. Their little boy loved baseball and was always throwing a ball around their yard and in their house.

It was at the moment of seeing this that they realized that their son was exactly where he belonged and that he was at peace. I tell this story to my staff to remind them that healing and peace is not something that we can rush or that we have control over. As cemeterians, we need to realize that we are instruments of God's grace and often we aren't always in control of the situation. For me, it is a reminder that the Holy Spirit is at work in mysterious ways and it is a blessing when we get to it.

Describing how he became a member of the CCC Board of Directors, and what his initial expectations were, Robert said:

I was elected as the Western Region representative. As a newcomer from the West Coast, I had always heard that the CCC was a mid-west and east coast organization, so my immediate goal was to bridge the perceived gap with the west. As the Executive Director Oakland and the CEO of Catholic Management Services I also know that a lot of people don't really know what to make of our working in so many dioceses across the country. Being a part of the CCC Board is a way of dispelling

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rumors and providing information and insight to the Board about the struggles of so many bishops and CFOs with their cemetery operations.

From my perspective, seeing so many dioceses struggle financially and learning that most cemetery organizations are seeing their revenues decline, I am hopeful that the CCC can open up dialogue where there is more transparency about this issue. It seems like we are having a crisis in succession planning as many diocese cut budgets and long-time cemetarians head into retirement.

My term is up in October of 2016. My goal has been to open dialogue with our Board and the CCC membership to make the CCC a visionary organization that reinvents itself and is inclusive of new ideas and new members. New management models are emerging as bishops and CFOs have chosen non-Catholic organizations in the (arch)dioceses of Philadelphia, Indianapolis, Dallas, and Los Angeles to manage all or part of their operations due to economic concerns. In my opinion, this creates some new challenges for the CCC Board as we determine how to best adapt our bylaws and educational events to encourage new membership to join and participate in the Conference.

How do you feel the Board is tied into the Catholic Cemetery Conference administration, and how do they work together?

I am amazed at how much we accomplish given the small amount of paid staff that we have. We have an excellent Executive Director and have asked a lot from the national office. In many ways it can be unrealistic if we create too many demands on a small staff to publish our magazine run our convention, operate the Smaller Cemetery Seminar and School of Leadership and Management, as well as attend to the various other membership needs. With limited resources, we have also depended upon contributions of time and talent from the membership and the Board. I think the Board has had to be too active in the day-to-day management of the administrative duties of the CCC. This is a problem that has developed over the last few years, and the Board is trying to address it. We have a tireless Board, and I am very impressed with the dedication of individual Board members. We can't just ask the Board or administrative staff to work harder, so we're trying to be more strategic in setting goals and objectives.

To me this means that we also have to limit our expectations and put a focus on the CCC's core areas of competence while striving for excellence.

Everyone on the Board is dedicated to our membership. The one unifying characteristic about the CCC is that there is a real desire to help and assist cemetarians throughout the Catholic Church.

Catholic Cemetery magazine asked Robert if there were additional topics he wanted to address during this interview. His response:

I think the topic of Catholic Management Services is one topic that has never had a forum for discussion with CCC members. With the Board, I have been very open with them about the work that CMS is doing on behalf of bishops in their dioceses. It is really exciting when you see the results and envision what it would be like if each cemetery director had the resources they needed to grow and build their organization. It is this "collective" resource approach where CMS' annual budget as a non-profit is based upon the success of each of these dioceses. CMS is able to reinvest in additional staff and expertise as a result which gets more resources back to each diocese we serve. We've grown from 6 employees to over 35 in just over 4 years. We recognize that this new approach isn't well understood by CCC members and certainly might get lumped in with the concerns about for-profit funeral and cemetery operators taking over Catholic cemeteries, but it isn't true. My goal has been to build a Catholic Church-owned and operated organization that rolls up its sleeves and works alongside cemetery staff. What I am most proud of is that we've been able to direct a significant amount of our budget to working in "mission" dioceses where finances are tight and the need is the greatest.

My goal working on the Board has been to share these experiences and encourage fellow Board members to envision the CCC as an inclusive organization increasing membership and getting less bogged down in governance. We need our focus to be on sharing information and stories about our collective experience as Catholic cemetarians.

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