



GREG AGNEW/TIMES & TRANSCRIPT

Since August, Weston and Tim Jones of Jones Funeral Home have been offering an online video link for funeral services.

Online link brings mourners together

Funeral homes using Internet to bring ceremonies to far-flung friends and families

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They're not quite the first, but they're certainly pioneers in our region when it comes to helping a globe-trotting world gather whenever it's time to say goodbye.

Since last August, the Jones Funeral Home chain in southeastern New Brunswick and Cumberland County, Nova Scotia has been offering families the chance to broadcast the funerals of loved ones over the Internet so that friends and family faraway can attend services they might otherwise have to miss.

This is not about replacing traditional funeral rites and rituals with something techie and trendy.

Because funerals are as much for the living as for the dead, it will always be best to travel home when friends and family die, both to provide and draw on the support of others.

But when you just can't make the trip, you can now at least log on to the funeral home's website from your home in Vancouver or Calgary and see the streaming video from back home.

"In today's world, people don't just live down the street anymore," says Weston Jones, one of the owners of the longtime family business.

"This is how the world's connected now."

Jones noted, however, it's not just loved ones far afield who have benefited from the service. It has also helped those who are shut-ins, for whom a trip across town can be as gruelling as a trip across continents, feel they have been part of an event that's important to them.

And then there's our climate. Jones says a recent funeral happened to coincide with one of our rare stormy days this winter, preventing many from attending who would have been there if the roads had been safer.

Thanks to the live stream, people throughout the area were able to log on from home. The funeral homes also keep recordings of the videos on their website for a year.

Speaking of recordings, the Jones chain records the funerals onto disc just in case the Internet lets anyone down at precisely the wrong time. All of this is only done if it is the wish of the family of the deceased.

"We always ask people's permission and we have people who are very private," Weston Jones said, "but the majority are ecstatic that we provide it."

Back in August, when the system was first in place, they had 200 people log online to see funerals handled by the Jones chain, either held in the funeral chapels or with churches that have Internet access. In January, with the aforementioned bad weather admittedly a likely factor, more than 1,200 people logged on to observe funeral services.

Besides its own network of funeral homes, the Jones family also has a complementary business designing websites for other funeral homes, which helps explain why they were also one of the first funeral homes in our area to have a website more than a dozen years ago.

So far, two of their website customers in the region have also adopted the idea of filming funerals on behalf of families.

Jones says they didn't rush into this aspect of their business. Rather, they spent two years doing careful research to ensure that from the first time the cameras rolled the technology would be both reliable and unobtrusive.

"We wanted to make sure it was well thought out," he said, saying dignity and quiet professionalism will always trump capturing images.

After a lot of planning and careful shopping, they've come up with a portable kit of equipment that is simple for funeral homes to use. Nevertheless, Jones says offering the service has also required more staff be on hand at funerals, so that funeral directors aren't distracted from their core responsibilities by any technological stress.

There may not be many funeral homes out there offering the service yet, and no one can say what the future will hold, but this appears to be an idea destined to be around for a long time.