

ICCTA[®] MAGAZINE

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CEMETERY

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The Gardens at Gethsemane

Going above & beyond to serve families



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ICCFA Magazine spotlight



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► **Alan MacKinnon, CCE,** is president of The Gardens at Gethsemane, Boston, Massachusetts.

► He started at the cemetery 28 years ago as grounds

foreman for 5 1/2 years. He then served as general manager for seven years. In 2002, he formed a nonprofit corporation called The Gardens at Gethsemane which acquired the 22-acre cemetery.

► MacKinnon is a graduate of ICCFA University and attended the ICCFAU master's program, as well. He has been a professor at ICCFA University in the College of International Studies, talking about Orthodox cemetery and funeral traditions.

► He has served as secretary-treasurer of the Massachusetts Cemetery Association.

www.thegardenscemetery.org

► **The Gardens at Gethsemane** is surrounded by the 179-acre Brook Farm. In 1870, a German immigrant and wealthy Boston brewer bought the farm property and formed the Association of the Evangelical Lutheran Church for Works of Mercy, which was to include a cemetery. The cemetery was established in March 1873, later becoming a subsidiary of the association until being purchased by the nonprofit organization formed by MacKinnon in 2002. Brook Farm, once a communal home for Transcendentalists in the 19th century where Nathaniel Hawthorne and Ralph Waldo Emerson summered, today is a National Historic Landmark and operated by the state as a historic site.

► The cemetery has held a Memorial Day event every year, drawing close to 1,000 people. This year's Memorial Day event will be the 50th annual one. The cemetery's annual Pumpkin Day fall community outreach program, which started in 2008, drew more than 4,000 people last year.

SERVICE TO FAMILIES & COMMUNITIES

Creating a garden for a specific group is not uncommon

—The Gardens at Gethsemane had done it before.

But building a chapel at the cemetery for the Orthodox community took Alan MacKinnon on a journey that was both physical (through Greece, Russia, Lebanon and Italy) and spiritual, and led to a change in mission and focus for the entire cemetery.



From left, Metropolitan Hilarion, Metropolitan Methodios and Bishop John Abdalah of the Orthodox Church and Alan MacKinnon, CCE, president of The Gardens at Gethsemane in Boston, at the 2012 groundbreaking for The Orthodox Garden and Holy Resurrection Chapel at the cemetery.

How The Gardens' service to the Orthodox community has benefitted all its families

It all started with a simple request—simple but by no means small. Father Victor Boldewskul of Holy Epiphany Russian Orthodox Church in Boston, Massachusetts, asked Alan MacKinnon, CCE, president of The Gardens at Gethsemane, about the possibility of building an Orthodox chapel at the cemetery.

In 1976, The Gardens had sold 200 lots to St. Mark of Ephesus Orthodox Church in Roslindale for the use of its members, and had sold individual lots to Orthodox families at least as far back as the 1950s, MacKinnon said.

The Gardens, a nonsectarian cemetery,



From Alan MacKinnon's Facebook page, a photo of him welcoming the Chinese Year of the Dog. The Gardens built a Chinese section, Hong Ling Garden, after a request from the community.



Holy Resurrection Chapel in the Orthodox Garden at The Gardens of Gethsemane. In the foreground are olive trees. There will be climbing hydrangeas on the arbor. Many of the resting places near the chapel have been chosen by Orthodox families.



Left, an aerial view of the Orthodox Garden before installation of a private mausoleum off the cobblestone road, Emmaus Way. The light patches in the grass are recent interments.

The Orthodox Chapel at the Garden's Cemetery serves as a unifying symbol of the Greater Boston Orthodox community.

—Father Victor Boldewskul,
Holy Epiphany
Russian Orthodox
Church



Above left, the Garden of Honor, a veterans section created at The Gardens. The closest national cemetery is more than 50 miles away, so local veterans asked MacKinnon for a site closer to home. **Above right**, the Orthodox Chapel in a section reserved for use by members of the Orthodox Church at Rock Creek Park Cemetery in Washington, D.C.

already had a history of responding to requests from the community for special gardens.

“When the Chinese community came to us,” MacKinnon said, “we built Hong Ling Garden on a nice hill facing east”—with proper *feng shui* consideration, of course.

Some veterans came to him and said they didn’t want to be buried at the Massachusetts National Cemetery in Bourne: “It’s 52 miles away—nobody’s going to visit us there!”

MacKinnon developed the Garden of Honor so that local veterans could be buried close to home as well as to each other.

“The Muslim community came to us and said, ‘Nobody will allow us to practice our customs and traditions.’” MacKinnon educated himself about Muslim funeral and burial practices. “I studied the Janazah and their method of burial, and said, ‘We can do this for you.’”

The Garden of Mercy (Almarhama) was developed, where “families are allowed and encouraged to memorialize according to their (Islamic) faith.”

Therefore, it’s not surprising that when Father Victor approached him back in 2009, MacKinnon had an open mind—and heart. “I thought, a priest is asking me to do something—maybe it’s a good idea.”

He talked to other Orthodox priests who held services at The Gardens. What did they think about the idea of building an

Orthodox chapel at the cemetery? “They said, ‘That’s a great idea! You should visit my village!’”

He was told that in Greece, in Lebanon, in Russia—wherever there are substantial numbers of Orthodox families—there are chapels in the cemeteries, by the side of the road, even in people’s back yards.

“At first I wondered, ‘Why would there be a chapel in someone’s back yard?’ Then I thought about the Madonnas that some Roman Catholic families here have in their yards, in a little shrine.”

MacKinnon decided that the chapel should be built in a new section, an Orthodox Garden—a major undertaking on the face of it. At that point, he had no way of knowing that he was starting a process that would not simply add an unusual feature to the cemetery but also inspire a change in The Gardens’ approach to serving families.

Doing the research

Father Victor told him about the Orthodox chapel in Rock Creek Park Cemetery in Washington, D.C., which is built on the Orthodox model, and sent him a link so he could see photos of it online.

MacKinnon also checked out a couple of chapels built for the Orthodox community at cemeteries during travels around the U.S., but said their exteriors looked like those of Protestant churches. If he was going to do this, he was going to

build a chapel that looked like an Orthodox chapel, inside and out.

He went abroad, to the homelands of some of the Boston-area Orthodox churches, to see for himself what the clergy envisioned. Already knowing a number of people from the local Orthodox community proved to be a big help.

A friend of his was in Greece, so he surprised him, making the first of several trips to that country. “I called him and said, ‘Pick me up at the airport.’ My friend said, ‘Dude, I’m in Greece.’ I said, ‘I know; I’m in Zurich. I’m going to be there in a couple of hours.’”

His friend picked him up at the airport and he already had a place to stay—a woman from a Boston area church whose husband rests at The Gardens had given



A mini-altar in one of the small chapels MacKinnon saw on one of his four trips to Greece, where the vast majority of the population is Greek Orthodox.

Travels with Alan: Byzantine churches, the hospitality of strangers and a touching graveside service in Greece

Alan MacKinnon, CCE, made trips to Greece, Lebanon, Russia and Ravenna, Italy, the mosaic capital of the world, to see Christian Orthodox churches and chapels as he developed a design for an Orthodox chapel and garden at The Gardens at Gethsemane cemetery in Boston, Massachusetts.

He witnessed the elevation of three bishops and an archbishop in Lebanon, visited some large, beautiful Byzantine churches in Russia, attended services in several languages and experienced the hospitality of strangers.

MacKinnon tells a story about one of his trips to Greece that was particularly memorable.

In the middle of one church service, presided over by bishops and attended by several hundred people, a cell phone started ringing. Like everyone else, he started looking around him to see who this inconsiderate person was who had forgotten to silence their phone. "I don't have a phone on me," he thought to himself as the unfamiliar ringtone continued, uncomfortably nearby.

Then he remembered that someone in Greece had given him a cell phone to use. Oops. He'd never heard it ring, which is why he hadn't recognized the ringtone.

As everyone, including the bishops, stared at him, he backed out of the church with the unfamiliar phone and answered it with a whispered, "Hello?" It was his

friend, just making a friendly call. "What are you doin'?" Being embarrassed in front of a church full of people is what he was doing.

After the service, people came out of the church holding wreaths and walking to the cemetery, so MacKinnon walked with them. They walked and walked—it must have been a quarter of a mile before they stopped at a resting place, a grave with a raised marble rim or curb.

It was a Masonic service; pallbearers wearing tuxedos and white gloves set the casket on the curbing. Two men with ropes around their necks came forward, placed the ropes under the casket and straddled the grave. MacKinnon was alarmed, thinking, "Either they're going to get hernias or OSHA's going to come in and fine them."

Nevertheless, those two men straddling the grave in front of 100 people lowered the casket into the grave, pulled the rope out from underneath the casket, tossed the rope aside, grabbed shovels and started filling the grave as the family watched, the rocks mixed in with the dirt drumming an irregular beat on the casket.

For MacKinnon, it was an unusual enough sight that he was still standing there watching after everyone but the family had left. Someone came over to him and said something to him. All he

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Alan MacKinnon in Mt. Athos, Greece.



MacKinnon's Russian driver welcomes his customer with an easy-to-recognize sign.



Above, a building in Peterhof, Russia. MacKinnon was interested in the stone veneer. Left, in Moscow, standing in front of an iconostasis. The church beside this room has an even larger one.



Above left, some of the mosaic work MacKinnon studied on his trip to Ravenna, Italy, the mosaic capital of the world. **Above center**, an Orthodox grave in Russia. **Above right**, MacKinnon at Balamand Monastery in Lebanon, with Patriarch Ignatius IV of Antioch and all the East. MacKinnon witnessed the elevation of three bishops and an archbishop.

“And then we shook our hands down, and then we threw our hands up in the air and let go.

That was amazing—so powerful.” —Alan MacKinnon, CCE



At a chapel-building company in Greece. MacKinnon looked into the possibility of having a Greek company build a chapel and ship it to the United States.

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could say was, “I don’t speak Greek.” Someone else asked him in English, “Who are you and what are you doing here?”

MacKinnon gave his name, said he was from the United States and started explaining his Orthodox cemetery tour. Before he could finish, someone spotted his Masonic ring.

“Suddenly, it was ‘Oh, you’re a Mason



MacKinnon with a priest outside the church where his cell phone went off and he took part in a graveside service.

from America came to pay respects to my father.’ And I’m saying, ‘Oh, no, no,’ but they grabbed my hand and yanked me over to the family, and they started saying I was this big, high-up Mason from America came to pay respects to their father.

“Then we all held hands in a circle and they started whispering down the line, and I’m thinking, ‘Oh, no, it’s going to be Greek.’ The person next to me said what sounded like ‘Vasilios,’ so I figured it was



One of the pre-made Orthodox chapels that are sold in Greece.

the deceased’s name, and I said it to the person next to me. I hope I pronounced it right.

“And then we shook our hands down, and then we threw our hands up in the air and let go. That was amazing—so powerful.”

him the key to her apartment in Athens. “That’s how much trust we had already built with the Orthodox community.”

When he traveled to Lebanon, he went with members of the local Lebanese-Syrian community to witness the elevation of three bishops and an archbishop. When he traveled to Russia, MacKinnon went with a bishop and a group of priests.

Each time he returned with scores of photographs—pictures of chapels and cemeteries, close-ups of mosaics, icons and iconostases (the screens holding the icons).

He would sit down with groups of priests. “I would show them the pictures

and ask, ‘What about this?’ They’d say, ‘Oh yes, do that,’ or ‘Oh no, don’t do that.’ He and the priests who advised him agreed on a Byzantine style.

The priests served not only as advisors as he developed what became the Orthodox Garden and Holy Resurrection Chapel at The Gardens but also as ambassadors for the project. This was crucial, because its success would require buy-in from and the support of the Orthodox community.

The Orthodox community

The Eastern Orthodox Church has approximately 225-300 million adherents,

mainly in the Balkans, the Middle East, Russia and other former Soviet counties, according to Wikipedia.

According to its website, the Orthodox Church in America numbers approximately 700 parishes, missions, communities, monasteries and institutions in the United States, Canada and Mexico. It had its North American beginnings with Russian missionaries arriving in what would later be Alaska in 1794.

After the Russian Revolution of 1917, the church in America, previously together in one diocese under the Russian Orthodox Church, became increasingly organized



Despite being in the West Roxbury section of Boston, The Gardens at Gethsemane, lower left, is surrounded by greenery. The Charles River can be seen at the top of the photo. There is a well-developed Jewish cemetery by The Gardens, and much of the adjoining property is Brook Farm, a state park.

into ethnic parishes with ties to their various home countries.

In the United States, Wikipedia estimates the adherents of the Orthodox Church at more than 800,000, making it a small minority. (Many Americans' knowledge of the Orthodox community is probably limited to attending Orthodox church festivals to enjoy Mediterranean food and to watching the movie "My Big Fat Greek Wedding.")

However, MacKinnon estimates the Orthodox community in the Boston area at somewhere between 150,000 to 200,000 people, including Russian, Greek, Ukrainian, Syrian, Armenian, Albanian and Lebanese Orthodox churches, among others. There are more than two dozen Orthodox churches in the greater Boston area, and The Gardens has served families from every one of them, MacKinnon said.

Though there are some first-generation immigrants, there are also many second- and third-generation Americans among the members of the Orthodox churches, and most people speak English as well as their native language, so there hasn't been a language barrier to deal with in getting to know and work with this community, MacKinnon said.

Some of the Orthodox communities have schools set up to teach their

American-born children the language of their forebears and help pass on their customs and traditions. And they bring their children and grandchildren with them to the cemetery.

In fact, now that the chapel is built, two girls, around 7 or 8 years old, come to the cemetery about once a week with their mother and clean it. They sweep the floor, do a bit of dusting, clean up any spilled candlewax. (MacKinnon pays them.)

"These communities are passing their customs and traditions down to their children, and we're helping them."

MacKinnon has gotten to know many people in the Orthodox community in addition to the priests. He has attended

numerous church festivals and bazaars and made donations to projects at several churches.

After plans for the Orthodox Garden and Holy Resurrection Chapel were developed, MacKinnon would bring a model of the planned garden and chapel and information to hand out to church events. Having previously enlisted the priests as advisors/ambassadors helped.

"I'd set up a booth and tell people the history of the project and some people would be wondering, 'What are you doing here? Are you selling graves?'"

"I could see some people going over to the priest and asking what I was doing at their festival. And the priest would say, 'He takes care of our loved ones over at Gethsemane. He's part of our community. He's not selling anything; he's just showing you what we're doing with the Orthodox community at The Gardens cemetery.'"

Designing the Orthodox Garden and chapel

The Gardens at Gethsemane is a park within a park. An overhead view of the area (on this page) shows the cemetery in the lower half, with wide tree buffers all around. Adjacent are a Jewish Cemetery and Brook Farm, which was once a transcendentalist utopian society. Today, Brook Farm is a state-owned park.

"We're surrounded by 1,000 acres of rolling hills, meadows and woodlands south of the Charles River."

MacKinnon said he decided the Orthodox Garden chapel should be placed at the highest elevation possible in the cemetery. He thought the priests would like that idea, and they did.

As he worked on the design, "I realized it wasn't just going to be a physical space;



The Gardens' involvement with the Orthodox community includes making donations and attending events. Here MacKinnon presents a check for a project at Holy Epiphany Russian Orthodox Church in Boston. At right are Metropolitan Hilarion and Father Victor.



Above, MacKinnon makes a presentation at Annunciation Greek Orthodox Cathedral of New England after being introduced by Father Cleopas. “My presentation was awesome,” MacKinnon said, “But I think they liked the lamb shanks better.” As part of his visit to talk about plans for the Orthodox Garden and chapel, MacKinnon offered attendees dinner.



Above, MacKinnon is introduced by Father Timothy at St. George Antiochian Orthodox Church of Boston.

Below, Father Timothy talks to parishioners about the plans for the Orthodox Garden and chapel.



Above, MacKinnon with the display, printed material and a tile (created by Tile Artisans) of one of the icons created for the chapel by Alex Melo. This display was at St. Athanasius The Great Church in Arlington.

Left, making kabobs and demonstrating traditional dances at Lebanese bazaars and Greek festivals. MacKinnon has attended many such events.

it was going to be a spiritual space, too,” one that would allow Orthodox families to follow their traditions.

The design and the models changed over time. The chapel had to face in a certain direction. He decided he wanted to include an olive orchard and a pergola, where he would grow grapes.

Oh, wait, not grapes: They would attract birds, which would make a mess. The pergola would still be built, but it would be

covered by climbing hydrangeas.

The memorials had to be uprights—The Garden does have memorial park sections, but the Orthodox community would not appreciate that sort of memorialization. Cemetery rules were changed to add six inches to the allowed height of memorials.

For those who might want a “tablet” memorial of the type that can be seen in many European cemeteries (as in the photo at the Russian cemetery, top of page 60), a

family estate area would allow for it.

He hired an architect, Yervant Nahikian, who is of Armenian descent and has experience with Byzantine design, including Orthodox Church design. MacKinnon knew what he wanted done, but had to hire an architect and engineer in order to get plans drawn that could be put out to bid.

“Between myself and a half a dozen priests and my advisory committee—the leadership team—we had already designed

Right, from left, Father Victor, who originally approached MacKinnon about building an Orthodox chapel; Metropolitan Hilarion, first hierarch of the Russian Orthodox Church; Metropolitan Methodios, spiritual leader of the Greek Orthodox Metropolis of Boston; and Bishop John Abdalah of the Diocese of Worcester and New England of the Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese of North America; Father Ted; and Nektarios Antoniou, a famous chanter who brought MacKinnon to Mount Athos at the request of a mutual friend on one of MacKinnon's trips to that country.



Far left, Father Timothy from St. George Antiochian Orthodox Church of Boston; Father Patrick from Holy Resurrecton Orthodox Church, Allston; and Father Victor from Holy Epiphany Russian Orthodox Church, Boston, participate in the groundbreaking. Behind them is Bishop John.

Left, MacKinnon and architect Yervant Nahikian participate in the groundbreaking.

Below, a closeup of the gold-plated shovels used in the ceremony. MacKinnon gave each of the clergymen a plaque to commemorate the event.

what we wanted to see and what the Orthodox community needed.”

A groundbreaking ceremony took place in 2012. Many local priests took part, as well as renowned chanter Nektarios Antoniou, a Yale graduate who travels the world; and three bishops: Metropolitan Hilarion, first hierarch of the Russian Orthodox Church; Metropolitan Methodios, spiritual leader of the Greek Orthodox Metropolis of Boston, which includes most of New England; and Bishop John Abdalah of the Diocese of Worcester and New England of the Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese of North America.



A year or two later, the construction started, with the pouring of the foundation and installation of lawn crypts. The walls went up in the summer of 2015, with the dome in place by late fall.

About 400 double vaults were put in place, and there is room for expansion to allow for thousands. These are full-body burials, since the Orthodox traditionally do not cremate.

The vaults were installed in a field that was 13 feet below the top of the foundation for the chapel. “It just made sense to scrape off the loam, put in some crushed stone and piping, put the double vaults on top of the stone and then fill over

the top,” MacKinnon said. The result was that the field was brought up to the level of the chapel.

One side of the cobblestone road that runs through the garden to the chapel is reserved for mausoleums and private family estates, which are 5 feet wide by 12 feet long. MacKinnon installed one eight-person family mausoleum on spec to show families the possibilities. The mausoleum also adds to the garden’s ambiance. “It looks like the cemeteries in the old countries,” MacKinnon said.

There is also a two-person private mausoleum, also installed on spec, next to the chapel. Again, he wanted to show people that the above-ground interment favored by some is available in the Orthodox Garden. “If you go to the old



Above left, MacKinnon stands on the site with a plan for the Orthodox Garden. **Above center**, the foundation work gets started. The cross-like shape of the chapel interior can be seen in this view. **Above right**, the foundation walls go up.

country, there are all these above-ground memorials.” Some of them are put together by family members and fall apart in a few years, “but not this one—I got this from an ICCFA member supplier.”

The chapel is immediately recognizable as Orthodox, with its curves, arches and domed cupola. MacKinnon had the concrete block sides covered with stonework to give it an “old world” feel. The building is approximately 16 x 24 feet with 12 windows and room for a Holy Resurrection mosaic above the entry doors.

The building is solid—really solid. “The foundation is about 8 feet deep and a foot thick—I should have included a basement,” MacKinnon said. “If a hurricane’s coming through here, I’m running up to the chapel. Those walls might be cinder block, but they’re solid, with poured-in concrete.”

Stone cladding was added to the exterior walls “to make it look like it had been there for years,” MacKinnon said. He saw plenty of chapels in Europe with simple plaster exteriors, “but I want this building to last hundreds of years.”

Steel framework holds up the domed cupola, which has arched windows and is topped by a simple cross. MacKinnon did see ornate crosses on some of the chapels in Europe, but he wanted something everyone would feel comfortable with.

MacKinnon chose zinc for the dome cladding “because it doesn’t patina like copper. You put copper up and it’s orange and then it turns green. I didn’t want the color to change.”

The inside is substantially—but not 100 percent—complete. The inside walls have not yet been plastered, and MacKinnon plans to tile the floor and include radiant heat provided by solar panels. “Our solar panels will be a few hundred feet away, and we’ll have conduit running the



electricity to the chapel. We can’t put solar panels on a Byzantine-style chapel.”

One of the important features of an Orthodox church or chapel is the iconostasis. Some are elaborately carved, and Holy Resurrection Chapel might have one like that someday, but the iconostasis now in place suffices to serve its function of holding and displaying the icons.

The iconostasis holds striking aluminum replicas, painted by Alex Melo, of the icons MacKinnon had made in

Above, double-depth lawn crypts were installed in the Orthodox Garden on land that was lower than the chapel. After they were covered with soil, the ground elevation was raised to that of the chapel.

Left, the granite plaza behind Holy Resurrection Chapel. MacKinnon moved his own resting place, which had been on what is now Orthodox Garden land, to where the plaza is.

Albania.

The original icons are not left in the chapel because it is left open 24 hours a day. The cemetery as a whole is pretty much a 24/7 operation, since MacKinnon lives there. In any case, the precious originals are kept in his home, but the stand-ins are beautifully displayed.

One of the icons is brought out for every Orthodox graveside service. Inside the tent, “We put the Holy Resurrection icon and a basket of earth,” MacKinnon



Above left and center, the chapel walls before and during the addition of stone cladding.



Right, the first service was held in the chapel before the roof was installed.



Above, a mausoleum from Norwalk Vault Co. being placed near the chapel. MacKinnon placed this mausoleum and an eight-person one in the garden to showcase the possibilities for above-ground memorialization.



Above and left, the dome being finished on site and placed atop the chapel. **Below,** the cross is put into place.



said. “Ninety-five percent of the time, the casket’s going to be lowered into the resting place after the flowers are placed there, and then people are going to come up, take a handful of earth and place it on the top of the casket.”

After the walls were up, before the roof was in place, one family insisted on having their service inside the chapel walls. “They

couldn’t wait,” MacKinnon said, obviously pleased that even in its incomplete state, the chapel was drawing Orthodox families.

Though the building has no fixed seating, chairs are brought in for services. Today’s trend in funeral chapel design is for removable seating in place of fixed seating, but this feature is a not a modern innovation but a traditional one in some

Orthodox churches.

The pergola’s columns match the chapel’s cladding. MacKinnon saw some metal pergolas in the cemeteries he visited, and found that the metal did not hold up well under the pressure of growing vines.

“Our pergola is solid. We have 2-by-2-foot columns that are solid concrete with 1-inch rebar inside.” The beams are wood



Above, A fisheye view of the chapel's interior with the iconostasis in place.

Above far right, an interior view showing the list of "great donors" on the red banner. The list will later be carved in granite.

Right, MacKinnon with Alex Melo, who painted the icons for the iconostasis. The icons were made in Albania.



MacKinnon had specially cut at a sawmill.

The Orthodox section has a wide, 300-foot cobblestone road running from the entrance to the chapel. MacKinnon wanted to name the road, so he asked the priests for ideas. "Father Nick, from St. Demetrios Greek Orthodox Church in Weston, came back with 'Emmaus.'

"He said Emmaus was a good name for the cobblestone road because after Christ was resurrected and the rock was rolled back from the tomb, he was walking down the road to Emmaus and two of his disciples were walking with him but didn't recognize him. When they got to Emmaus, he broke bread and gave it to his disciples and then they recognized him. There's an icon called 'The Road to Emmaus.'"

The other priests liked the name, so the cobblestone road became Emmaus Way.

He worked with a leadership team on funding the project, MacKinnon said. And the lawn crypts were put in place early so that interments could start taking place. By the time the chapel was being built, interments had already been made; memorials were already in place.

The Orthodox community also has no problem with acquiring resting places before need. "A lot of families want to be close to the chapel," MacKinnon said. Pre-need purchases, which included a tax-deductible donation toward the chapel project, helped build the chapel.

One interesting footnote to the development of the Orthodox Garden is that MacKinnon ended up moving his own planned resting place. "The lots I had reserved for myself were right by the chapel," MacKinnon said, "but I wanted to place the chapel in the best location in the



Above, wooden beams are put into place on the stone columns of the pergola. Like the chapel, it was built to last. **Above far right**, the pergola in place. **Right**, an icon depicting the road to Emmaus, specially commissioned for this project. **Below**, the eight-person mausoleum in place on the side of Emmaus Way reserved for mausoleums and family estates.



cemetery, and that happened to be on top of my lots. I had to give my lots back to the cemetery.”

He didn’t move far away, though. On the other side of the chapel is a 20-by-20-foot granite patio with one bench (and room for more). “That’s where I will be resting in the future; I’ll go right underneath the granite patio. I built it as a sitting area so that if people want to donate to the chapel they can be recognized on the granite caps.”

Though the patio is not an official part of the Orthodox Garden, he did see sitting areas and benches in some of the cemeteries he visited, so he felt that it fit in.

The evolution of the cemetery’s mission

The influence of this project, and of interacting with the Orthodox community, has spread far beyond the development of one garden, MacKinnon said. It has affected the way he sees the cemetery’s mission — and his own.

“I initially approached the Orthodox Garden and chapel as a building project, sort of a ‘build it and they will come,’” MacKinnon said. “The Orthodox community has a strong belief in burial and a great respect for customs and traditions. In undertaking this project, I felt I could count on the loyalty of the Orthodox community to support and sustain it.”

That all turned out to be true, MacKinnon said, but what he didn’t anticipate was how his years-long involvement in this project would change “the way we view what a cemetery is, what we do and how we do it.”

“A lot of the Orthodox customs and traditions that we help them with take place after the service and are about helping people heal.” They hold nine-day, 40-day and one-year memorial services — and these can now be conducted in the Holy Resurrection Chapel.

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The Orthodox Christian community of Greater Boston is truly blessed with the addition of the Holy Resurrection Chapel and Orthodox Garden at the Gardens at Gethsemane Cemetery. It is, as far as anyone knows, the only Orthodox chapel in a secular cemetery in the country and we are most grateful for that distinction.

Thanks to Alan MacKinnon's unique vision and dedication, we now have a beautiful Byzantine styled Church surrounded by a serene burial garden in keeping with the time-honored traditions and customs of Eastern Christians. It is a special blessing to offer our prayers at the Holy Resurrection Chapel and to bless the graves of our departed loved ones buried there. We are thankful to know that future generations will reverence this sacred ground and lift their voices on high as they pray at the Holy Resurrection Chapel

—Father Timothy Joseph Ferguson, St. George Antiochian Orthodox Church of Boston

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In addition, “They come back to the cemetery, they place eternal lights, they plant flowers. These are things that are forbidden in a lot of other cemeteries, but I decided that we’re a very intimate cemetery, and we provide a level of hospitality no one else can match, so why can’t we let people do these things here?”

“There are about 40 women who come here every day and make sure the candle’s

lit for their husband or their mom or dad. It’s changed my thinking about what we do here.

“Years ago, when I first started (as the foreman), I thought, ‘I work in a cemetery. I dig graves; I bury people.’

“Years later, I started getting hugs and kisses from these Orthodox women saying, ‘Thank you for taking care of my husband.’ Or, ‘Thank you for taking care of my parents.’ I wasn’t a huggy-kissy kind of guy,

so I sort of thought, ‘Oh, OK, lady.’

“But after a while, they made me understand that I was doing something special: I was taking care of people they still loved.”

He also was influenced by the people who worked with him, advisors he named to his leadership team. They had no cemetery experience—except, perhaps, making arrangements for a family member. They attended ICCFA conferences “and

The Gardens emphasizes relationship selling

William Ernest Garneau is one of the advisors to The Gardens President Alan MacKinnon, CCE; he serves as program manager for the Orthodox Garden project and helps with community outreach.

His involvement with the cemetery goes back to when his father asked him to find a place—“a place that’s local so the kids or grandkids can come and visit, can come and talk to me if they’re having a hard time”—for him and Garneau’s mother.

He had been to services at The Gardens and thought it was a “really nice cemetery,” so that’s where he purchased resting places for his parents.

About four months later, his mother died. The graveside service was “unbelievable,” Garneau said. It was a raw March day. There were heated tents, but despite that, his father was cold. “And out of nowhere, Alan brings over a blanket and he wraps it around my father.”

Garneau has more than 30 years of experience in nonprofit fundraising and

management, and is no stranger to event-planning. He notices attention to detail. “Somebody had to really think about that, plan it—have the blankets there.”

Several months later, there was a second service at The Gardens, for his father. This time, it was a military service. “I just started talking to Alan; he’s an interesting guy—he looks at things very deeply.”

One of the things MacKinnon has thought about a great deal is sales, always a major concern for cemeteries. How do you conduct sales and how do you measure the effectiveness of your sales efforts?

At The Gardens, they measure success via the emails, letters and face-to-face comments they receive, MacKinnon said.

“We don’t have any high-pressure sales. We don’t have any quotas,” he said. “But ninety-nine percent of the people who walk through this door wanting a resting place choose one at The Gardens. So that’s our closing rate: 99 percent.”

MacKinnon’s low-key approach seems to work, Garneau said. Community outreach is becoming more important

as traditional sales and fund-raising approaches have become more difficult.

“I know a lot about phone calling and telemarketing,” Garneau said. “First of all, you can’t even get people on the phone today. And when you do get them on the phone, they’ve been trained to hang up on you.”

“The whole trend in sales is relationship selling, reaching out to the community.” Which, of course, is what MacKinnon has been doing, not only with the Orthodox community but with all families.

The cemetery sponsors events such as its annual Pumpkin Festival, which draws thousands of people; flag retirement ceremonies; a motorcycle run and blessing of the bikes; and MacKinnon’s annual holiday open house, where everyone is welcome to come by and enjoy music, food and drink in the family room.

“We are not a ‘sad, bad, scary place,’” MacKinnon said. “We are the place where people you love and people your children love are resting.”

Because MacKinnon lives at the cemetery, his home and office are together and he welcomes visitors. “On the weekends, we leave the front door open. People can come into the family room, where we have coffee and pastry available all weekend. We’re available 24/7.”

came back with an energized feeling that we’re doing something different here.”

MacKinnon was accustomed to going to conferences and coming back with a head full of ideas, and his team helped him pull everything together. Over the years, he’s felt a shift in the cemetery’s mission and focus from selling graves and promoting the beauty of the grounds to one of asking people “How can I help?” of being there to serve.

“Once, a few years ago, I came back from a conference and busted out a wall in the office and went out and bought some comfortable living room furniture and put in a fireplace and created a more welcoming family and visitor center.

“When you come in the front door and into the family room, there used to be an oval table sitting there. It seemed to tell people: ‘Sit down; we’re going to do some business here. We’re going to sign some papers.’

“Now when people come in, we sit down in comfortable chairs and we talk about Mom or Dad, the people they love.”

He’s attended a lot of ICCFA Wide World of Sales conferences and found he had to adapt what speakers were talking about to make them workable for The Gardens. “We’re a smaller operation. We don’t have a sales force. We don’t give scripted presentations in homes. I’ve never made a cold call.”

At this year’s sales conference, one speaker said, “The people are there. Why aren’t you?” That describes the approach at The Gardens, MacKinnon said. “That’s us. We’re everywhere. We have events here at The Gardens; we’re at other groups’ events; we’re in people’s homes; we’re sponsoring coffee hours at churches.”

In New England, combination operations are not allowed. Funeral homes, cemeteries and monument companies are all separate. The local funeral directors “either love us and say there’s something different about us,” MacKinnon said, “or they think we’re jerks, causing problems: ‘What do you mean, you want to see the family before the service?!’”

“Some funeral directors wonder why a family representative has to visit the



MacKinnon show off some of the figs now growing in his garden. He has about 30 fig trees. “Sometimes the Greek and Lebanese women, when they find out I have fig trees, say, ‘If you don’t give me figs, I will kill you.’ I say, ‘You just hugged me and thanked me for taking care of your mom and dad and now if I don’t give you figs, you’re going to kill me?’ ‘Yes.’ They really love figs!” He also plants tomatoes, cucumbers, peppers, zucchini and herbs and gives produce away to cemetery visitors.

cemetery,” MacKinnon said of families who have purchased pre-need. “The main reason is that we need to verify the resting place, learn who the authorized representative is and get a signature in person.”

This is also a way to build relationships of trust and rapport.

As part of their “What can we do to help?” attitude, cemetery staff will go with family members to the funeral home, will invite monument companies to meet with families at the cemetery office, will give referrals to independent or assisted living or to hospice, will provide the names of local florists.

“This might be normal practice for cemeteries in other areas of the country, but not in our area,” MacKinnon said.

He said he likes families to feel a seamless continuum of care in the transition from the funeral home to the cemetery—which can be challenging where funeral homes and

cemeteries are separate organizations.

The Gardens invites local funeral directors to its events, and visits them. One of its advisors, Marion Kelly, executive director of the local YMCA, made appointments with eight or nine funeral homes and conducted in-person interviews with the directors at each one. She asked them what they thought about The Gardens and what they would change, if they could change just one thing.

Kelly compiled the results in a spreadsheet and presented them to the rest of the team at The Gardens without disclosing who said what, and they made some internal changes in how they did things, to make their service more seamless, friendly and inviting.

Because he lives at the cemetery, his home and office are together and he welcomes visitors. “On the weekends, we leave the front door open. People can come into the family room, where we have coffee and pastry available all weekend. We’re available 24/7.”

MacKinnon plants a vegetable and herb garden and welcomes people to come in and pick some vegetables. He might fire up the grill for a barbecue. “People stay and tell us stories about Mom and Dad; they feel comfortable sharing.”

This is not a close-at-dusk cemetery. Some people have graveside services in the evening, or come at night to visit their loved ones’ memorials.

If cemetery staff members are not available when people phone, an answering service handles the call so that callers don’t end up talking to a machine.

Not that MacKinnon is allergic to technology. “We work with webcemeteries.com and Cemetery360. Every person resting here at The Gardens has their own website where family members can share pictures and videos and memories, and GPS can guide you right to someone’s resting place.”

Changing the sign—and the rules

One of the things they’ve changed at The Gardens is the entrance signage. There is a sign that says “The Gardens,” and one that says “Office and Visitor Center. Welcome.”

There used to be a sign that started off in a friendly enough way, MacKinnon said:

If a staff member sees someone taking plants and a shovel out of their trunk, they'll come over and offer to help, MacKinnon said. He realizes that allowing planting makes maintaining the grounds more difficult for cemetery staff, but decided that it was more important to help families heal than make things easier for the cemetery. "We'll trim around the plants—after all, we're weed-whacking professionals."



MacKinnon designed the family room at The Gardens to encourage people to sit down and talk in comfortable surroundings. Here the room is decorated for Christmas. He holds a holiday open house after the first of the year.

"If we can be of any assistance, please stop in the office and speak with Alan or Eunice." (Eunice A. Davis is a Certified Celebrant and is in charge of family services.) He thought including names was a nice, personal touch.

But then the sign went on to say, "As we maintain the cemetery, we ask you to refrain from the following ..." What followed were the typical cemetery prohibitions against doing things such as planting flowers.

"I walk around the cemetery almost on a daily basis," MacKinnon said, "and we do remove items occasionally." But they've loosened up on what is allowed, and try to use education rather than prohibition to steer people away from things that would create maintenance hardships.

If he sees someone aiming to plant a rose bush, he'll stop by and ask if

they could plant the roses at home and plant something else at the cemetery. "I might say, 'Some people who aren't as conscientious as you, who won't come back to the cemetery to visit and take care of the roses like you will, will see your bush and want to plant one, too.'"

In any case, they talk to people first. "We don't go through and just start ripping stuff out. That happens in a lot of places, and that's when you get angry people coming into the office."

If a staff member sees someone taking plants and a shovel out of their trunk, they'll come over and offer to help, MacKinnon said. And on Mother's Day, every visitor is offered a free potted plant.

He realizes that allowing planting makes maintaining the grounds more difficult for cemetery staff, but decided that it was more important to help families heal than make

things easier for the cemetery. "We'll trim around the plants—after all, we're weed-whacking professionals." The Gardens also provides hoses attached to the water draw-offs so that visitors can water their plants.

The strategic business plan at The Gardens is to differentiate the cemetery by allowing families to follow their customs and traditions, MacKinnon said.

"We provide a ministry of healing and compassionate care. We want to provide exceptional service and allow families to grieve the way they want to grieve—within reason. As long as you're not surrounding the resting place with cobblestones, or parking your car somewhere it shouldn't be.

"What really came out of all this was a ministry of compassionate care and healing services that could be stated and adhered to in our vision, mission and values." 