

'Faith in Funerals': religion and spirituality in 'secular' funerals

findings snippets



Content analysis of 1000 funerals

Seven independent celebrants from England and Wales provided service plans.

The funerals in the analysis took place between late 2019 and late 2022.

We undertook a quantitative analysis of the religious and spiritual content in these services (spiritual content was more complex to analyse).

Who were the funerals for?

Age: 1.3% were 100+ years old
18.3% were 90-99; **31.6% were 80-89;**
22.6% were 70-79; 13.2% were 60-69;
7.6% were 50-59; 3% were 40-49;
1.3% were 30-39; 0.5% were 18-29;
0.6% were under 18

Gender: 48.3% were female, 51.7% were male.

Lack of ethnic and religious diversity?

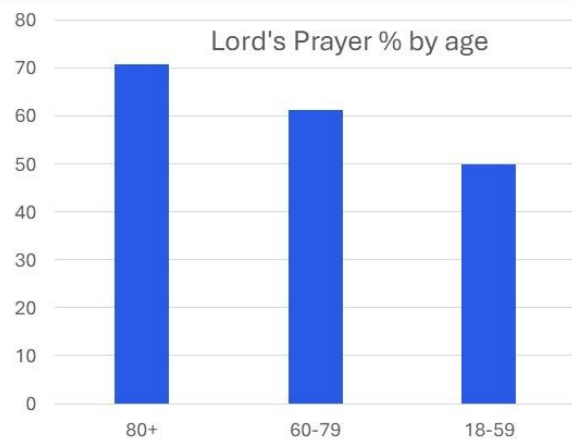
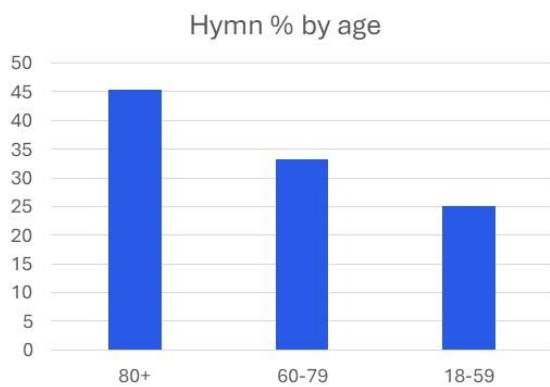


Religious content

- 65% of services had the Lord's Prayer
- 23% had other prayers
- 38% had at least one hymn
- 25% had a reading from scripture
- **In total 76% of services had one or more of a reading, hymn or prayer**



Breakdown by age



Spiritual content: songs



The following themes emerged from our analysis of popular songs:

- THE SKY AND RELATED OBJECTS 28%
- JOURNEY or TRAVEL 17%
- ANGELS, FLIGHT, BIRDS 14%
- PLACE BEYOND or AFTERLIFE 11%
- GOD or DEITY 10%
- ASCENSION 9%
- PRAYER, BLESSINGS, PRAISE or WORSHIP 7%
- ETERNITY 5%
- FAITH or BELIEF 4%
- THE SOUL or SPIRIT 3%
- FREEDOM or LIBERATION 3%

Popular songs with religious or spiritual themes include:

'Tears in Heaven' by Eric Clapton

'Angels' by Robbie Williams

'Stairway to Heaven' by Led Zeppelin

'Turn, turn, turn' by The Byrds.

Spiritual content: poems



80% of the 1000 services had poems with religious or spiritual references. However, the analysis of such popular resources is complex.

- 'God's Garden' or 'God saw you getting tired' explicitly mention God but are not about God so much as the person who is gone.
- 'She [or he] is gone', mentions the word 'pray' in passing but does not reference the afterlife - it focuses on being happy that the person has lived and for the memories of them
- 'Footprints' is often used in religious contexts but is not necessarily religious (this example is often used to refer to Jesus carrying the person but could also be interpreted to reference the deceased being alongside their loved one).
- Some poems explicitly mention 'heaven'. Other popular poems contain symbolic but substantial references to the afterlife without any specific religious terminology, such as 'Look for me in rainbows' or 'The ship'.



Has Covid had an impact?

- Before Covid: **69% of funeral services had the Lord's Prayer** and **52% had a hymn** (based on 166 services in late 2019/early 2020).
- During Covid: **63% of funerals had the Lord's Prayer** and **43% had a hymn** (based on 136 services in 2020/21).
- Post Covid: **64% had the Lord's Prayer** and **34% had a hymn** (based on 698 services in 2022).
- The interviews suggest the impacts of the pandemic were a mix of temporary changes (e.g. not being able to sing when playing a hymn) and some more long-term changes (e.g. webcasting/hybrid funerals).

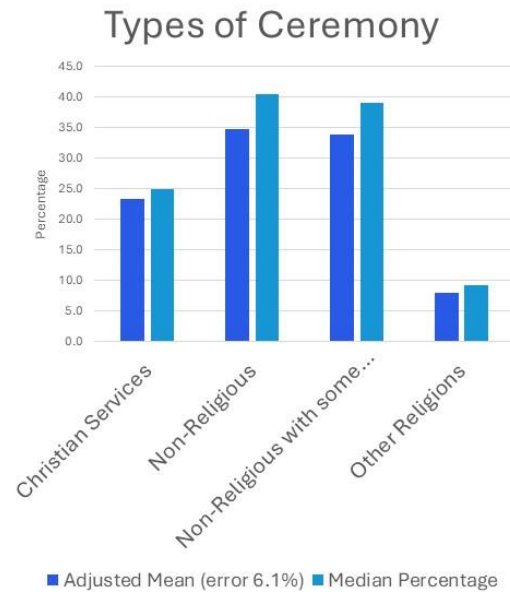
Survey of funeral arrangers

- The survey of funeral directors/arrangers was circulated across the UK by the NAFD.
- It received 169 responses. 82% of respondents were from England.
- The purpose of the survey was to understand what proportions of people initially opt for a religious or non-religious service and the type of officiant they request.
- It also asked about forms of religious content requested.



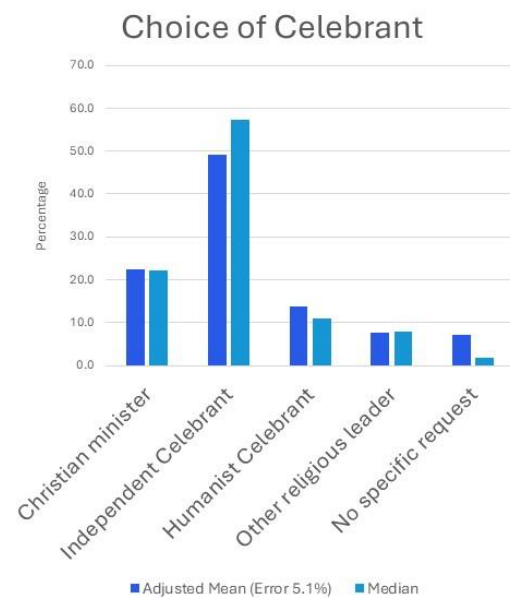
Initial choices: religious or non- religious?

- 34.8% opt for a non-religious ceremony
- 33.8% for non-religious with some religious content
- 23.4% initially opt for a Christian service
- 8% opt for other religious services.



Initial choices: type of officiant

- 49.2% opt for an independent celebrant
- 22.3% opt for a Christian officiant
- 13.7% for a Humanist celebrant
- 7.6% for other religious officiants
- 7.1% make no specific request



Initial choices: forms of religious content



98% of arrangers had had requests for Christian content:

- 88% had received requests for The Lord's Prayer
- 87% for a Christian hymn or song
- 15% for a Bible reading
- 9% for a Christian poem
- 16% for other Christian prayers and blessings

42% had had no requests for content from other faiths.

Popular hymns include All Things Bright and Beautiful, The Lord's my Shepherd, Abide With Me, Morning has Broken, Amazing Grace, Jerusalem.

The most popular Christian reading was Psalm 23.

Key findings from the quantitative data

People are presented with binarized initial choices that do not reflect the fusion of religious, spiritual and non-religious content in everyday funerals.

Three quarters of everyday funerals include explicitly religious content and four fifths contain popular songs and poems with reference to spiritual themes.

The Lord's Prayer is the most popular religious resource in everyday funerals.

Funeral arrangers are most likely to engage an independent celebrant to lead a funeral over other officiants (including religious and Humanist).

