

Faith in Funerals Toolkit

for funeral professionals

Executive Summary

The 'Faith in Funerals' research project explored the use of religious and non-religious content in funeral ceremonies led by independent celebrants in England and Wales. Civil funerals differ from civil wedding ceremonies which are entirely secular - as funerals are not a legal ceremony and there are no legal restrictions to using religious content in civil funerals conducted by non-religious officiants.

Funerals conducted by independent celebrants fall into categories created about the proportions of secular or non-religious funerals. The reality is more complex than such divisions suggest and these binaries misrepresent the engagement with religion, belief and spirituality by people planning these funerals for their loved ones.

Between 2022 and 2023, we undertook a content analysis of 1000 funerals led by independent celebrants in England and Wales, a survey of funeral directors/arrangers and interviews with independent celebrants, religious ministers, funerals arrangers and those who have organized funerals for their relatives.

Our research found that most everyday funerals include some religious content with 76% of those we analysed including at least one of a hymn, prayer or reading. 80% included popular poems with reference to broader spiritual themes. Use of religious content declines with the age of the deceased with funerals for younger people having lower levels of hymns and prayers. The use of hymns in funerals is in decline (potentially accelerated by the Covid-19 pandemic) but the incorporation of The Lord's Prayer (the most popular religious resource) appears to remain stable.



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Most everyday funerals are officiated by independent celebrants and people using their services largely value the overall flexibility and choice provided by these officiants. Overall, most everyday funerals are a fusion of religious, non-religious and spiritual resources, balancing ritual with personalisation, and do not fall into the binaries of either a traditional religious service or an entirely secular ‘celebration of life’. There is not consensus that the term ‘celebrant’ and its connotations of celebration, appropriately reflects what people are looking for. We also found that the religious perspectives of funeral arrangers and celebrants impact on how they guide people in designing services in relation to religious content.

Religious ministers are seen as less flexible than independent celebrants by funeral professionals and those organising funerals for their loved ones. The decisions of funeral arrangers to offer services with varying degrees of religious content to independent celebrants may be influencing the decline of church-led funerals. However, families reflected that they perceived a church-led funeral would have been ‘more about God’ than their loved one. Religious ministers recognised these perceptions and felt that churches could do better to make clear the range of choice and flexibility they are able to accommodate.

The reasons people gave for incorporating religious content in funerals included a sense of obligation or that it was the ‘right thing to do’, a sense that it brought comfort or facilitated collective emotion, and a desire to honour the wishes of the deceased or other (particularly older) family members. For some, it also appeared to reflect a desire to believe their loved one was living on. Incorporation of a range of popular songs and poems that reference the person living on in some way, in the here and now, also appears to support this.



The implications of the study include that people could be presented with a more nuanced range of initial choices for funerals beyond simply religious or non-religious, church leader or

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celebrant. The celebrants in our study had a range of backgrounds, beliefs and specialisms. The ability for people to view a range of profiles (as they can for a coffin, for example) would support more informed and nuanced choice of officiant.

The training provided to funeral arrangers and celebrants could be reviewed to ensure that it supports funeral professionals to navigate people's complex and nuanced spiritual needs, beyond the religious and non-religious binaries. Within this, these professionals need to remain reflexive as to how they cater for these varied needs within the range of approaches to guiding people towards or away from religious content.

Our research also found a lack of racial and religious diversity among celebrants and the funerals they officiate. Black celebrants recounted experiences of discrimination. As such, training for funeral industry professionals needs to incorporate reflection on issues of diversity and discrimination.