

# Faith in Funerals?

The use of religious and spiritual resources in everyday funerals in the UK

Research report - February 2024

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## 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.

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 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.

## Introduction

This report outlines the findings from the 'Faith in Funerals' research project, which explored the fusion of religious, spiritual and/or non-religious content in funeral ceremonies led by independent celebrants in England and Wales. Civil funerals in the UK 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 of secular or non-religious funerals. The reality is far more complex than such divisions suggest and they misrepresent the engagement with religion, belief and spirituality by people planning these funerals for their loved ones.

The increase in UK funerals led by independent celebrants is an under-researched area. Independent celebrants are neither Humanists nor religious officiants, though there is a range of religious positions among those who take up the role, from retired religious ministers to Atheists and everything in between. A more nuanced understanding is required of the needs, desires and expectations of the large numbers of people who do not opt for a strictly religious or secular funeral for their relatives. The 'Faith in funerals' project explored how people use the services of independent funeral celebrants to find and create meaning using religious and non-religious resources. The research has explored how these celebrants cater to people's desire for ritual and/or personalization in funeral ceremonies.

Despite no legal requirement for a ritual following death, almost everyone has a funeral. In 2002, registrars in the UK began to lead civil funeral ceremonies (Cook & Walter, 2005). Whilst considered to be secular, these services often incorporate religious content, including the very first one which included The Lord's Prayer, by request of the deceased's daughter (Cook & Walter, 2005). Since then, there has been a sharp rise in the number of 'secular funerals' with the majority of funerals now conducted by independent celebrants (Walter, 2016). There is no common understanding as to what constitutes a civil ceremony, particularly as there are aspects of religion within such services. Whilst there has been research into some alternative, non-religious funerals, these have tended to focus on particular examples, such as woodland burials, Humanist services, and home funerals (Rumble, 2016; Engelke, 2015; Hagerty, 2014). Everyday civil funerals have received little attention from academic researchers, with a small number of recent studies in the UK and US (Bailey & Walter, 2016; Holloway et al, 2013). In particular, no other substantial quantitative study exists to analyse the proportion of such funerals that incorporate religious and spiritual content. There is a need to understand how changes to funerals over the last two decades fit into broader patterns of religious change and how the use of religious resources in civil funerals challenge narratives of secularisation.

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 over three quarters of them including at least one of a hymn, prayer or reading. Four fifths included popular poems with reference to broader spiritual themes. We also found that the religious perspective of the celebrant and funeral arranger impacts on how they guide people in designing services. Most everyday

funerals are officiated by independent celebrants and people using their services largely value the overall flexibility and choice provided by these officiants. There is not consensus, however, that the term 'celebrant' appropriately reflects what they are looking for. Overall, most everyday funerals are a fusion of religious, non-religious and spiritual content, balancing ritual with personalisation, and do not fall into the binaries of either a traditional religious service or an entirely secular 'celebration of life'.

## Religious affiliation in the UK

The 2021 Census shows that 46.2% of the population of England and Wales identify as Christian, down from 59.3% in 2011 and 71.7% in 2001 (ONS, 2022). While Christians remain the largest category in the Census, this shows a pattern of steady decline. The second largest group are those who identify as having no religion at 37.2%, a 25% increase since 2011. There were also increases in those who identify as Muslim (at 6.5% of the population in 2021) and Hindu (at 1.7% in 2021) (ibid.). Religious affiliation decreases with age with more younger people being represented in the growing category of no religion (ibid.).

Whilst religious affiliation is in decline overall, the 46.2% who identify as Christian is a much larger proportion than those who actually attend or engage with churches, suggesting that belief and active membership do not go hand-in-hand, as noted by several sociologists of religion in recent years (Day, 2020; Davie, 2007; Woodhead, 2016a, 2016b).

Sociologists of religion tend to agree that the categories of religious and secular are ineffective at describing people's relationships with religion, spirituality and belief in what Cloke et al (2019) have described as the post-secular context. Dinham et al (2018: 4) encapsulate this context as 'more religious, more secular and more diverse all at once'. Woodhead (2016a: 41) explains that 'a growing proportion of British people now refuse to categorise themselves as either religious or secular and display notably variegated beliefs which are impossible to fit into neat religious or secular schemas'. Similarly, Day (2020: 195) argues the 'lived, everyday beliefs and practices of non-religious people problematizes the secular/sacred and religious/non-religious binary'. These scholars suggest those who have rejected religious labels have not necessarily turned from all things spiritual. Woodhead (2016b) claims that the largest proportion of those who identify as non-religious are agnostic as opposed to staunchly atheist - and this is supported by the sub-categories chosen among those who identify as having no religion in the 2021 Census (ONS, 2022).

Bullivant et al (2019) suggest that identifying as non-religious relates more to rejecting belief in a God than a disengagement with spirituality more broadly. Day also recognises that relationships with institutional religion are in sharper decline than connections with a broader spirituality. She states that:

*a turn from organized religion is not necessarily a turn from matters spiritual or supernatural. Indeed, such beliefs and experiences appear to be growing, particularly in countries which are seeing a decline in institutionalized religion. (2020: 199)*



Sociologists of religion have, over recent decades, broadly recognised this distancing from institutional religion as significant in the growth of those identifying as non-religious as well as that many people in this category are still engaged with spirituality and belief in some form (Davie, 2007; Day, 2020; Woodhead, 2016b). This suggests, in relation to our study, that a distancing from religious institutions, including in who officiates a funeral, does not necessarily represent a complete distancing from religious-informed belief and ritual. There are also obvious generational shifts to manage between the beliefs and affiliations of the deceased and of those arranging their funerals.

## Changes to funeral patterns in the UK

It is difficult to find any clear data on the proportion of funerals that are officiated by independent celebrants and how this has changed over time, though scholars report an increase in secular or celebrant-led funerals (Davie, 2007, 2013; Walter, 2016). A recent report by Theos indicates that there has been a sharp decline in Christian religious funerals with a 50% decline in Church of England funerals between 1999 and 2019 (Rozario et al, 2023). The Church of England's own statistics show that 'there were 114,000 Church of England-led funerals during 2019, 62% of which took place in churches and 38% at crematoria/cemeteries' and this represented 23% of all deaths (Church of England, 2020:3; Rozario et al, 2023).

Some statistics exist on funeral preferences among the general public with the Funeral Survey 2023 indicating that 17% of people would opt for a religious funeral, 12% for a spiritual funeral and 65% for a non-religious funeral (the other 6% opting for 'other') (Funeral Guide, 2023). This represents a 25% increase since 2017 of people stating a preference for a non-religious funeral and a decline of 37% of them stating a preference for a religious funeral in the same period (ibid.). The survey also found that 61% of people would want a celebrant to lead their funeral (almost double the proportion from 2017), 28% would opt for a vicar and 9% would like their funeral to be led by a family member or close friend (ibid.). The funeral survey data differs from the Co-op's (2019) funeral trends report which cited that only one in ten people would opt for a traditional religious funeral. These differences likely represent differences in the questions asked and categories offered by different surveys and reflect the complexities in placing religious and non-religious into binarized categories.

Our own survey of funeral directors (see figure 1 in the findings section) which asked about actual funerals (rather than people's desires for their own funerals) suggests just over one fifth of people organising funerals initially request a Christian funeral with a third each opting for either a non-religious funeral or one that is non-religious with some religious content. A difference occurs again in our analysis of 1000 funerals led by independent celebrants (see findings section) which indicated that the majority of these funerals had some religious content (overwhelmingly Christian). This reflects, perhaps, that the initial fixed categories offered do not reflect the nuanced reality of what people go on to choose as they design the funeral with the guidance of their celebrant.

Cremations were traditionally seen as the marker of a secular funeral (De Spiegeleer, 2019) though increasingly (as church graveyards have become fuller and cremations have become the norm) they are used after religious services, often with a short additional committal service at the crematorium. The Cremation Society's journal *Pharos* reports that there were 525,092 cremations in the UK in

2021 which represents the vast majority of all deaths, which numbered 669,762 that year (The Cremation Society, 2022). Similarly, the Co-op's (2019) Funeral Trends report states that 82% of funerals conducted by its funeral directors were cremations in 2019.

Recent years have also seen a rise in *direct cremations*, which are cremations either without a ceremony at all or with only limited opportunity for close family to attend a short committal without an officiant. The Co-op (2019) stated that one in 25 of funerals arranged by its Funeral Directors was a direct cremation that year, with an increase in people preferring to have an informal celebration or just a wake over the traditional funeral ceremony. Similarly, research by Woodthorpe et al (2022) found that the rise in direct cremations represents a rejection of the public ritual and ceremony provided by the funeral service in favour of something more informal and private.

## Religious ritual vs. personalisation in UK funerals

Over recent decades, UK funerals have become much more personalised and the Church's influence and input into funerals has changed significantly, a phenomenon which has been credited to some extent to the death of Diana, Princess of Wales in 1997 (Davie, 2013; Cook & Walter, 2005). The fusion of this religious-led service with elements of personal and secular input encouraged the growth of a desire for personalisation of funerals (Bailey & Walter, 2016).

The growth in more secular, personalised funerals may represent a shift away from people turning simply to religious authorities when searching for meaning. The personalisation of funerals has been described by Cook and Walter (2005) as the reclamation of the funeral by the mourner from the Church. This is seen particularly in the shift from funerals focussed on the Christian message to celebrating the life of the deceased (Walter, 2016).

In the UK today, most civil funerals are a fusion of religious and non-religious resources with a continued reliance on collective religious rituals such as hymn-singing and reciting The Lord's Prayer. Some scholars refer to a 'degradation of traditional religious rituals, whereas personalisation of rituals has become more popular' (Mitima-Verloop et al, 2019: 735). Our research, however, suggests it is not necessarily a replacement of one with the other. Our findings suggest there is a balance between traditional religious rituals and personalisation in most everyday funerals led by independent celebrants. O'Rourke et al (2011) found that the role of religious ritual persists as a sense or obligation of what makes a good funeral. This also emerged in our study where people we interviewed drew on a sense of it being 'the right thing to do' when they incorporated religious content in funerals. Both ours and O'Rourke et al's study support that the use of religious content in funerals creates a sense of 'completed ritual' for grieving families and this, in turn, constitutes a proper funeral for them.

Arguably, the increase in celebrant-led funerals marks not a clear secularisation of funeral rituals but a fusion of religious, spiritual, secular and personalised content in the everyday funeral – a more nuanced reality than narratives of secularisation suggest. This is supported more widely by the sociologists of religion cited earlier who suggest that there are not clear binaries and boundaries of

religious and secular in people's spiritual lives in the post-secular context (Bullivant et al, 2019; Cloke et al, 2019; Dinham et al, 2018; Davie, 2007; Day, 2020; Woodhead, 2016a, 2016b).

## Research questions and methods

The 'Faith in funerals' project aimed to answer the following research questions:

- How does the growth of civil funerals represent change to how funerals are enacted in the UK, particularly in the fusion of religious and non-religious content?
- What meaning and/or challenge does an in-depth content analysis of civil funerals offer to narratives of secularization?
- To what extent might these funerals be analyzed and understood through the lenses of 'lived religion' and/or 'non-religion'?

We undertook a mixed-methods study. This has included a content analysis of 1000 funerals conducted by funeral celebrants in England and Wales over a three-year-period. This was a primarily quantitative analysis to explore what proportion of funerals included religious resources and the prevalence of different forms of religious content (such as hymns, prayers, scripture). The analysis has also considered the spiritual content in popular songs and poems used in funerals – and how choices of these resources connect with a belief in the afterlife or that people's loved ones are 'living on' in some way. The content analysis of 1000 funerals involved service plans submitted by seven independent celebrants in England and Wales. Three of these celebrants identified as white and female. Two identified as black and female. Two identified as white and male. Additionally, one printer provided 174 anonymised service sheets from funerals led by independent celebrants. The 1000 funerals all took place between late 2019 and late 2022. The majority took place in 2022 (698) with 136 taking place during covid-19 pandemic restrictions to funerals in 2020 and 2021, and 166 taking place pre-pandemic in late 2019 or early 2020.

Adding to the quantitative analysis, we circulated a survey to Funeral Directors in the UK to gather statistics on the proportions of people initially opting for religious and non-religious funerals, and proportions of funeral services led by religious figures, independent celebrants or others. The survey also provided data on the most common forms of religious content requested when the funeral arranger meets people who are planning services for their relatives. This survey was circulated by the National Association of Funeral Directors (NAFD) and received 169 responses.

For the qualitative analysis, we have undertaken interviews and focus groups with a total cohort of forty-four independent celebrants, religious ministers, funeral arrangers<sup>1</sup> and people who have organised funerals for their loved ones in England. Focus groups and interviews have taken place with fifteen independent celebrants and ten funeral directors/arrangers about how they guide

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<sup>1</sup> Funeral arrangers are the first point of contact for people accessing the services of funeral directors. They meet with clients and support them to make the decisions about what form of funeral and officiant they want - among the other choices to be made about the funeral (e.g. coffins, cars, venues, etc).

families in funeral choices and the forms of religious and non-religious resources that are drawn upon. We interviewed ten Christian religious ministers about how they view changes to funeral practices over time, the decline of church-led funerals, and the current role of religion and religious professionals. Interviews took place with nine people about how they chose what to include in celebrant-led funerals for their loved ones, six months to one year after the funerals had taken place. This was, unsurprisingly, the hardest to reach cohort hence the lower number of interviewees. We used thematic analysis within and across the cohorts of interviews to understand how and why people choose religious content in funerals and the ways in which they are guided in this.

The table below shows the demographics of the sample:

CATEGORY	GENDER	ETHNICITY	RELIGION	RELIGIOUS STATUS
FAMILY	Female	White or White British	None	Non-religious
FAMILY	Male	Asian or Asian British	Buddhist (SGI)	Religious
FAMILY	Female	Asian or Asian British	Buddhist (SGI)	Religious
FAMILY	Male	White or White British	Christian	Religious
FAMILY	Male	White or White British	None	Non-religious
FAMILY	Male	White or White British	Christian	Religious
FAMILY	Female	White or White British	Unknown	Did not say
FAMILY	Male	White or White British	Christian	Religious
FAMILY	Female	White or White British	None	Non-religious
ARRANGER	Female	White or White British	Unknown	Did not say
ARRANGER	Female	White or White British	Unknown	Did not say
ARRANGER	Male	White or White British	Christian	Religious
ARRANGER	Male	White or White British	None	Non-religious
ARRANGER	Female	White or White British	Christian	Religious
ARRANGER	Female	White or White British	Christian	Religious
ARRANGER	Male	White or White British	Unknown	Did not say
ARRANGER	Female	White or White British	Spiritual	Religious
ARRANGER	Male	White or White British	Christian	Religious
ARRANGER	Male	White or White British	Unknown	Did not say
CELEBRANT	Female	White or White British	Christian	Religious
CELEBRANT	Female	Black or Black British	Christian	Religious
CELEBRANT	Male	White or White British	Unknown	Did not say
CELEBRANT	Female	Black or Black British	Christian	Religious
CELEBRANT (+ ordained minister)	Female	Black or Black British	Christian	Religious
CELEBRANT	Female	White or White British	Agnostic	Agnostic
CELEBRANT	Male	White or White British	Unknown	Did not say
CELEBRANT	Female	White or White British	Agnostic	Agnostic

CELEBRANT	Female	White or White British	Lapsed Catholic	Semi -Religious
CELEBRANT	Female	White or White British	Unknown	Did not say
CELEBRANT	Male	White or White British	Christian	Religious
CELEBRANT	Female	White or White British	Unknown	Did not say
CELEBRANT	Male	White or White British	Atheist	Atheist
CELEBRANT	Male	White or White British	Christian (Methodist)	Christian
CELEBRANT	Female	White or White British	Agnostic	Agnostic
MINISTER	Female	White or White British	Christian (Anglican)	Religious
MINISTER	Female	White or White British	Christian (Anglican)	Religious
MINISTER	Female	White or White British	Christian (Anglican)	Religious
MINISTER	Female	White or White British	Christian (Anglican)	Religious
MINISTER	Male	White or White British	Christian (Anglican)	Religious
MINISTER	Male	White or White British	Christian (URC)	Religious
MINISTER	Male	White or White British	Christian (Anglican)	Religious
MINISTER	Male	White or White British	Christian (Baptist)	Religious
MINISTER	Male	White or White British	Christian (Anglican)	Religious
MINISTER	Male	White or White British	Christian (Anglican)	Religious

While there were a range of religious perspectives from religious to agnostic to non-religious across the sample, we did not manage to engage a very diverse representation of faith backgrounds beyond Christianity within the interview cohorts. This appears to potentially reflect who engages with independent celebrants as our content analysis of 1000 funerals also revealed a lack of diversity of religious content beyond Christianity in services led by these celebrants. We also faced some challenges in recruiting a diverse sample in terms of ethnicity (that we addressed to some extent through proactive invitations with a focus on diversifying the sample). These challenges may reflect a lack of diversity in the mainstream funeral industry and/or it may reflect our positionality as a White British research team with a leaning towards experiences of Christianity. Black celebrants did recount some experiences of discrimination in their careers (outlined later in the report) which suggest there may be some barriers to diversity in the profession. A key implication of our study is the need for further research on more minoritized religious, cultural and racial perspectives in UK funerals. There is a dearth of research on these perspectives though some is emerging (see, for example: Gumisiriza, 2022; Islam, 2023). Such further research to build on this study would need to include interviews with religious leaders from faiths other than Christianity – who tend to lead funerals that are arranged outside of the mainstream funeral industry.

## Research findings

### Survey of funeral arrangers

The survey of funeral directors/arrangers was circulated across the UK and received 169 responses. 82% of respondents were from England, 8% were from Scotland, 5% from Wales, 4% from Northern Ireland and 1% were unclear/unstated. Therefore, the vast majority of responses represent the experience from England.

#### Initial choices for religious or non-religious services and type of officiant

The main 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. Figures 1 and 2 show the responses to these key questions where arrangers were asked to give their best estimate of the proportions of people who choose the different types of ceremony and officiant (the respondents chose banded categories and we used mathematical calculations to turn these into specific percentages with some margin for error). When looking at the mean average in figure 1, it can be observed that most people initially opt for a primarily non-religious ceremony with 34.8% opting for non-religious and 33.8% for non-religious with some religious content. 23.4% initially opt for a Christian service and 8% opt for other religious services.

The proportions opting for non-religious ceremonies or non-religious with some religious content will have been affected by whether they were offered the more nuanced latter option in the initial conversation with the arranger. Our content analysis of 1000 funerals (explored later) found that the majority of funerals led by independent celebrants did include some religious content and this suggests the initial choices do not represent the nuanced reality of what happens later through discussion with the celebrant. This supports our argument that the binarized categories of religious and non-religious don't reflect the reality of what people want. As such, the survey data suggests that many funeral arrangers may not be capturing the nuanced reality in the options they initially present.

In relation to choice of officiant, the mean average in figure 2 shows that 49.2% of people opt for an independent celebrant, 13.7% for a Humanist celebrant and 7.1% make no specific request, roughly correlating with the proportions that initially opt for a non-religious ceremony (including non-religious with some religious content). 22.3% opt for a Christian officiant and 7.6% for other religious officiants, again correlating with the proportions who opt for a Christian or other religious service. The proportions opting for Christian ceremonies and officiants also reflects the Church of England statistics cited earlier which show they led funerals for 23% of deaths in 2019, though this doesn't account for other denominations (Church of England, 2020).

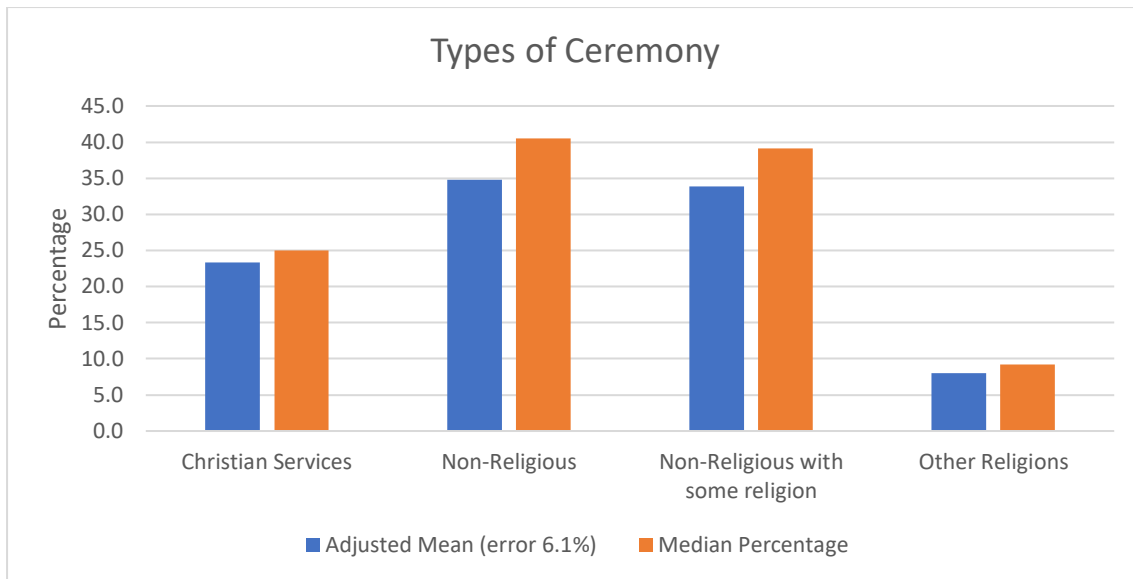


Figure 1 – type of ceremony initially requested.

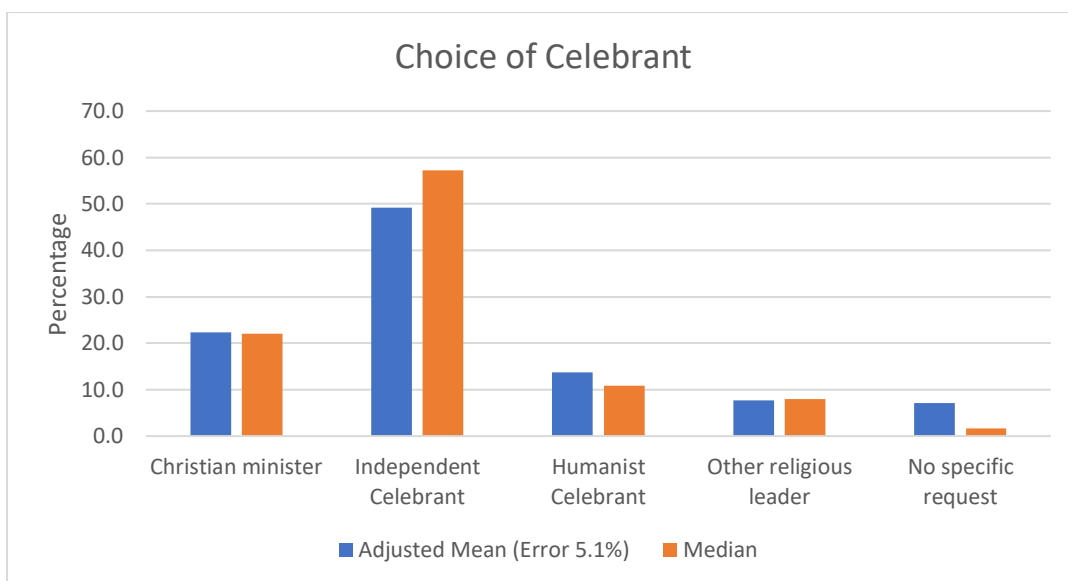


Figure 2 – choice of celebrant

The survey also asked who arrangers recommend if there is no specific request for a particular type of officiant. 83.8% said they would recommend an independent celebrant with 13.6% recommending a Christian ordained minister, 1.8% (3 respondents) a Humanist celebrant and 0.6% (1 respondent) a religious leader from another religion. This suggests that independent celebrants may be the favoured option for funeral arrangers, potentially because they are seen as most flexible and able to accommodate people’s needs or perhaps (as suggested in some interviews) that they are more likely to answer the phone when the arranger calls.

Arrangers were also asked what they feel is the most common level of understanding of the role of a civil/independent celebrant among people arranging funerals for their loved ones. While 48% felt

there was a reasonable understanding, 37% felt there was only a little understanding. Only 11% felt there was a full understanding and 4% felt there was no understanding at all. This has implications for how people are guided when choosing an officiant.

### Requests for religious content

The survey asked arrangers what religions were represented in their experience of arranging services. The most common religion represented was Christianity with 98% of respondents saying it was represented among services they had arranged. This was followed by Hinduism (experienced by 50% of arrangers), Buddhism (45%), Sikhism (43%), Islam (26%) and Judaism (24%). Respondents could also state additional religious categories that had been represented in services. There were some specific denominations or derivatives of the religions above stated here as well as some other religious or spiritual positions. These included Catholicism (6 respondents), Jehovah's Witness (5 respondents), Pagan (4 respondents), Bahai (3 respondents), Spiritualism (3 respondents), Taoism (3 respondents), Greek and Russian Orthodox (2 respondents each), Zoroastrianism (2 respondents) – and Wicca, Mormonism, Rastafarianism, Zionist, and Hare Krishna (1 respondent each). The responses to this question demonstrate that Christianity is the dominant religious perspective that these arrangers encounter but that there is a diversity of religious positions represented in the funerals they arrange, albeit some of these perspectives featuring very occasionally. Some of the responses stated by arrangers in the 'other' category may have featured more if we had included them as possible answers to the question. The lower levels of non-Christian religions may reflect that people from these communities do not always use the services of funeral directors. The dominance of Christian representation is reinforced by our content analysis of 1000 services led by independent celebrants (see next section) but this analysis found negligible content from other faiths. This may be because this representation of other faiths largely falls into the 7.6% of services that arrangers said are led by religious officiants from faith communities other than Christianity.

The survey also asked about the specific forms of Christian and other religious content that people requested in their meetings with the arrangers. 88% of arrangers said that they 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, and 16% for other Christian prayers and blessings. Arrangers shared that popular requests for hymns included All Things Bright and Beautiful (shared by 47% of respondents to this open question), The Lord's my Shepherd (40%), Abide With Me (33%), Morning has Broken (14%), Amazing Grace (13%) and Jerusalem (12%). These also emerge as popular hymns in our content analysis of 1000 services led by independent celebrants. The most popular Christian reading that emerged in this open question was Psalm 23 (mentioned by 24% of respondents) and this also is reflected as a popular reading in our content analysis of 1000 services led by independent celebrants. In regards to content from other faiths, 42% of arrangers said they had had no requests for such content, 41% had had requests for prayers and blessings, 18% for musical items, 13% for readings from scripture and 12% for religious poems. Whilst this question asked specifically about non-Christian religious content, a small number of arrangers may have included content here from Christian denominations such as Catholic as well as Greek and Russian Orthodox, given these were stated as other religions in the question discussed in the previous paragraph.



## Content analysis of 1000 funeral services led by independent celebrants

Unsurprisingly, the majority (over 70%) of the 1000 celebrant-led funerals we analysed were for deceased people who were aged 70 years and over. This suggests that religious content in funerals will at least, in part, represent the generational beliefs and affiliations of older people. The age breakdown of the deceased is as follows:

- 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.

In regards to gender, there was a relatively even split with 48.3% of the deceased being female and 51.7% male. Celebrants did not keep consistent records of ethnic and religious identities. They reported that there was generally a lack of ethnic and religious diversity among the deceased who they conduct funerals for, with the vast majority being white and their religious affiliations split between Christian and non-religious. The data on religious content suggests that Christian material was the most popular form of religious resource, with only seven of the 1000 services having content from other religious traditions.

### Religious content in services

The vast majority of the 1000 funeral services had some 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 the 1000 services led by independent celebrants had one or more of a reading, hymn or prayer, representing a very high proportion of services with some religious content given these services are generally considered to be non-religious. As can be seen from the data presented above, The Lord's Prayer was overwhelmingly the most popular aspect of religious content.

There was a lack of non-Christian religious content in the sample with 0.4% of services having readings from non-Christian religions (Buddhist and Islam) and 0.3% having prayers from other traditions (Jewish, Hindi and Apache).

Despite the prevalence of Christian religious content in the funerals analysed, this decreases by age of the deceased, with funerals for young people having lower levels of religious content. The incorporation of a hymn or The Lord's Prayer into a funeral decreases by approximately 10% between each of the age categories of 80+, 60-79 and 18-59 as shown by figures 3 and 4. There are not enough cases in the younger age groups to break this down further in the younger age categories. The Lord's Prayer was used in five out of six of the funerals for those under 18 but this is too low a sample to know if it is significant or an anomaly in the data. By comparison, however, a hymn was used in only one of the same six services.

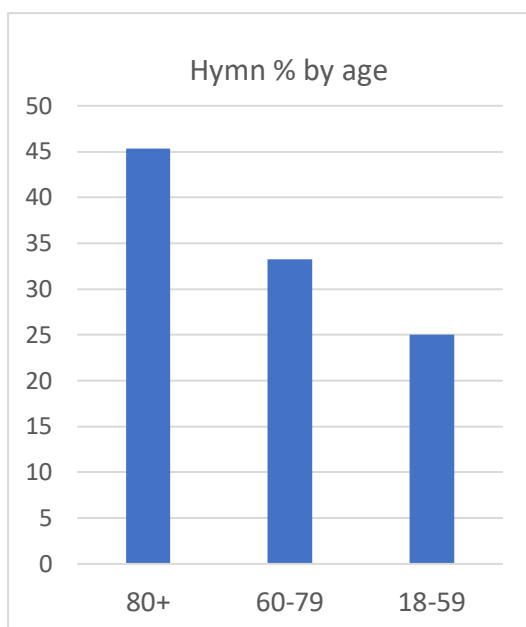


Figure 3 – hymns in funerals by age

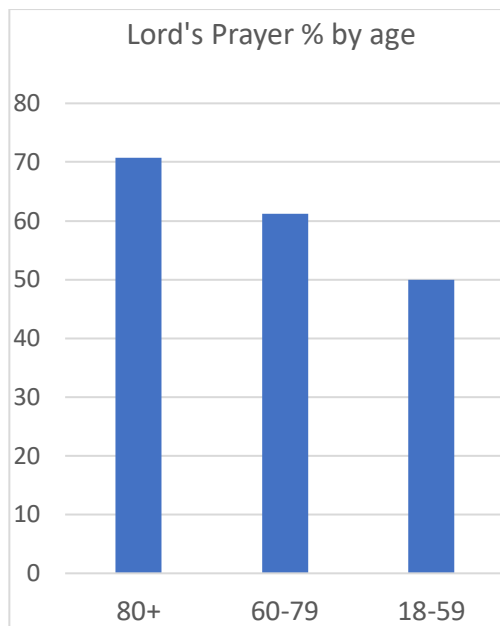


Figure 4 – The Lord's Prayer by age

We also considered whether the covid-19 pandemic has had an impact on the use of religious content in funerals led by independent celebrants:

- 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).

While singing was not allowed in funerals during the pandemic and this would have impacted on the collective ritual of singing (rather than simply listening to) a hymn, the use of hymns may have already been in decline. The interviews suggest that this decline may have been in place before the pandemic but has been accelerated by it. Celebrants, ministers and funeral directors referred to 'the death of the organist' with many crematoria no longer employing organists and the use of backing tracks with choirs on the sound systems being a more popular choice when hymns are used in services, as well as fewer people singing along when hymns are included.

#### Spiritual content in services

Beyond the formally religious content, we also explored the popular songs and poems that reference spirituality in some form. Many of the songs and poems were clearly chosen for funerals directly because of their references to themes such as angels or the afterlife suggesting that people want to believe that their loved ones are living on in some way. Whether this is a long-term or temporary belief during their time of grief is not clear. Examples of popular songs include 'Tears in Heaven' by Eric Clapton, 'Angels' by Robbie Williams, 'Stairway to Heaven' by Led Zeppelin and 'Turn, turn, turn' by The Byrds. Similarly, there are a range of popular poems that reference spirituality or the afterlife including, for example, 'Gone from my sight' by Henry Van Dyke, 'Do not stand at my grave and

weep' by Mary Elisabeth Frye, 'All is Well' by Henry Scott Holland, and 'The Shepherd' by William Blake.

These poems and songs were complex to analyse and differentiate as religious, non-religious and/or spiritual due to the range of explicitness and subtleties in the references. For example, among the poems, there were references to God in several but not necessarily a reference or link to a particular religion or belief system. Popular poems such as '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. Others make only brief reference to words such as 'pray' or 'peace'. For example, one of the most popular poems across services, 'She [or he] is gone', mentions the word 'pray' in passing ('you can close your eyes and pray that she will come back') but does not reference the afterlife; it focuses on being happy that the person has lived and for the memories of them. Other popular poems such as 'Footprints' are often used in religious contexts but are 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'. In total, 80% of the 1000 services had poems with religious or spiritual references whether explicit or subtle, passing or substantial.

We conducted an in-depth analysis of the lyrics in songs and musical items used in 250 of the 1000 services. Across these 250 services, there were 700 musical items. 489 of these were not religious hymns. Of these 489 pieces, 74 (15%) were instrumental pieces and therefore excluded from our analysis. Of the remaining 415 songs, the following themes relating to spirituality emerged:

- THE SKY AND RELATED OBJECTS (Stars, rainbows, planets) 28%
- JOURNEY or TRAVEL (Pilgrimage, symbolic journey to the afterlife) 17%
- ANGELS, FLIGHT, BIRDS (References to flying, wings) 14%
- PLACE BEYOND or AFTERLIFE (Heaven, Nirvana, Hell, inc. metaphors) 11%
- GOD or DEITY (Prophet, Saint, Satan, Devil, Higher Power, etc.) 10%
- ASCENSION (Upwards, to the sky - up to an afterlife such as heaven) 9%
- PRAYER, BLESSINGS, PRAISE or WORSHIP 7%
- ETERNITY (Forever, unchanging) 5%
- FAITH or BELIEF 4%
- THE SOUL or SPIRIT 3%
- FREEDOM or LIBERATION 3%

The percentages are based on how frequently the themes occurred across the songs, including in repeats, in order to demonstrate the popularity of particular themes. Other references that occurred in the songs that were not substantial enough to constitute themes included glory, religious holidays, divinity, sin, and Biblical references including the walls of Jericho, Goliath, and Adam and Eve. This analysis demonstrates the frequent references to religion and spirituality in popular songs chosen for funerals that would not typically be considered as religious.

Parodies of popular religious resources were also present in services. These are clearly based on religious prayers or verses but are not religious or spiritual in and of themselves. A popular example

of this is the Busdriver's Prayer which includes lines such as 'Our Father who art in Hendon', 'Forgive us our Westminster's' and 'Lead us not into Temple Station'. Such parodies, though not explicitly religious, draw on and re-appropriate popular rituals like The Lord's Prayer in secular form. In other cases, a religious hymn might be chosen for a secular reason – interviews with families, for example, mentioned 'Abide with me' being chosen in relation to its connection to English football.

### Interviews with independent celebrants

Independent celebrants were keenly aware of the rise over the last two decades of independent celebrants (alongside the decline in church-led funerals). One celebrant told us that 'when I began thirteen years ago, I was one of two celebrants in my county. I'm now one of 300' (Celebrant 13). Almost all the celebrants reflected that it was a difficult profession in which to forge a successful career, because of the huge increase in the number of independent celebrants and a lack of professional regulation, meaning anyone can decide to become a celebrant. They emphasised the need to appear reliable and available to funeral arrangers (and some funeral arrangers similarly reflected that independent celebrants were often their favoured choice because they were more likely than religious ministers to respond quickly to calls).

One prominent member of a leading Celebrant Association explained that there are many more training providers than ever, as overheads for training are low and it is easily accessible for many people. There is, however, no formal requirement to engage in any training to become an independent funeral celebrant, potentially contributing to a lack of standardised approaches that celebrants work to, including around how they engage with religion and people's spiritual needs when arranging funerals.

### No consensus about what makes a religious service

The celebrants expressed a range of views about what makes a service religious. Some celebrants suggested that they would class a service as 'religious' with the inclusion of The Lord's Prayer, a hymn or anything religious, and others that it would only be where there was a religious committal. While some celebrants reported they did feel comfortable to 'commit someone to God', not all felt this was in the scope of their role. One celebrant said 'I draw the line at committing someone to God. If that's what the family want, I tell them that I can't do that. That isn't my role' (Celebrant 3).

The personal religious perspective of the celebrant appeared to impact on their views as to what makes a service religious. Some celebrants were practising Christians while others were agnostic or non-religious. Celebrants from a Christian background emphasised that they could bring this into their role in supporting Christian families and/or those whose deceased relatives had faith: '...it's the hope you can communicate that death is not the end for those who have put their faith in the Lord' (Celebrant 4). This suggests that independent celebrants from Christian backgrounds were leading religious services and being called on (instead of religious ministers) by funeral arrangers to lead services for those with a faith.

Some of the non-religious celebrants felt their services should not be considered to be religious even where religious content was incorporated.

*Having something like The Lord's Prayer doesn't make it religious, it just gives it a religious bias. (Celebrant 3)*

*My services that include religious content aren't religious, because I'm not religious. It's the element of religious rites that makes a service religious... I don't invite people to join in with the Lord's Prayer and I don't believe in prayer. Therefore, it's not religious, it's just me reading words, as I would a poem. (Celebrant 12)*

Some of the celebrants did not view their incorporation of religious content as making a service religious in and of itself because they were either not personally religious or not ordained. This raises the question of when religious content such as The Lord's Prayer makes a service 'religious' – and whose definition matters, the officiant or those participating in the ceremony.

### No standard approach to guiding people around religious content

The celebrants held a range of religious perspectives (though religious leanings tended to be Christian). Some had strong links to churches, some had a strong sense of spirituality without religious beliefs or affiliations, and some had no interest in religion at all. One celebrant said 'I used to describe myself as an Anglo-Bapti-Methi-Costal, with Salvation Army leanings, as I've spent time with all of them. Now I believe none of it' (Celebrant 12).

While the celebrants reported that they were primarily guided by the wishes of families, they took a range of approaches as to how they guide people in relation to the inclusion of religious content. Some reported that they proactively ask if people would like religious content, some said they don't mention it unless the family do, and some actively dissuade people because they see their role as non-religious. Some celebrants, for example, indicated that they would ask the family if they wanted to include The Lord's Prayer, and if the family weren't sure, they would suggest reasons why they might like it such as it being 'traditional' or a source of 'comfort' to some of those attending. Another celebrant, however, said 'I actively discourage it. If people aren't sure, I tell them they don't have to have it and there are much better things to read'. The same celebrant went onto explain that if it is included, they read The Lord's Prayer 'like a poem or a reading' and they do not ask people to pray along with them as they 'don't believe in prayer' (Celebrant 12). Other celebrants reported that people sometimes approach them after the service and ask if they have church connections because of the meaningful way they engaged with the religious aspects of the service. As such, the interviews suggest that the celebrants' own personal perspectives on religion influenced how they would guide those they work with.

In line with the findings of the content analysis of funeral services, most of the celebrants did indicate that the majority of their funerals included some religious content, particularly The Lord's Prayer, and they understood that this was often included for reasons such as that older family members or the deceased would want it to be, that it makes the families feel like it has been a 'real'

or 'proper' funeral, or even that it was a way of families 'hedging their bets' about the existence of God and the afterlife. The comment around people 'hedging their bets' also emerged in the survey and interviews with funeral arrangers, suggesting that these stakeholders experience that people in their time of grief are often not sure what they believe, and may be more agnostic than entirely non-religious. The comments on the inclusion of religious content to make a 'proper' or 'real' funeral also emerged as a strong theme in the interviews with families who had arranged services for their loved ones.

The celebrants reflected on why they were matched to families by funeral arrangers according to requests for varying levels of religion in services. This included how they might be considered to offer a 'middle ground' (between a religious minister and Humanist or entirely non-religious celebrant). Some celebrants felt they were chosen because the arrangers considered they were able to handle requests for some religious content sensitively. This suggests there is some nuance to what is offered to families arranging funerals beyond the binaries of religious and non-religious. It also reflects that there are variations in what different independent celebrants offer and suggests they should not be viewed or understood as a homogenous group by families when it comes to choosing a funeral officiant.

Offering something more flexible than a church-led religious service.

Celebrants recognised the opportunity for flexibility that comes with their status as independent celebrants. One celebrant said 'I have three categories: religious, more or less a standard church service; semi-religious, some religious elements like a prayer or a hymn; and non-religious, no religion at all' (Celebrant 5). Such celebrants recognised their independent status allowed them to lead a service with a range of religious and non-religious content, sometimes even involving religious leaders in the service alongside them. One celebrant said 'I have led services where the Priest has come into to do the religious committal, and the Rabbi to say the Jewish prayer to the deceased' (Celebrant 8). This emphasises the role of independent celebrants in providing personalised and flexible services that draw on a fusion of religious, spiritual and non-religious content.

There was a tendency among the celebrants to distinguish their practice from that of church leaders and, at times, an indication that they felt a sense of competitiveness with them. Most of the celebrants said they had heard stories of religious ministers making mistakes, getting people's names wrong or making the service very impersonal. One celebrant recalled a family member they worked with saying that the celebrant had mentioned the name of the deceased's wife 'more times than the vicar did at her own funeral' (Celebrant 14).

Some celebrants felt that religious leaders were more flexible than they had been in the past and could balance varied amounts of religious and personalised content. They acknowledged this may be due to the need for religious ministers to adapt if they were to retain a stake in the industry.

*I think the Church is trying to make a comeback - some of the younger clergy are trying to make services more personal, although the older clergy I think will continue do to their ten minute service. (Celebrant 6)*

There was a range of views among independent celebrants (and funeral arrangers) about how flexible religious ministers were willing to be when leading services and a recognition that it varied between individual ministers.

For the celebrants, there was a strong sense in the interviews that they saw their role as celebrating someone's life rather than mourning their death. However, this didn't always reflect what families wanted and they sometimes had to adapt this focus. One celebrant explained 'One mother and father, who had lost their twenty-two-year-old son said they didn't want me to use the term "celebrate" at all; for them, the best they could do in their grief was to commemorate their son' (Celebrant 14). A sense that some people do not favour the term 'celebrant' and its connotations of celebration in relation to funerals for loved ones they are mourning, also emerged in interviews with those who had arranged funerals for their relatives. Celebrants generally reported being able to adapt to such situations but it does raise some issues with the term 'celebrant' itself and whether it reflects a broad enough representation of what people want from their funeral officiant.

#### A lack of understanding about the role of an independent celebrant?

Celebrants reported that there was often a lack of understanding about their role and what an independent celebrant is. They reported having been called many things when they visit a family, including 'Humanist, Humourist, Naturist, Naturalist, Celibate and Vicar!' (Celebrant 3). A lack of understanding among the public about what the role of an independent celebrant is and what they can offer has implications for how informed they are when making a choice or being guided towards a particular funeral officiant. This is also supported by the funeral arrangers' survey (where only 11% felt that people arranging funerals for their relatives fully understand the role of an independent celebrant).

One celebrant told of one visit to a woman, who took a call during their visit. She said to the caller 'I can't talk now, the vicar's here'. The celebrant then explained that they weren't a vicar, were not ordained and didn't wear a dog collar. The phone rang five minutes later, and again the woman said 'I can't talk now, the vicar's here' (Celebrant 14). However, given that the research suggests, as mentioned above, that some people do not like the term 'celebrant', such occasions of misdescription may, at least at times, reflect a lack of preference for the term rather than a misunderstanding of the role.

Celebrants felt that the level of care they offered was often more important than their role or status. One celebrant said 'For some families, they don't care what you're called or who you are. As long as you're professional and you look after them and care about their loved one and the service - that's all they really want' (Celebrant 8). This suggests that for some people the need for an ordained officiant linked to a church is becoming less important, even where they want religious content in the funeral service.

#### Implied inferiority



Several of the celebrants reported that they experienced an 'implied inferiority' when engaging with religious ministers. Some celebrants reported that religious ministers were unfriendly and dismissive towards them. One recalled having a door closed in their face by a religious minister. Another shared a situation in which they were 'asked to leave the vestry' at a crematorium by a religious minister, as the minister didn't consider it an 'appropriate place' for them to be (Celebrant 13). The same celebrant reported that after they led a funeral, a minister who had attended was 'visibly annoyed' with them because he knew the deceased but hadn't been asked to take the service, despite there being some religious content. In this case, the family weren't religious and had chosen to use an independent celebrant to lead the service. A few of the celebrants also reported that religious ministers were more likely to enter the chapel before a service is properly over, whereas other celebrants tended to wait for permission or for it to be clear.

The celebrants also felt that religious ministers were critical of celebrants for not providing sufficient pastoral support or aftercare - which some felt was not an accurate or fair criticism. They cited examples of where they had established ongoing relationships, in some cases leading several funerals for the same family over time. The level of pastoral care offered - both before, during and after the service - varied between celebrants. One Celebrant said 'I have a heart for after-service. Life after death is important' (Celebrant 4). Some celebrants said they actively contact the family after the service by sending a card or a nice message, along with a presentation copy of the service script or eulogy (something they felt a religious minister is less likely to produce). Some felt that the end of the service is the end of their role and therefore any proactive engagement with the family, though they suggested they would engage with a family that contacted them first.

### Changes since Covid- 19: the 'death of the organist' and rise of direct cremations

The celebrants recognised a decrease in hymn-singing, caused by the Covid-19 pandemic when singing was not allowed. However, they also referred to a trend that some called the 'death of the organist' that had been happening since before the pandemic but that they felt had been accelerated by it. This refers to a decrease in crematoria having on-site organists and the increase in use of recorded backing tracks with the music and choral accompaniment played via the sound system when hymns are used in funerals.

*The death of the organist is very sad... I've not had an organist play for me for over a year now. It's fine to some extent having a background choir, but a live organist makes it more real. They can play louder to suit etcetera. You can only do so much with a recording.*  
(Celebrant 3)

Alongside the increase of backing tracks replacing the organists, celebrants reported that there was a decline in people singing along and an increase in them listening to the track instead, as they would with other pieces of music. This potentially represents a more passive act than the collective ritual of singing together and may reflect that fewer people, particularly from the younger generations, know the lyrics to hymns when they are played.

The main change to funerals reported since Covid-19 by the celebrants was a massive shift towards greater use of technology, which was not viewed as pessimistically in all its forms. Celebrants

reported an increased reliance on technology in funerals, ranging from their early meetings with families, where more family members could attend from a distance via video call, to the use of slideshows and webcasting in services. Such visits and services had become more flexible and hybrid since the pandemic period. More opportunity to display photos and images on screens in the funeral services were also seen as bringing more potential for flexibility and personalisation of funeral content. Celebrants also reported that many crematoria had increased time-slots for funerals to allow time for technology to be set up where required. One celebrant explained 'The use of virtual meetings has increased, as has the livestream [webcast] and slideshows. Ceremony lengths have also increased' (Celebrant 1). This suggests that changes to funerals since Covid-19 include an increased technological literacy in the funeral industry and an increase in potential for flexibility and personalisation through increased use of technology. One celebrant reflected that there were 'more and more slideshows - more frills, if you like. I think only 1 in 10 services will be a simple service, with no orders of service, webcast or slideshow' (Celebrant 3). The increase in these longer and more personalised, technology-enhanced services, contrasts with the increase in direct cremations which were also observed to have also risen since the pandemic.

The celebrants recognised the increased cost of more technology and longer time-slots in crematoria. They suggested the rise in direct cremations was 'in part due to the rising cost of the funeral service' (Celebrant 14). They were critical about direct cremations being advertised hard to older people, with companies seeking to persuade people that they can have a cheap, unattended cremation rather than their families paying for a costly funeral.

*The barrage of daytime adverts is pressuring older people to choose these low-cost options, which they often do without consulting their families. I recently had one family who were fuming because their Mum had done that, and they worked hard to reverse the situation as they wanted to have a proper funeral - but that was tricky for them to do. (Celebrant 14)*

## Discrimination

As discussed earlier, there is a lack of religious and racial diversity in our interview samples overall – as well as a predominance of Christian backgrounds among the celebrants and a heavy leaning towards Christian content in services they lead. This potentially suggests a lack of diversity in the mainstream funeral industry.

The two black celebrants who were interviewed shared some experiences of discrimination. One said that, in their many years of working, they had only had one example of direct discrimination. After meeting with a family and thinking she had got on well with them, 'the family called the funeral director and asked for a different celebrant' (Celebrant 4). Although they had a strong suspicion that this was because the family were uncomfortable with them being a black celebrant, she recognised that this couldn't be proven to be the reason and this had made it difficult to challenge. Another celebrant said they had experienced discrimination on a daily basis throughout their career. They recalled one particular example, whilst working in a large town, of being the favoured celebrant with a certain company of funeral directors, because of the consistently positive feedback for their

services. When the funeral arranger who used to book them left their job, the company stopped using her as a celebrant without explanation. Since moving to a much more rural (and less diverse) area a few years ago, the celebrant explained they have hardly had any services at all. This suggests that the matching process of officiants to families overseen by funeral arrangers may, at times, reinforce a lack of diversity among celebrants.

## Interviews with funeral arrangers

Funeral arrangers described the biggest change they had observed to their industry over the last thirty years was the increase in choice available to people when arranging funerals for their relatives. They viewed technology as a key factor in people being more aware of choice and flexibility in funerals with one arranger explaining 'Over the last 15-25 years, the internet has seen the de-mystification of our industry' (Arranger 1). Several other arrangers also commented that the internet meant people were more informed when first arriving at the Funeral Directors. This contrasts, however, with the view of some families that they did not know what the available options were. Arrangers pointed to 'public' or high-profile funerals as contributing to their sense of there being a *de-mystification*. Some arrangers mentioned how the funeral of Princess Diana at the turn of the century has led to an increase in personalization and choice in funerals. For example, one arranger called this 'The Diana effect; Princess Diana's funeral in 1997 showed people that, even a traditional service could have modern music, photos and high-production values' (Arranger 7).

Arrangers also felt the impact of this increased range of choice on their role in how time-consuming it was to prepare all the elements of the funeral. One arranger said 'More choice is available to clients and that's made everything much more time-consuming to prepare' (Arranger 6). They also had limited time to discuss all the options with families in their meetings with them to make their initial decisions. Arrangers outlined that choices extend to venues for the service and reception, coffins and cars - as well as the type of service and officiant the family want.

Recognising that the officiant would often spend more time with the family than they would and be the main person supporting the family with their choices of funeral content, arrangers placed a lot of emphasis on choosing a reliable officiant that they could trust to do a good job.

*I am entrusted with all aspects of the service, and the officiant, during the service, becomes the face of the company. I've sub-contracted - and entrusted - that responsibly to the officiant, but I am still ultimately responsible. So, they have to be good!* (Arranger 3)

This was reflected in several of the interviews with arrangers. Despite this, it appears that the choice of officiant presented to families may be less varied than that of other aspects (such as the coffin, where a whole catalogue is often presented). The main categories of service presented to families by funeral arrangers tend to be religious or non-religious and the main categories of officiant a religious minister (usually Christian), an independent celebrant, or occasionally a Humanist.

## Religious vs. non-religious services and choice of officiant

Two of the key choices that arrangers present to families is what 'type' of service and officiant they require for their loved one. Our interviews with arrangers suggest that the most common questions they ask to inform these choices are whether the family would like a religious or non-religious service, a religious minister or non-ordained celebrant, a male or female officiant, and/or whether they already know someone who they would like to lead the service.

Several arrangers said that if a non-religious service is requested, and the family doesn't specifically request a Humanist officiant, then they suggest an independent celebrant. Several arrangers had 'go-to' celebrants that they knew would provide a good service, and stay in regular contact with both the family and busy arranger, meaning they could trust the work was being done and wouldn't have to chase up the celebrant. Arrangers often had particular celebrants that they viewed as being flexible and able to accommodate a range of religious and non-religious elements. One arranger, for example, said 'I use one particular celebrant because, even if it's defined as a non-religious service, that person deals with the religious elements perfectly, as they are also a believer' (Arranger 3). The arrangers broadly recognised that even where people made an initial choice for a non-religious service, they were likely to incorporate some religious content.

This may be why independent celebrants were generally favoured (rather than Humanists) for non-religious services as they were seen to offer this flexibility. Some arrangers indicated that, at times, a celebrant was 'matched' with a family where they had discovered a common interest between the family and the celebrant, or a location in common. This could include anything that was flagged up by the family that the arranger knew a celebrant shared, including what football team they support.

While arrangers did appear to generally favour independent celebrants who were often quicker to respond to phone calls and requests for services, there were some who had particular connections to religious ministers. This could reflect the arranger's religious perspective, the reputation of the minister as a funeral leader, and/or the activity of the local church in the area. One arranger spoke of the work of a prominent vicar who had developed a strong reputation in their area for leading funerals. She said that this minister's services incorporated 'three words... based on Corinthians... faith, hope, love... People are aware of her faith, the service is full of love, and people come out with hope' (Arranger 7). Arrangers in smaller towns and communities tended to be more likely to report that the local church still had a significant stake in leading funerals. One arranger explained that in their area, the churches had retained a 'friendly relationship' with local families (Arranger 4). Another explained that 'a lot of people around here attend church, and the churches have a lot of events on' (Arranger 8).

Overall, it appeared that the perceived quality of service and reliability of the celebrant was most crucial to who arrangers favoured and they often had particular celebrants that they would always go to first. One arranger worked for a funeral home that had moved to providing everything in house, employing their own celebrants, and even leasing their own venues. This arranger was keen to emphasise 'We're not trying to compete with the local church, we're competing with the crematorium chapel' (Arranger 9). This is currently rare but could become a growing trend.

Personalised services and levels of pastoral care

Arrangers felt that the best officiants were those that make sure the service is a personalised experience for the family to mourn or celebrate their loved one in the way that they wish to. They largely felt the flexibility of an independent celebrant (over a religious minister) allowed for this because they are not tied to liturgies or other religious and institutional expectations. One arranger said 'These services tend to be much more person-centred, and not reliant on church-based liturgy' (Arranger 6). Arrangers acknowledged there were exceptions to this and were aware that so-called 'cut and paste celebrants' often have a bad name in professional circles. Some arrangers recognised that celebrants were held to a different standard of personalisation than religious ministers. One Arranger made the observation that 'Why is it not appropriate for a celebrant to "cut and paste", when a vicar uses the same liturgy for each service?' (Arranger 4).

Arrangers were aware of the suggestion, also raised by celebrants, that independent celebrants might not be perceived to offer the same level of pastoral care as religious ministers. This was disputed by several arrangers who suggested that some celebrants spend more time with families than some ministers. One arranger questioned 'Does an ordained minister have more pastoral skills than a celebrant just by virtue of the fact that that they're ordained?' suggesting that this was not a logical connection to make (Arranger 2). The same arranger went on to say:

*I believe that celebrants more stay in touch with families and touch base with them, offer them a bit more. Lots of our celebrants will put together nice packs - like a keepsake of the service... It's not my experience that religious ministers are better at pastoral care. It's awful to say, but I think a vicar's job is just a job now. I don't think it used to be, but they've just got so much going on now... they have like three or four churches or parishes to look after. I don't think they can manage it really and the church is run like a business these days. (Arranger 2)*

One arranger took a more cynical view and said 'Remember, pastoral care for a minister doing a funeral is sometimes about trying to get someone to go to church' (Arranger 4). However, criticism of the pastoral care provided by churches was not unanimous. One arranger explained that church structures can be 'scary' but they can also be important for ongoing pastoral care (Arranger 6). Another arranger suggested that perceptions of the inferior care that might be offered by non-religious officiants did impact on some people's choices between a religious or a non-religious service (Arranger 7).

### Most funerals are religious to some extent

Whilst most of the arrangers asked families whether they wanted a religious or non-religious service in the first instance, they recognised that most services were more nuanced than this. They described that beyond this question, they often went onto discuss religious content that was required despite most people having initially opted for non-religious. This then also impacted on what officiant was seen as most suitable. One arranger said that they explain to families the choices they have with a 'piece of string' analogy, and then finds an officiant to suit their answer: 'At one end of the string you have a vicar, on the other end a Humanist, and depending on where they choose in the middle, I know who to suggest' (Arranger 9). There was broad consensus among arrangers that most services have some religious content and fall into the middle of the spectrum described here. Another arranger said that they ask the families they engage with 'How much God do you want in

your service?’ (Arranger 8). These perspectives suggest that funeral arrangers recognise the nuances of what people want in terms of religious content despite the binaries of funerals being initially classified as religious or non-religious.

As with the celebrants, there was a range of views among arrangers as to what actually constitutes a religious service. Some felt this was only services led by ordained ministers or with a religious committal of the deceased to God, while others felt that having The Lord’s Prayer included made the service religious. One arranger recognised there was a view among some arrangers that ‘the committal is the pivotal bit, that’s the bit that moves it’ into becoming a religious service (Arranger 8). Another observed that religious iconography is present in almost all services because the cross in the crematorium chapel is usually kept in place unless there is a specific request to take it down which rarely occurs (Arranger 3).

There was a broad experience among the funeral arrangers of most services including The Lord’s Prayer, even where the service was otherwise entirely non-religious. Several arrangers felt that this reflected people ‘hedging their bets’ as mentioned earlier, or a sense that many people experience some agnostic leaning towards belief in God in relation to death. One arranger recalled someone who didn’t go to church had said before they passed away ‘it’s okay, God will look after me now’ (Arranger 1). The same arranger described the inclusion of The Lord’s Prayer or other religious content in otherwise non-religious services as ‘The last chance saloon for naughty people’ (Arranger 1). The interviews with families suggest that the reasons for including religious content may be somewhat more complex and reflect a range of people’s preferences within the family of the deceased. However, what is clear is that most funerals incorporate some religious content and this nuance is not reflected in them being classified as religious or non-religious. One arranger explained that, across his thirty-year career, even before the decline in church-led funerals and rise of independent celebrants, that funerals services had always fallen into ‘degrees of religious’ (Arranger 9).

#### Church-led funerals in decline, religion in services not so

The analysis of funeral services and interviews with celebrants, arrangers and families demonstrate that the use of religious content in funerals is persisting even as church-led funerals continue to decline. The arrangers shared some reasons for the decline in funerals led by religious ministers attached to churches. Some arrangers suggested that people felt that churches and their institutional structures created added complications or additional agendas into the funeral. One arranger recalled a family saying to them ‘Dad wasn’t really religious, and we don’t go to church so we don’t want any fuss’. The arranger reflected that ‘It’s almost like they think the church is turning up with more baggage’ (Arranger 3). This suggests that some people are actively choosing not to have their funerals led by someone attached to an institution or church.

Another potential reason for the decline in church-led funerals that emerges from the interviews with arrangers is that the arrangers themselves may be actively choosing officiants who are not attached to churches. Several of them commented on how they often engaged independent celebrants who are ‘believers’ or ‘retired clergy’ when arranging religious services. One arranger illustrated this by saying ‘Retired clergy can be a safe bet with some families, if they think it’s step too

far to have the current minister or have issues with the minister in the parish they live in' (Arranger 3). Another arranger stated 'quite a lot of clergy don't have churches and can do some of that light religious stuff as well' (Arranger 8). While this use of non-institutional officiants clearly reflects a lack of connection to churches by the families arranging funerals for their relatives, it also demonstrates the role of the arranger in determining who leads funerals.

### The influence of the funeral arranger

The discussion of the interview themes above suggests that arrangers may have favoured officiants or celebrants that are both reliable and can be flexible according to what is required along a spectrum of religious and non-religious content.

As with the celebrants, the arrangers' own religious perspectives may impact on how they guide families. One arranger shared that she was 'sad that people don't think prayers are important any more'. The same arranger stated 'I believe a lot of people who think they don't believe or have any faith, actually do' as well as saying that they would often remind a family that the deceased and older family members 'would likely have attended school assembly, religious education classes and possibly Sunday school, and that a small religious element would reflect that and be some comfort to others attending' (Arranger 6).

Some arrangers also mentioned that an independent celebrant is often easier to deal with than a religious minister, because it is their livelihood, and is the main thing they're focussed on. There was a general agreement among arrangers that the administration of an independent celebrant was better than many ministers.

*In many ways I prefer to work with a good celebrant. Church ministers have a lot to deal with in their churches etc, but for celebrants, this is their livelihood. They're usually much better on the administrative side of things, which helps me, especially when I'm busy. They have to be because this is their livelihood, and if they weren't on it, they'd not get the work. (Arranger 4)*

The interviews with arrangers suggest that they may, at least to some extent, be contributing to the decline in church-led funerals because they choose to use independent celebrants for their reliability and flexibility and, in particular, their ability to cater to a range of levels of religious content in funeral services. However, this also presents a challenge to religious ministers to respond to the perception that they are less flexible and reliable if they want to retain a stake in supporting people with the planning and delivery of everyday funerals.

### Changes since Covid-19: improved technology and direct cremations

Similar to the celebrants, arrangers noted significant advances in the use of technology in the funeral industry since the Covid-19 pandemic. They recognised that this had improved the customer experience, providing greater options for creative use of technology in the personalised elements of services. One arranger, for example, said 'we're getting more and more people wanting to turn the



service into some sort of production. And crematoria technology has helped with that, with webcasts and visual tributes and the advent of the music system at the crematorium' (Arranger 3).

Arrangers also commented on the rise of direct cremations and some were sceptical about this.

*Since Covid, the media pressure for direct cremations isn't helping... If the direct cremation people have their way, people will be taken off like their cat and brought back in a small urn and then they will do some sort of party. I'm not sure that will suit everyone, to say the least... Daytime television is being bombarded with these direct cremations. I think the 'man, van, dog, round the back, sort yourself out', is not an appropriate way to honour a life, despite the individual thinking that they don't want to cause any fuss... It's about taking it back and saying to people 'what and who is a funeral for?' And I think that's the bit that celebrants and clergy need to be involved in. I think that would make a big difference because they need to be earlier in the conversation with people. (Arranger 9)*

However, unlike celebrants and religious ministers, some arrangers were less critical of direct cremations, having observed that they provided more flexibility to families arranging the funeral event and do not necessarily mean a smaller or simpler occasion.

*We have found more families opting for a direct cremation, with a funeral service in a hall or a pub, or somewhere special to a family... We have done a few in what is traditionally a wedding venue, which are empty during the week, so have been able to provide a full day celebration, with their loved one in the coffin. We then take the deceased to the crematorium for an unattended cremation whilst the family carry on the celebration. (Arranger 5)*

This suggests that direct cremations may increase the range of choice, particularly for non-religious funerals, about where and how a funeral event is enacted, rather than simply meaning no event at all. However, the concerns raised by celebrants, arrangers and religious ministers about companies engaging in aggressive marketing of direct cremations to older people has some clear ethical implications.

## Interviews with families<sup>2</sup>

The interviews with people who have arranged funerals for their loved ones revealed further how religious content is incorporated into everyday funerals and why. Not all were comfortable with the term 'celebrant' and the idea that a funeral is a celebration of life. However, they appreciated the flexibility and choice offered by independent celebrants. Families largely discussed funerals that incorporated a balance of religious, spiritual and non-religious content – very few had experience of arranging funerals that were entirely religious or non-religious. The interviews revealed that the incorporation of religious content persists in everyday funerals, triangulating our content analysis of 1000 funeral services. There was a sense that including religious content was an obligation to make a 'proper' funeral. For others, it supported the facilitation of collective emotion or comfort. Reasons for including religious content did not always reflect an initial explicit desire on the part of the lead family member to have a religious funeral. They revealed that they have to balance honouring the

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<sup>2</sup> While we recognise that not all who arrange funerals are family members preparing services for loved ones, it is rare that they are not, and they were in the case of our interview sample. Celebrants and arrangers preferred to use the term 'families' than 'clients' so we have adopted the same terminology.



wishes of the deceased and of other (particularly older) family members - as well as often seeking guidance from the arranger or celebrant on what to include, revealing further the influence that funeral professionals have.

### Uncertainty over the term 'celebrant'

The families suggested there was some confusion over the term 'celebrant' and, in some cases, a dissociation with the meaning of the word. As with the interviews with celebrants, it emerged in interviews with families that they did not necessarily like the term 'celebrant' nor did they necessarily see the funeral service as a celebration.

*I think people don't know the word 'celebrant' because when people were talking about this celebrant, they were like, 'Oh, you know the guy that did it, what's it called?' So I don't think people always know the word 'celebrant,' and I'm not sure if 'celebrant' is the best word either. When you think about celebrant, you think about celebration, and I think it is a celebration of someone's life, but that's not the first thing you think about with a funeral...I just think people do know that there are other options than having a priest, but I don't know if they'd know to ask, 'I want a celebrant', but they wouldn't know the word. So, I think there's some work to do around language. (Family member 9)*

The same family member said 'The title "celebrant" is something of an anachronism - something that's out of its time. It's also a word that seems out of step with what it is. Is it like a misnomer? Like it's got the wrong word for what it does' (Family member 9). These reflections suggest that the uncertainty over the term 'celebrant' does not always reflect a lack of understanding about the role, as was suggested in the arrangers' survey and interviews with celebrants, but may actually reflect a sense that the term 'celebrant' and 'celebration' are not appropriate representations of the kind of funeral some people want.

There was certainly not consensus on this across family interviews and it was revealed to be a complex issue. For example, the family member quoted above as questioning the use of the term 'celebration', had arranged multiple funerals for loved ones. Despite their reflections above, they said that one of the funerals 'was warm and funny and kind. You know, it's weird saying "funny" when you talk about a funeral, but you do need a little bit of warmth and humour. It should be a celebration of their life' (Family member 9). This suggests that the term 'celebrant' may be appropriate in some cases but not in others – and may not reflect the range of services that independent celebrants lead. A more broadly representative term might be needed for people to feel confident referring to these officiants in a consistent way. These complexities around what people are looking for also emphasise the need for a flexible and adaptable approach from celebrants - where not all are looking for a traditional religious service nor do they fully embrace the idea of a 'celebration of life'. This demonstrates, again, the fusion of traditional and personalised content, and middle-ground between the binarized categories that funerals are often placed into, that most people are looking for.

## Choice and flexibility in using religious and personalised content

Families largely reflected on how they had sought a fusion of religious and personalised content for the funerals they planned for their relatives. Most of them had initially opted for a non-religious funeral either knowing, or later deciding, that they wanted to incorporate some religious content. They reflected on how independent celebrants had the flexibility to support and guide them in this.

*It was hard to start with as we were all in grief and probably not making any sense when we went into the Funeral Directors. And when she asked us if we wanted a religious or non-religious service, we had very different views on that. We probably weren't very clear at the time. So, they told us that [the celebrant] could do something in between and make a service from what we wanted. So, we went for that. We were also asked if we wanted a man or a woman... they said [the celebrant] would organise it and could do a mixture of religious and non-religious, so that's why we went for [the celebrant] and not a vicar. We didn't want it to be all about God. (Family member 5)*

*We didn't have a religious service for him, and we have a good friend who is a celebrant, who is non-religious or religious. So, you could have either way, and in that service, it was really good because we had a bit of a mixture. So, the openness of the celebrant in order to say, you know, 'You can have a prayer if you want, or you can have a reading. You can have whatever you want'. The openness of it made it a lot less rigid in organising it. (Family member 9)*

These participants reflected on wanting a balance between religious ritual and personalised content in the funerals they planned for their loved ones and the role of the celebrant was seen as significant in facilitating this balance between ritual and personalisation. These examples suggest that independent celebrants were seen by both funeral arrangers and families as offering more flexibility between religious and non-religious, ritual and personalisation than religious ministers, which also emerged in the interviews with arrangers. The quotations above also suggest that funeral arrangers go some way to presenting the nuance of what a funeral can look like (as also reflected interviews with arrangers) but that they do tend to start from the binarized categories of religious and non-religious. The first quotation refers to the initial questions asked by arrangers of 'religious or non-religious' and 'man or woman' which suggests that there could potentially be more choice presented in terms of what different independent celebrants offer and the opportunity for families to view a range of profiles in choosing their officiant.

While the desire for choice was a clear theme across the family interviews with them often wanting to retain autonomy and control of the funeral arrangement process, it is also clear that this was often combined with a need for guidance from officiants (and other funeral professionals). This was somewhat dependent on how the families were experiencing their grief and level of shock as well as being due to an uncertainty around funeral arrangement processes and what can or cannot be done in relation to the service. This particularly emerged (as seen in the examples above) in relation to not knowing what could be included in terms of religious content in a broadly 'non-religious' service.

Some of the family members had also had experience of funerals led by religious ministers. Others explained why they had opted for an independent celebrant over a religious minister, who tended to

be perceived as less flexible. One family member who was also a funeral arranger by profession reflected on their experience of working with church leaders.

*Sometimes the church is cooperative, sometimes they're not...I've had priests say to me, 'Well, if the family don't like it, they'll have to go elsewhere,' and that's from the family of one of their parishioners. So, it's very much formal when you have it done religiously, whereas I think a lot of people now like a celebration, they prefer it as a celebration rather than talking more about that religion. (Family member 4)*

Another family member explained how they had been guided away from using a religious minister by the funeral arranger: 'we asked about this in the funeral directors, and they said that [an independent celebrant] could do anything, but a vicar might be a bit less personal. So, we were happy to go with their recommendation' (Family member 8).

There were some examples, however, of where church ministers had been flexible in accommodating a balance of religious and personalised content. One family member who was a Buddhist and had led the funeral for his mother, who had been a Christian and church member, reflected on how the church accommodated them. The church leader had allowed for the family member to be the celebrant leading the service, accommodating a fusion of Christian, Buddhist and other content in the service.

*My Mum hadn't been to the church in the last few years because of her health, and also chanted [a Buddhist ritual] a lot in her last two or three years. So, she was more than happy for us to do what we thought was right. And when we spoke to the minister, he was really happy, he said, 'I'll support you'. You know, in a way ours was a, sort of, Buddhist-themed ceremony inside the church. (Family member 2)*

Some family members reflected on how their choices for what they wanted in the funerals they were planning were guided by a sense that the funeral should be an emotional event and, particularly, a time for collective emotion or grief to be expressed. For example, when one family member was asked what they had been looking for in the service, they responded 'I would say emotional, we wanted it emotional. Because I am a bit of a firm believer that if you go to a funeral and you haven't got the tears and things like that then that person's life meant nothing...the emotional side, obviously, the respectful side' (Family member 4). For this family member, the focus was on collective mourning rather than 'celebration of life' despite it being a non-religious service led by an independent celebrant. Another family member (who had led the 'Buddhist-themed ceremony inside the church') reflected on how the incorporation of religious elements had supported the expression of collective joy in what was, overall, a 'celebration of life' service.

*I mean, in a way, the faith aspect became quite a strong part [of the funeral service] because I related a lot of my Mum's life to her [Christian] faith, because it enabled her to have incredible strength. And then, yes, ending with the story of her chanting so it encapsulated both, and she did love chanting, she'd prepare for Church with chanting and we call it Daimoku...she, with me, helped encourage four of my family members to also practice this Buddhism...and then even her carer...my Mum was very wanting to share, encouraged people to practice this Buddhism...so the actual ceremony really, I think, for everybody was joyful, everybody came out saying how joyful it was and that was our goal, that everybody would be*

*smiling and celebrating my Mum's life and that there wouldn't be a sad face in the room. And I don't think there was. (Family member 2)*

These examples reveal the complexities of classifying non-religious or secular services as 'celebrations of life' and religious services as more sombre occasions. While collective emotion was a priority in both examples, whether this was sadness or joy varied between the examples. The examples suggest there is not consensus on whether collective emotion in funerals should focus on celebration or mourning, nor is this clearly divided by whether a service is more or less religious in nature. It is clear from the second example that the incorporation of religious content supported the emotional synchrony and collective joy as part of the 'celebration of life'. This suggests that the expression of collective emotion in funerals is supported by flexibility and personalisation as well as by elements of religious ritual.

In a small number of cases, the range of what can be offered, and the overall control of the service that is held by the officiant, allowed for things to be incorporated into the service that were not wanted. This particularly occurred where families reported that they didn't feel the officiant (whether minister or celebrant) had fully listened to them. One family member explained how the increased use of technology was used in an inappropriate way for her father's funeral by an independent celebrant.

*She also said to us 'you could have some kind of cinematic showing of pictures while you have some music'. That wasn't him at all...at another point, I had said how he liked cats...he loved cats if they came near him...when we got to the crematorium and they were pushing the coffin in, I noticed that on this screen there was a little picture of a kitten with my Dad's name underneath it. She hadn't asked me; she'd just done that which I thought was really odd. (Family member 1)*

This has implications for how celebrants are trained to use the range of flexible and personalised options that can be incorporated into services in a way that ensures they balance being guided by the family and actively listening to them, while offering guidance where it is requested.

### Influence of the funeral arranger and celebrant

Some of the examples in the previous section indicate that families looked to the funeral arranger or celebrant to guide them in choices around the form of funeral and officiant they should have, as well as the forms of content they could draw on in the service. Some of the families indicated that arrangers and celebrants had a substantial influence on their choices.

There were some cases where families shared that they wanted to be explicitly directed. One family member was asked in interview whether they had wanted a religious service and responded 'Not really, but we didn't really know. We just needed someone to help us figure it out because we'd not done this before and it was such a shock' (Family member 5). Other families also reflected on needing and receiving varying levels of guidance or direction.

*I think in my Dad's one, it's interesting when you talk about that one because we did know the minister, but I don't remember having any input into the service, really. Like, he just told*

*me what we were having, and that was alright. It was alright. It didn't feel pressurised, no, and if I'd have said, 'I don't want that', He would have said, 'That's fine', but I think we were all a bit like - it was a really bad time and he kind of took charge which I appreciated at the time... In terms of the recent experiences with the celebrant, I think it was like, 'You can have this or you can have this', or, 'I'm suggesting this'. It was a helpful amount of suggestion and sometimes - especially my [family members] found it really difficult and they couldn't decide anything. So, it was really helpful to have things to choose from rather than just going, 'blank page, what do you want?' It was helpful to have that, without the pressure of it. (Family member 9)*

This example highlights that people planning funerals for their loved ones may not always be aware of the range of options that they can draw on in relation to content, as well as that they may feel overwhelmed by too much choice. This suggests that funeral professionals need to support people to understand the range of choice available, beyond the binaries of religious and non-religious, whilst also carefully guiding them through these options with suggestions that respond to their religious or spiritual needs.

There were occasions where families felt that the guidance or direction they received was not necessarily ideal. One family member explained why the funeral arranger had chosen to allocate a particular celebrant who she later felt was potentially not the right person to have been matched with.

*They [the funeral arranger] said 'oh, we've got somebody in mind'. And because my Dad was a Shakespeare scholar and stuff, we'd said we'd like somebody who is, I don't know, someone who appreciates Shakespeare and literature and that sort of stuff. So, they said 'Oh we've got just the person who used to be a headteacher', or something. (Family member 1)*

This family member did not feel the celebrant had listened well to the family or reflected what her father would have wanted. An opportunity to see celebrant profiles, and understand the range of who is available and what their particular specialisms are, would better support informed choice when it comes to choosing an officiant.

#### A persistence of religious content in funerals – the 'rite' thing to do?

Overall, as with the other elements of our research, the interviews with families reinforce that there is a persistence of religion in everyday funerals, alongside personalised content. One key reason for the persistence of incorporating religious ritual appeared to be because families viewed it as making a 'proper' funeral. They often spoke about opting for religious content because of a sense of it being the 'right thing to do' as in the examples below.

*I don't know the best way to describe it but it was kind of, I don't know, like the right thing to do. (Family member 4)*

*I had to do what Mum wanted really, and [my sister] was also keen. Mum really liked that hymn, All Things Bright and Beautiful, from Sunday school and she wanted The Lord's Prayer because she said that it wouldn't be right if it wasn't included. (Family member 5)*

*We chose Psalm 23 because Mum really wanted that, and everyone has The Lord's Prayer, so that seemed right and Mum liked that. She felt it wouldn't be right without it. (Family member 7)*

In this sense, the use of religious content was presented as a rite or obligation rather than necessarily a choice, often particularly for the older generations of families.

However, for some, the incorporation of hymns and prayers was also seen as bringing comfort.

*What we actually done was we all sat down and had a discussion on what we would like. So, although the family is not religious but it still, I suppose, to some extent, it's a little bit of comfort there having some of the hymns and The Lord's Prayer and things like that, I think you get a little bit of comfort from it. (Family member 4)*

This suggests that the use of such resources may bring a sense of emotional synchrony to funerals if 'bringing comfort' is understood as relating to emotion. This may link back to the importance of funerals, for some families, in facilitating collective emotion, as suggested earlier. In this case, the role of religious ritual and the collective act of saying a prayer or singing a hymn may contribute to feeling a sense of collective comfort or emotion.

The sense of comfort, however, might also relate to feeling that the deceased is being committed to God in some way. Some families did suggest that they included religious content for this reason. The same family member as quoted above, although they described themselves as 'not religious', also explained that their incorporation of some religious content in an otherwise non-religious funeral related to 'I suppose, in a way, the hope that she will go on, we're putting her in the hands of God, sort of thing' (Family member 4). This may link to the idea of people 'hedging their bets', as suggested by some celebrants and arrangers in the research. Further to that, it indicates that some otherwise non-religious family members do feel some sense of religious belief (albeit potentially quite agnostic and/or temporary) when they are grieving – particularly, that they do want to believe their loved one is living on in some way. This emphasises, again, the need for funeral professionals to be well equipped to work with people's spiritual needs regardless of whether they initially request a non-religious funeral.

Defining the everyday funeral as a non-religious service with religious elements?

Families did not necessarily view funerals with some religious content as *religious funerals*. Most described having opted for a non-religious funeral though they incorporated some religious elements in the final service. When asked whether including religious content in a funeral made it a religious service, one family member responded as follows:

*No, I think it's a lot deeper than that. I think, really, if you want it religious you need to fully understand it...I mean, you might have hymns and The Lord's Prayer, for example, whereas I think when you go with, into the Church, you do have different readings from the Bible and things like that. So, there's a lot of coming away from [a focus on] the person that's passed away and going over to the religious side. (Family member 4)*

This family member did not consider the service they had planned as religious because it was not in a church and the focus was more on their deceased relative than on religion. They described the funeral as 'I would say non-religious, but then I suppose a little bit of a nod to religion, which suited us perfectly'. Family members may, in some cases, ultimately define services with religious elements as non-religious because they are presented with the binaries of religious and non-religious in the first place, rather than a spectrum.

However, for some, there was potentially the conscious desire to distinguish what they organised as a personalised service with an overall focus on the person who had died from a church-led service focused on God. There was a shared sense among some interviewees that a heavily religious service would distract from the deceased and their life and be more impersonal than a service defined as generally 'non-religious'. Others reflected similar sentiments to the family member quoted above that there would be less focus on the deceased and more on religion, even where the deceased was perceived as religious. For example, such comments included 'We didn't want it to be all about God' (Family member 5) and 'Mum believed in God, so it was a little more Godly, but not at the expense of talking about her' (Family member 6). Again, this appears to reflect a distancing from institutional religion but not necessarily a complete disconnection from some religious beliefs at times of grieving a loved one. Despite generally being described as non-religious, these everyday funerals appeared to fall into the middle ground of a spectrum and not neatly into the binaries of religious and non-religious.

### Honouring the wishes of others

The reasons for including religious content in funerals often reflected the family member arranging the funeral's desire to manage the wishes of others, rather than simply reflecting their own preference as the person (or persons) arranging the funeral. Perceptions of what the deceased would want were obviously a key consideration in this regard. One family member reflected on how this played out differently for their mother's and father's funerals, with their father having passed away a short while before their mother did.

*Mum believed in God, so it was a little more Godly, but not at the expense of talking about her. Dad's was a bit less Godly, and some of that was for Mum anyway. But both services were perfect for each of them...both were a good balance of stuff. We got to talk about both Dad and Mum, and I think that the religious stuff was just right for both of them. (Family member 6)*

This reflects how the perceptions of what the deceased would want were managed but also touches on how the needs of multiple family members need to be considered. A member of the same family reflected further on their father's funeral, which their mother had been alive for, and how they balanced what their father would have wanted with their mother's desire for some religious content.

*We didn't know what we could have, and I thought that if we had a non-religious service then we couldn't have any of it, and that upset Mum a bit. But when [the celebrant] came to see us, [they] reassured us that we could choose what we wanted but the service would still be all about Dad, and not all about God. (Family member 7)*



This demonstrates, again, how the initial categories chosen of religious and non-religious do not reflect the complexity of what people want, overall, as well as the flexibility of the celebrant in supporting the family to find the right balance for them.

There were times where attempts to manage the desires of various family members and friends caused some tension, as in the examples below.

*We did go into a Catholic church...which was interesting because my Dad wasn't Catholic, but he knew them all there, he was quite a big sort of figure in the local area so they were more than willing to do a Catholic service for him...I mean, to be honest, I'm not 100 percent how he knew the people from the Catholic church but I think he'd helped them outside of the church and they'd become friendly there... And, of course, when he passed away they said, 'Look, if you want a service in the church, we can do that for you.'...we had a mixture, because we had an actual church service and then we went on afterwards to [Crematorium] where it was pretty much a second service...because, I think the thing is, although there was a church service we still had Irish pipers that he also knew, so they came along and it's like, 'Yes, we'll do that for him.' ...So, there were a lot of people jumping in to say, 'We'll do this, We'll do that,' but then equally there were a number of people that would not go to the Catholic Church. So, of course, then we had to have a secondary service at the Crem... because they didn't believe in religion and things like that. (Family member 4)*

*[Family member] was quite involved and wanted something quite religious, and [family member] is quite religious. But I'm not - I'm just angry with God, if there is a God, because [deceased] was too young and taken too soon... I had to do what Mum did really, and [family member] was also keen. Mum really liked that hymn, All Things Bright and Beautiful, from Sunday school and she wanted The Lord's Prayer because she said it wouldn't be right if it wasn't included. But for me it's nonsense. (Family member 5)*

While these tensions clearly manifested in the final funeral event for these families, there is some indication that the potential for flexibility in people's funeral choices supports the managing of these tensions to some extent. This is particularly in the nuance that a funeral does not need to be either entirely religious or entirely secular. The family member quoted above who had two services at the Catholic church and the crematorium reflected that doing this felt like 'the right thing to do', suggesting that the choice and flexibility to have two services with a range of religious and non-religious content struck the right balance for them.

### Spirituality as subjective

As with our content analysis, some family members interviewed recognised that it isn't always easy to determine what constitutes spiritual content beyond the formally religious. One woman, who arranged her father's funeral with no explicitly religious content at all, reflected on how his love of literature and her use of this in his funeral potentially represented something profoundly spiritual.

*I suppose my Dad would consider all his literature spiritual, and that's where he lived his emotional, spiritual world really. He was just immersed in literature... But we didn't have any prayers, I think he would've thought that a bit odd if we'd done anything like that... I suppose*



*a lot of Shakespeare's plays were, in a way, about the afterlife and people coming back, birth and death, sort of spirit ghosts, spirits that stay around. He loved Keats, so one of the poems that I read towards the end was a Keats poem that he would often recite to us at Sunday lunch. And I suppose because Keats died when he was twenty-six, having written all his poems and my Dad was obsessed with this idea of this young man writing all these poems and then living on... I suppose in a way, literature was a kind of religion for my Dad, it was something that was sort of enduring and lived beyond the person. (Family member 1)*

This suggests that spirituality in funerals is subjective and what might appear to be an entirely non-religious service may have spiritual meaning. It is not clear from the research whether, at present, funeral arrangers and celebrants have explicit conversations about people's spiritual needs beyond asking if they want formally religious content. As such, this may be an implication for their practice and training.

### Negative experiences with officiants and other funeral professionals

Where families reported negative experiences with funeral professionals, these tended to relate to issues of lack of care or adaptability. Lack of attentiveness and active listening caused, in some cases, family members to feel that funeral professionals did not create services that represented how they or their loved one would have wanted them to be. People expected consistent care from the funeral professionals they engaged with, including both arrangers and officiants, and some families recalled times when they did not receive this.

*We had a problem with the orders of service... [the arrangers] weren't always very careful with the details, but other than that everyone was good. I remember there seemed to be someone different every time we went to their premises, to make the arrangements... so it wasn't always very consistent, but it all came together in the end. (Family member 8)*

Some of the poor experiences with officiants related specifically to religious ministers who were perceived, overall, to have offered less choice and personalisation than independent celebrants.

*My Nan wasn't really religious... If I had organised it myself, it would have been a bit different. It was a religious service, but having had subsequent funerals before that and after, he [the minister] didn't take any time to listen at all...it felt like he was filling in the blanks, and she had a really interesting life... They organised this C of E minister, and so it was different dealing with him. I don't know why Mum didn't want the minister that we knew...I think what we wanted out of it was, we only had it at the crematorium, but a dignified service that was warm....to celebrate her life and have that kind of warmth, I suppose...I would call it, it was like a cover lesson. It was like a plug and play service. It was almost like fill-in-the-blanks, 'So, so-and-so was born at the - went so-and-so, did this'. It just felt like he was just filling in the blanks rather than actually listening...from the moment we met him to the moment he left after the service, everything was in a hurry. It just felt like he was always, 'That's it. Right, good. Five minutes, blah blah blah. I've got to go. I've got another meeting at 7:15'. It felt a bit like we were an inconvenience... It wasn't memorable because it wasn't 'My Nan's' funeral', it was just a funeral. It could have been a funeral for anyone, apart from I*

*did the tribute...that was the worst part, not because what I said was the worst part. Because he was so rude...he just made it feel like it was a real inconvenience and a rush. (Family member 9)*

This reflects the view shared earlier that church-led services were often perceived by families as not being focused on the person whose funeral it was – as well as in this case, a sense of a lack of care and attention by the minister.

However, not all independent celebrants were able to manage the nuance of what people wanted as effectively as some of the examples shared in the above sections. One participant reflected on her shock at her father being described as an atheist by the celebrant at the start of the service.

*I don't think I had used the word atheist although I might've done, that's quite a strong word, atheist, isn't it? We were just talking about him and how he loved a theological discussion, he used to read in church quite a lot because he was best friends with the vicar, but he always denied any existence of God of any kind...I was explaining this to the celebrant... There were these sorts of mixed messages, of 'I'm really, really here for you', and then this sort of distance where I didn't really feel like she had really listened to us... I asked her to open and close the service... And then [the celebrant] stood up, introduced everybody and said, 'Of course, this is non-religious because [my dad] was an atheist' and I was shocked when she said that. I found it really strange that I was so shocked by that word because there is something so strong about it. Also, I knew that the two wardens that ran his retirement home were deeply religious and they were the loveliest people in the world, and my dad loved them and they loved him and I knew they were sitting at the back. And I had this terrible sense when she said this, I was furious with her because she hadn't run it past me... That's why the word 'atheist' really disturbed me, knowing that these lovely people who were running this home, I knew they were deeply religious and I knew that would be really offensive. And actually afterwards when we stood outside [one of them] sort of came up to me and gave me a hug and she said, 'he was not an atheist'. I said, 'no, no, I don't think he was', you know, but they found that deeply offensive. I was trying to be very, very careful and I thought this was a very sort of unsubtle blundering in. (Family member 1)*

This suggests that some celebrants were more fixed in binarized categories of religious and non-religious and did not fully listen or explore the nuance of what families needed. The example reflects a complexity in managing the spiritual needs of families, even where they have opted for a non-religious service and describe themselves and/or their deceased loved one as non-religious. This example also shows that finding the 'middle ground' between the binaries relates back to some extent to managing the wishes and feelings of others; in this case, the people who ran the retirement home. This suggests that the spiritual needs of a range of people are considered and navigated by people organising funerals for their loved ones, from their own to those of the deceased, and to those of other family members and friends. There is a potential implication here for training for celebrants to ensure it covers working with the full range and complexity of spiritual needs when supporting families and not adopting fixed or binary categories for understanding what people's religious and spiritual needs might be.

## Interviews with religious ministers

The interviews with religious ministers revealed that they are sharply aware of a decline in their status over the last two decades as the default leaders of funeral services. They identified a range of changes in how funerals are enacted. These include the shift from funerals being God-centred to being person-centred, including in funerals they lead as religious ministers. Within this, they recognised the increasing diversity of forms and places in which memorial events might take place rather than them being located in a church or chapel and following a liturgical structure. Whilst many of them did not see the increase in choice as a bad thing per se, they did express some concerns about an increasing lack of aftercare as well as an increase in what they saw as ambiguous and complicated forms of grief for people where religious or spiritual rites and rituals were not part of marking the passing of a loved one.

They also identified a shift in focus from the hereafter to the here and now. Whilst they did acknowledge a focus on the afterlife in some sense in everyday funerals, this tended to focus on how the deceased person might still be in the world with the people who have lost them, rather than on them being in the Christian idea of heaven, or a time or place outside of the world as it is. Examples of symbols or rituals of this 'here and now' afterlife that they had experience of involved butterflies, robins, wind, angel anniversaries, and the release of balloons.

The religious ministers also recognized a shift in control from the clergy to the funeral director in supporting people to make their initial choices about funerals. They felt that these initial choices were over-simplified including in whether people wanted a religious or secular funeral, with these binaries not representing the nuance and complexity of what a service might involve, as well as the range of denominations and traditions not being well articulated when opting for a religious service. This demonstrates that the ministers did not see themselves as operating only from the fully religious binary.

## Rapid change and deformalisation of traditional practices

Religious ministers reflected on how they observed and experienced wider social and technological changes to funerals. The first changes they observed were *social* shifts with the pronounced move away, over the past 20 years, from a 'one-size fits all' ritual where the main focus is the on the commendation of the soul in its onward journey to God. Instead, they felt the focus is now more on a celebration of the life of the deceased (though our other interviews suggest the idea of a 'celebration' is not always well received, as outlined above). This has led to the demand for greater personalisation and choice regarding the structure and content of the event which the religious ministers have had to become much more aware of.

*There has been a massive shift from the idea of a 'funeral' to the ideas of celebration, thanksgiving and legacy. This has led to a huge growth in remembering and personal remembering spaces. We no longer have a strong underpinning theology of an afterlife – all we have left to talk about as our legacy is our family. (Minister 3)*

The second changes that the ministers observed were *technical* shifts which, particularly since the Covid-19 pandemic, has resulted in the growth of hybrid services and the enhanced use of digital media such as music and video clips. Similar to the celebrants and arrangers, they felt this has obviated the need for organists to lead communal hymn singing and has blended secular and religious choices of music. Included in this technical shift has been the expansion in the means by which bodies are disposed. For example, the sharp rise in direct cremations. The rise of this practice alongside other recent forms of bodily disposal such as water resomation and woodland burials are all creating a momentum around greater choice, individualisation and personalisation.

There was a recognition that these changes combined were leading to a large *cultural* shift in terms of the decline in a collective memory of 'institutionally religious' funeral services and a recognition that the churches needed to 'up their game' if they were to be seen as credible providers in this new funeral industry landscape.

*People still see the church operating in very fixed boundaries and there is an assumption that I can't or won't deliver a non-religious funeral. (Minister 4)*

*I think the churches are at fault for not getting the message out there that they are interested in relating to these new changes. Or else the field is being dominated by the loudest voices that are more defined by dogma. (Minister 7)*

*We need to look closely at the changing nature of what we do and look at the culture that we are in now. We are in danger of being left flatfooted and ill-prepared for change. (Minister 5)*

#### A confused vacuum and the rise of market forces

There was a general perception amongst the religious ministers that the rapid shift towards deformalisation had created considerable confusion, and that new norms and expectations around the conducting of funeral events had yet to emerge. A key area of confusion was over a basic understanding of the words religion and spirituality. People were put off by the word 'religious' but neither was there a complete confidence in the term 'spiritual'. This meant that many people perhaps wanting some sort of comfort or reassurance at a time of grief may be in danger of missing out on that because of this lack of connection to and confusion over terms. Many reported that despite this, a sense of wanting to believe in some sort of afterlife remains strong and needs to be recognised in some way.

*Yes, funerals are more focussed on celebration of someone's life and there is the need to tell anecdotes of the history of the person who has died. We are sitting more lightly to the religious context but that is not the same as saying that people have walked away from spiritual content because they haven't. I believe that is a continued resurgence in owning a spiritual side but not a resurgence in traditional Christian belief. (Minister 2)*

This lack of a coherent narrative around the meaning of death and therefore a rite that expressed it was also leading, in the eyes of many ministers, to a rise of market forces. This was creating demand for more and more choice to the point where for some, there was now an over-abundance of choice and a hyper-individualisation that was eroding some of the more communal or public aspects of

bereavement – in other words, an unhealthy commodification of death and grief. They also recognised that in this new space, the traditional power of the clergy person to shape and deliver funeral rites had been superseded by the funeral arranger and the independent celebrant who are now the chief arbiters of how religious or spiritual content is mediated in funeral events. One minister explained ‘I now have to fight for the religious space. You can’t assume that people look to you anymore. I feel that I have to prove my worth. Nothing can be taken for granted’ (Minister 1).

### Place of death in Western society

In line with the above analysis, there was a common perception amongst ministers that the place of death in Western society was radically changing. They felt that death is increasingly seen as an inconvenience to people’s busy and complex lives and there appears to be an unhealthy desire to manage away the messiness of death and the aftermath of grief. They understood this as being seen primarily in the rise of funeral events where the body is not present (for example, in the rise of direct cremations and their heavy advertising including the pitch that the dead don’t want to ‘cause a fuss’ for the living). There was concern expressed that these new trends will later lead to high instances of complex or unresolved grief. Many ministers now saw their role as working with any grain expressing the hope for a continuing existence for the soul or an afterlife (expressed in things like angel anniversaries) in a highly bespoke and individualised way.

*We are transparent about who we are. First question – ‘Where do you imagine your mum or dad to be – where are they’ – and if they express an element of an afterlife – angels etc – we say to them – ‘we are going to give you comfort in that’ and we build the content of the funeral around their understanding of what happens when you die. (Minister 3)*

### Bad choices made on the basis of a lack of understanding

Religious ministers observed that the ways in which issues of religion and belief were handled in the funeral process were too binary – i.e., totally religious or totally secular which created a lack of nuance and sensitivity at a critical time. There was therefore a strong possibility that people could be ‘shortchanged’ in their real wishes and desires. There was a perception that a lack of confidence in understanding terms like religion or spirituality was also leading to a lack of confidence from families asking for religious content in the first place. One minister reflected, for example, that ‘As soon as the answer is “No” to did your mum go to church every Sunday – it kicks in and goes down the secular route and Funeral Directors - they are offering a choice to the family and [assuming] the family has ruled out a church’ (Minister 5).

### The place of institutional religion in the new funerals ‘market’

The range of responses from ministers to the sharp rise of a ‘secular market’ in funerals was mixed. Some sensed their religious institutions were veering between being overly defensive (i.e. banning

the use of unsanctioned forms of service) to being overly complacent in the wake of the seismic cultural shifts that were occurring. Some even reported that colleagues had lost interest in conducting funerals and no longer saw it as a missional priority. Many respondents saw the new funerals landscape as an opportunity to re-imagine what religious content might look like and several pointed out that they sensed a counter-factual demand for more material and ritualistic expressions of death and bereavement – what one participant summarised as ‘tactile church’. By this, they meant sacred spaces, candles, rosaries, home vigils and ceremonial disposal of ashes, home visits and a script for the families.

*We offer to provide rosaries at the coffin and vigils in the house. We offer the chance to come to the cathedral for a memorial service. We will light a candle on the morning of your mum’s funeral and send a picture of it. What we are not saying is ‘Why weren’t you at the church last week?’ (Minister 3)*

Ministers also saw an important role for the church in offering consistent follow-up care for the bereaved and providing them the space and opportunity for community support as a response to the ‘hyper-individualisation’ of current trends. One reflected ‘We have to be mindful of our local community – and how we engage with people. If people have a good relationship with the local church, it is an obvious place to go when someone dies – so hard work is building community in local schools and care homes’ (Minister 2). They also suggested that the way clergy and licensed lay ministers are trained needs substantial reconfiguration in the light of the rapid social and cultural changes outlined above.

## Conclusions and implications

Our research demonstrates that there is a continued persistence of religious content in funerals, despite the decline in church-led and strictly religious funerals and the growth of personalised and flexible funerals. Our study suggests that the increasing personalisation of funerals (Bailey & Walter, 2016; Cook & Walter, 2005; Mitima-Verloop et al, 2019) has not replaced the use of religious rituals and collective acts. These aspects of ritual and personalisation sit alongside each other in everyday funerals in the present context. Despite some growth in direct cremations (Co-op, 2019; Woodthorpe et al, 2022), the ritual of the ceremony itself persists with particular religious rituals remaining popular and featuring in the majority of everyday funerals. This challenges the binarized categorisation of funerals as religious or non-religious, as several scholars of religion have done more widely in relation to people’s beliefs (Day, 2020; Woodhead, 2016a). The findings also have something to offer to understanding people’s shifting relationships with institutional religion and person-centred spirituality.

The shift towards the majority of funerals being led by independent celebrants and containing a fusion of religious and non-religious content (with 76% of these celebrant-led funerals found to have some religious content) builds on Grace Davie’s notions of ‘believing without belonging’ (1994) and ‘vicarious religion’ (2007). It is arguable that her concept of ‘believing without belonging’ emerges in some of the data – reflecting that the generations she wrote about in regards to this are the majority among the deceased. Our qualitative data suggests that their families often feel that either the

deceased themselves or their older relatives would want the religious rites included because that is what makes a 'proper' funeral.

Present-day funerals have departed from Davie's (2007) notion of 'vicarious religion' in the fact that most people no longer use a religiously ordained officiant to lead the funerals they are arranging. This suggests that while many people still feel an obligation to draw on religious rituals, they do not feel obliged to ask the church to act on their behalf, as is suggested in Davie's notion of vicarious religion. Several scholars have noted more broadly that the growing cohorts of those who identify as non-religious reflects a dissociation with institutional religion rather than a complete departure from spiritual or supernatural belief (Davie, 2013; Day, 2020; Woodhead, 2016a). The lack of need for a religious officiant may be a sign of the indifference to church that characterises Davie's vicarious religion or it may be a more active rejection of it. For some, referring to funerals with some religious content as 'non-religious' appears to reflect a conscious dissociation from a church-led event or one that is perceived to be focused 'more on God' than the deceased. The research suggests that funeral arrangers may also influence the decline in church-led funerals as they tend to view independent celebrants as more reliable and flexible to accommodating a range of 'degrees of religion' in funerals. Some reported that they call on independent celebrants even for religious funerals. Despite them being seen as flexible, the research also demonstrates that independent celebrants may guide people towards or away from religious content, according to their own religious perspectives.

Our data suggests that the use of some religious rituals are in decline. When our data on funeral content is broken down by age of the deceased, the use of religious resources decreases in funerals for younger people. The use of hymns is also in decline when the earliest and later funerals in our sample are compared. This may have been impacted by the restrictions on collective singing during the Covid-19 pandemic - but the decline has continued in the post-pandemic period and the interviews with celebrants suggest it was already in decline before the pandemic. By contrast, the use of The Lord's Prayer in funerals remains stable across the 2019 to 2022 time period.

While some research suggests that the rise of direct cremations represents a turn away from collective ritual practices as important in funerals (Woodthorpe et al, 2022), other research suggests the lack of such rituals during the pandemic had an adverse impact on people's grieving processes (Rozario et al, 2023). Our study suggests the perceived need for a ceremony and use of religious ritual is still highly prevalent. However, public attitude surveys about funeral preferences suggest there will be a continual decline in traditional religious funerals in the coming decades (Co-op, 2019; Funeral Guide, 2023). These surveys, however, tend to adopt the binary categories of religious and non-religious and, as noted, most funerals fall between these poles. Census data demonstrates a continual decline in religious affiliation and identity (ONS, 2022). As such, it is arguable that the use of religious rituals and resources in funerals is likely to also decline as the younger generations become older and are more widely represented among the deceased.

Popular non-religious and spiritual resources may also provide a sense of ritual or comfort in funerals. A range of songs and poems that reference the afterlife, birds, butterflies, angels, rainbows, or the person living on in some way in the here and now, emerged in our analysis of funeral content. These may represent secular symbols and rituals that achieve the same purpose as religious content for some. Popular secular performance rituals include the releasing of balloons or laying of flowers on the coffin.

There is some suggestion in our study that people do not fully understand the role of an independent celebrant with them being regularly referred to in a range of incorrect ways including both 'vicar' and 'Humanist'. This may reflect that some expect a celebrant to offer something entirely non-religious, where they are conflated with Humanists, whilst others referring to them as 'vicars' or 'ministers' suggests they may be afforded some religious status. However, some families also reported that they do not like the term 'celebrant' or its connotations of celebration, suggesting the name does not necessarily always represent what people want nor does it reflect the flexible range of funeral events that celebrants facilitate.

Overall, the research offers a challenge to narratives of religious decline. Whilst funeral practices may have shifted away from being the monopoly of institutional churches, they have not become as secularised as assumed. This has implications for the way that funerals are classified as religious or non-religious/secular in academic discourses, as well as in the funeral industry itself to support a nuanced understanding of what people need, expect and desire when planning funerals for loved ones, and the balance of ritual and personalisation they seek.

A range of implications for funeral professionals emerge from the study. Firstly, it appears that people could be presented with a more nuanced range of initial choices for funerals beyond simply religious or non-religious, church leader or celebrant, man or woman. Independent celebrants are not a homogenous group of professionals. The celebrants in our study represented a range of backgrounds, beliefs and specialisms – and this influenced what they offered and how they guided people. The ability for families to view a range of profiles that reflect this variation when they meet with funeral arrangers would support them to make more informed and nuanced choices of officiant. This would also allow religious ministers to create profiles that reflect the level of choice, flexibility and 'degrees of religion' that they offer.

There is currently no requirement for independent celebrants to undertake any training, though a range of training providers have emerged in recent years. The training provided to both celebrants and funeral arrangers could be reviewed to ensure it supports funeral professionals to navigate people's complex and nuanced spiritual needs, beyond 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 in relation to religious, spiritual and non-religious content in funerals. Our research also found a lack of racial and religious diversity among celebrants and the funerals they lead. Black celebrants recounted experiences of discrimination. As such, training for funeral industry professionals needs to incorporate reflection on issues of diversity and discrimination. This latter point also links to the need for further research to explore minoritized racial, cultural and religious identities in relation to funeral practices.

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