

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.