

## 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 on to 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.