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A FITTING TRIBUTE

There are now approximately 150 funeral celebrants in the UK, offering unique and personalised services, especially appropriate for those with no religious beliefs. **JULIE BINDEL** discusses

In 1998 I lost a very close friend in tragic circumstances. Emma had been an atheist almost all of her life, and those of us charged with organising her funeral were concerned that she was not misrepresented in death. We were lucky to have a funeral director who understood, and advised us to find someone to conduct the service with good oratory skills who would take the lead from those who knew Emma.

Sarah, a barrister and close friend of the bereaved, conducted the service having been primed by us about Emma's character and life history. After the service, which was beautiful, several people approached us saying how surprised they were that we had not chosen a humanist celebrant, often the alternative to a vicar or rabbi where the deceased is non-religious. "I didn't know it was allowed," was a phrase we heard more than once.

Now, more than a decade later, civil funeral celebrants are becoming increasingly popular. The definition of a civil funeral is one which is "...driven by the wishes, beliefs and values of the deceased and their family, not by the beliefs or ideology of the person conducting the funeral."

I have been to four other funerals since Emma died, only one of which was conducted by a vicar. "Humanism is still a dogma, albeit not a religious one," Frank Green, a celebrant living in Australia, told me. "So if the deceased had no such beliefs, the proper alternative is to have a civil service."

Christine Ogdon has been a funeral celebrant since 2005. Having given up teaching, she was looking for a part-time and flexible job in which she could make good use of her natural empathy and social skills. Like

many other celebrants, Christine began by conducting baby naming ceremonies and civil partnerships before training to conduct funerals.

“After my training course, which was extremely thorough, I began to visit the funeral directors in the area to introduce myself and persuade them to recommend me.”

The Institute of Civil Funerals (IOCF) runs the only accredited course of its kind and prides itself on being the only professional civil funeral celebrant training course that is externally accredited by the Open College Network at Level 3.

Those who pass the three and a half day residential course are given a six-month associate membership of the IOCF.

“The IOCF was founded in 2004 with an aim to drive upwards the quality of funeral ceremonies in the UK by supporting the work of civil funeral celebrants,” says its chairman Anne Barber. “We send out questionnaires to all of our affiliates’ clients after the event and get almost a 100 per cent return, and almost all positive.”

Celebrants get the vast majority of referrals from funeral directors, with a small number contacting them directly through word of mouth.

A friend alerted me to Green Fuse Contemporary Funerals in Devon. She had hired them to arrange her father’s funeral from start to finish and offered what she called a “bespoke and holistic event, which reflected my father’s life and helped us remember him as he was.”

Jane Morrell and Simon Smith set up Green Fuse ten years ago. It began as a flower shop offering ceremonies and ceremony planning, and Jane would display coffins in between bouquets and pot plants. “Although we were offering services in different areas such as baby naming and weddings, it was the need for funeral advice and ceremonies which overwhelmed, so we decided to focus exclusively on that need.”

Soon, Green Fuse became funeral directors as well as funeral celebrants and now can design and preside over a funeral from start to finish. They now also provide training in funeral celebrancy.

“I have been asked to conduct a funeral by the side of a barge,” says Christine Ogdon, “and have had grandchildren playing rock-guitar as the coffin was led out. The good thing about having a celebrant is that

they will reflect the life of the person rather than a particular religious belief.”

Christine charges around £160 to conduct a funeral service, but preparation can involve spending an average of 10 hours with the bereaved in order to get, “not just their CV or life history, but the essence of their character.

“I am the only person in the room who never met the person,” she adds, “so I want to be able to feel like I know them enough by the time of the ceremony so that the mourners will recognise the deceased.”

With the tragic deaths of babies and young children, celebrants should focus on the joy the deceased brought to the parents and other loved ones.

But what about independent funeral celebrants who set themselves up in business with little or no training? Anne Barber thinks that funeral directors are well versed in spotting inexperience, and will go for the professional with recognised qualifications in order to ensure that their clients have a positive experience throughout the process.

“This is a relatively new profession,” says Barber, who thought up the title of ‘civil funeral celebrant’ back in 2000. “We need to ensure that celebrants live up to the standard required.”

Doreen Salisbury chose a celebrant to preside over her sister’s funeral last year and was delighted with the result. “My sister was only 52, and had never followed a religion. We held her funeral in a hotel, and followed it immediately with a memorial service where lots of people got up and spoke about her. It took much of the sadness out of the day.”

With only 30 per cent of people in the UK being affiliated to a religious belief, civil funerals are becoming more popular and relevant than in previous years. However, there is no ban on religious content during the service.

“My elderly Catholic aunt was at my sister’s funeral and would have been offended if we had not included a prayer, so we did. It was fine with the celebrant, and did not affect the uniqueness of the service for the rest of us.”

For many, the presence of a vicar or other religious representative is a comfort, whereas for others they feel it hypocritical to arrange a religious service if the deceased was a non-believer. Civil celebrants offer an alternative. I suspect we will be seeing far more of them in the future.

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