

## **THE EMERGENCE OF THE CELEBRANT**

I experienced some amazing changes during my career in Bereavement Services, which began in 1961 and ended in 2006. When I started, at the age of fifteen, every service was religious and yet a recent report suggested that 64% of British funerals are now secular. Such statistics are unreliable yet it is evident that there is a considerable reduction in religious funerals in favour of secular alternatives.

The change was first noticed in the 1990's, when the British, principally the English, began to use the emerging Humanist funeral celebrants. For the first time in perhaps a thousand years, the clergy could be avoided when arranging a funeral ceremony. This avoidance clearly appealed to the bereaved and the number of celebrants has increased dramatically since that date, creating services which are a complex mixture of civil, secular and spiritual values within which reside Christian elements.

My early roles were as cemetery sexton and crematorium chapel attendant and I knew virtually every minister, and I could predict what hymns each would choose and how long their funeral services would take. Every funeral service was religious and the default position was to leave the Church of England service books in the pews, replacing these on the few occasions when Roman Catholic or Free Church services occurred. As a local authority, we provided books only for the Church of England; the other religions had to supply their own.

The council had no management interest or responsibility for ceremonies, but we were interested in when the service ended because of its impact on the workforce. The gravediggers twiddled their thumbs at the graveside, and at the crematorium, with far higher numbers, it was difficult to get everything done within the 30 minutes allocated for each ceremony. Those ministers who were quickest, usually the Church of England ones, kept well within the time. The stress was caused by the Free Church pastors and the Church of Wales, who would often overrun, delay the following funeral and upset the funeral director involved. We should have given more time but the prescriptive management in those days considered that we were the experts and we told people how much time was required; the bereaved were not identified as customers, and rarely complained.

As burial fell out of favour, those Church of England parishes with an older population began to do very high numbers of cremation services. Conversely, the new parishes, created by the building of council and private housing estates, had very few services. To balance this for the clergy, many crematoria authorities worked with the Church of England to introduce what became the notorious rota service. The parish clergy participating in the rota, which excluded retired clergy, were allocated specific weeks throughout the year when they would take all the Anglican services requested by funeral directors. The rota minister met the bereaved family for the first time as they arrived for the service at the crematorium.

I first experienced a rota when I became manager in Wolverhampton in 1974. Each minister might do six funeral ceremonies a day for a week. The worst ministers were those who rushed, a few reducing each service to eleven minutes. Too often they used the wrong name for the deceased. Some ministers, annoyed at the superficiality of non-churchgoers demanding a funeral service, would remind us all that the ceremony was about God, not the deceased. A few would not mention the deceased's name at all during the service, none would deliver a eulogy and the bereaved were not invited to participate in any way.

There were a lot of complaints and I became very concerned that these reflected poorly upon the crematorium, reinforcing the conveyor belt criticism. I sat in on some rota services, and sent my comments together with an erudite complaint from yet another upset family, to the Rural Dean, and asked him to respond. He was furious, and reminded me in robust language that it was none of my business. It didn't help that he was one of the worst performers! The Christian service, then, was sacrosanct. Upset at his response, I made arrangements to cancel the council's involvement and the rota ceased in 1976. The notoriety of rota systems similarly saw them phased out throughout the UK.

Consequently, funeral directors were told to return to the convention that supported the pastoral role of the parish minister, then all men. They had to be given first refusal on any request for a C of E funeral service in the parish. But although people still called themselves C of E, throughout the eighties deference to the clergy declined. The church made matters worse as its financial woes saw parishes consolidated, curates all but disappear, and fees increase. The major irritation was that, in a commercial sense, the bereaved had to pay for the service and yet the convention allowed the clergy to say yea or nay to personal requests, or even to mention the deceased's name.

Funeral directors recognised this tension, and the fact that fewer bereaved people even knew their parish minister. For many funeral directors, any threat that the parish minister might embarrass their client over their lack of churchgoing was seen as reflecting poorly upon the funeral directors service. So they began to buck the convention of informing the parish minister, preferring to exercise more control over the funeral service, which they recognised as needing to be more than just a rite of passage. Consequently, they increasingly gave the bereaved the option of using a retired minister, often called a 'tame' minister within the business. Those retired ministers who delivered a warm and humane service, sometimes with a theatrical flourish, of the right length, and with the option of a eulogy, were given the services. The fact that the retired clergy took the services away from the parish caused much controversy in the C of E.

Funeral directing was also dynamic and changing, and the patriarchal funeral director of old, who lived in the parish, and often stood shoulder to shoulder with the local vicar, had sold out to larger corporate firms. Funerals became commercial, all about marketing and sales targets, and many funeral directors changed into a salesman in a black suit. He, and increasingly, she, might be paid on commission and had no responsibility to local parishes or their clergy.

The church made matters worse when they prohibited colloquial language on churchyard memorials; no mum or dad, and the media castigated them. In the 1990's, when I was invited to my local chapter meeting to explain how services were changing, I suggested that they needed to market their funeral services, a comment that was received with bemusement.

By 1995, I had been involved with approximately 70,000 funerals in Shropshire, South Yorkshire, the West Midlands and Cumbria. There were no secular celebrants in these areas and every funeral service was still religious. The few atheist funerals that arose chose not to have a service at all, as it was unknown for family members to step in and take funeral services themselves. My staff were troubled by these non services and I discovered that my deputy took it upon himself, after he had moved the coffin to the crematory, to read the Lord's Prayer over it.

A significant change occurred in 1993 when the City of Carlisle accepted my proposals and opened the world's first natural burial site. The bereaved immediately recognised that there was no established format for this new kind of funeral. Many perceived these funerals as secular, even pagan, because the predominant theme was environmental, the graves were to be turned into oak forest, and would nurture red squirrels and owls. In the absence of any celebrant, I was increasingly asked to act as master of ceremony, principally to open the service, ask selected people to step forward and speak about the deceased, and for myself to round off the ceremony by performing the committal text. Sometimes, I was asked to explain the concept of natural burial to the mourners, not least to justify why an eco coffin was used, then only available in plain cardboard.

As it became known that I and my deputy would MC services, requests to do this increased year on year and extended to the crematorium. In part this was because our section, newly renamed as Bereavement Services, arranged many Independent (DIY) funerals. The families taking this route often ignored the conventions, which included the church. The ceremonies tended to be highly personal, with references to family events, local culture and occupations, and some were very humorous. The families involved wanted to make the service a celebration of the deceased's life and often suggested that no black be worn. Promotionally, each service had an immediate impact on many of the mourners attending, and drew many compliments. I need to remind you that all this was a revelation, both to me and to the bereaved.

Perhaps as a direct result of these changes, in 1995, a local member of the British Humanist Association became the first secular celebrant in Carlisle. He had put himself through the BHA celebrants training course, and a few of these ceremonies occurred each month. But the service used was often a standard format and sometimes just a matter of substituting the deceased's name onto the appropriate lines. Even on the cremation forms the deceased's ceremony would be recorded as 'secular', little help to any later researcher wanting to identify Humanists, atheists, pagans or agnostics. The fact is that most people simply asked for a non religious service.

In 1997, Princess Diana's funeral took place and was partially secular. Celebrants I have spoken to saw this event as the reason why celebrancy took off. A paper given by the Director of the Centre for European Studies in 2005, stated that Diana's funeral became a prototype for all sorts of funerals. The Director saw this as an example of a vicarious religion, of believing yet without belonging, to a church. By that time, when I was asked how I might measure the quality of a funeral service, I would use a continuum, a horizontal line, with committed Christian ceremonies to the left and committed Humanists, atheists and pagans to the right. Both parties are a community, one that often knows the minister or celebrant, and with this focus, are meaningful, emotional ceremonies. In the middle I described the indeterminate and less satisfied majority!

In 2001 I moved to manage Bereavement Services at Cardiff, and in 2003 to Croydon, where I retired in 2006. The number of celebrants remained quite small and those I encountered were mostly Humanists. It was only in late 2014 when I wanted to promote my book R.I.P. Off! or The British Way of Death, to practising celebrants, that I realised just how much they had expanded. Yet what had seemed earlier just a simple battle between secular and religious had become far more complex.

I decided to research on the internet to identify who and what are these celebrants, how many are there and what does the future hold? I do not present this as a definitive study, as I do not have the resources to complete a comprehensive survey.

As I read the many celebrants home page or descriptions, I found a huge variation in their approach. Some mentioned their training; many did not. And many of the celebrants stressed that they were 'independent', but from what?

Logically, as a Humanist myself, I started with the BHA website and listed a little short of 300 celebrants, including those in Scotland, and they remain the largest single group. In the mid 1990's the BHA were the only provider of secular celebrants, yet they still came with beliefs, a dogma, so I assume them not to be independent. Unlike most other celebrants, the Humanist celebrant will not (should not) allow religious content in the ceremony. In essence, anyone using them must denote themselves as non-believers. Prior to the mid 1990's, they did allow religious content but the subsequent prohibition led to the celebrants in the North East breaking away from the BHA.

The most innovative proposal arose at a conference in 2002. It was the creation of the civil celebrant, and your association had a healthy 160 celebrants when I checked it. You were the first alternative to the BHA. The civil funeral, the way I saw it, copied the civil wedding ceremony; or did it? My wife and I had a civil wedding in 1971 and it was bureaucratic and rather dull, but it expressly forbade religious content. That meets the dictionary definition of civil, which means outside religion. Your definition of civil suggests that it is a service chosen by the bereaved and not imposed by a higher authority and you accept as much or as little religious content as requested.

Progressively, the celebrants created other associations to represent and promote their services, often, I was told, because of internal disputes and schisms creating breakaways. The second largest group of celebrants, around two hundred and twenty eight, was the Fellowship of Professional Celebrants. The UK Society of Celebrants had forty eight, the Association of Independent Celebrants seventy nine and the County Celebrants Network, thirty three.

I counted a total of just over one thousand celebrants, represented by eleven organisations. A number of celebrants, possibly a similar number, are also independent of these organisations, mainly those who have created a local business based on word of mouth and, perhaps, by working with the local funeral directors. They, evidently, do not feel the need for an overarching organisation or further promotion. The typical fee for a service proved to be £150.00 to £190.00.

One celebrant stated that his fee was £135.00 but this was discounted by £40.00 for visitors to the website. This suggests that competition between celebrants is developing and may drive down fees, an aspect exacerbated by the fact that perhaps 20 new celebrants finish their training each month and join the market.

That word 'independent' kept returning to my mind. On one independent association site, I clicked funeral celebrants only to have two funeral directing logos immediately confront me. Are celebrants independent when their member's sites are adorned with funeral directing logos? Indeed, on one or two such sites, the featured male celebrants wear formal suits and ties and look suspiciously like funeral directors. One of these sites stresses the need to enrol and train celebrants locally, and emphasises this as a marketing strategy by quoting "Families will also be willing to pay for this service and open to discussing options for other merchandise or services that a funeral director has to offer." The implication is that if the funeral director employs, or controls, the celebrant to some degree, it benefits the business. It also suggests that truly independent celebrants might be seen as a threat to conventional funeral directing; that they might influence the bereaved adversely as regards buying more services, or, horror of horror, that they might support people in taking the DIY funeral route? For certain, in an industry so notoriously untransparent, any option that encourages external and independent advice is rarely favoured by the larger funeral directing firms.

The website with very close ties to funeral directing also suggests that the celebrant role is vital as a reflection of the quality of the funeral itself, which harks back to my earlier comments about the rota service in Wolverhampton. In a section titled 'How Celebrants Work' this website incorrectly states that there are 500 celebrants in the UK and approximately 45% of these are funeral professionals, which must mean funeral directors or funeral directing staff. This conflicts with Charles Cowling's *The Good Funeral Guide*, published in 2012, which on page 82 suggests that hardly any celebrants have a funeral industry background.

I was also unable to categorise the growing Interfaith movement. Many of these celebrants are ex clergy, seceded in varying degrees from the formal church, so are they in the celebrancy movement, or do they remain clergy? Can they be considered independent? I also noted that celebrant coverage is extremely variable, high in the Home Counties and low in rural areas, particularly Wales and Scotland.

It is fascinating to consider how much influence the celebrants have, as a whole, on the funeral market. Clearly, the independent celebrant is effectively bought as a creator of the ceremony and a source of advice and help on funeral protocol. This suggests that if the celebrant could sell themselves more directly to the bereaved rather than to the funeral director, it would enhance their role? If engaged before a family is associated with a funeral director, the celebrant has the potential to provide the greatest insight into how the local funeral market works, including the quality of burial and cremation facilities, and even advice on how to reduce funeral costs, as funeral poverty is now such an issue. The absence of independent advice is an issue that really troubles the bereaved. The celebrant who is not independent, such as those who work directly for a funeral director, cannot fulfil this role. But because this 'independence' is often not transparent, the bereaved might not understand this difference.

Otherwise, apart from compiling the service, the celebrant has also taken over some of the pastoral role once the prerogative of the parish minister, but more so. The celebrant really can focus on the bereaved, their life and love, family and achievements, free of dogma and conventions. They can replace the black clothing, the morbidity and the emphasis on ancient dogma, such as ashes to ashes, with a modern language full of meaning. Is this role, as provider of emotional support to the bereaved, and perhaps the confidence that is conveyed within this arrangement, given due recognition?

Perhaps this reminds us that the celebrant does have a dogma, in the form of the blurb on their website. As an example, of this, consider the Green Fuse website, a funeral directing concern in Totnes, who have trained and promote seventy seven celebrants. Unlike the BHA celebrants, these immediately expose their philosophy in their email addresses, with words like pointing star, heartsong and handmade ceremonies. These celebrants convey a bias towards natural and green

funeral ceremonies. Whatever, the bereaved can view any number of websites they wish before choosing the one they like, which will probably be the one whose words have the most appeal.

Both the Humanists, and yourselves, take great pains to create high standards and to train to these, but how important is this to the bereaved, and perhaps more importantly, to the mainstream funeral director? If their company feels that a funeral service is just a funeral service, or is concerned with the cost of trained celebrants, or fears the potential for external influence on bereaved families through the 'independent' celebrant, then they will expand their in-house celebrant network. The weakness of these in-house celebrants is that they will rarely work for rival funeral directors, and might be poorly trained and unable to offer specific services to niche groups, like the pagans, steampunk or to people with alternative lifestyles. The fact is that the service is the key element of the funeral, not the coffin, hearse or the cremation, which are merely perfunctory elements in the package.

For the celebrant today, it appears difficult to stand out from the crowd, to showcase unique qualities, which in marketing is called differentiation. The BHA can do this for the atheist, the pagan celebrant has a similar advantage within that niche, and Green Fuse celebrants might attract natural burials. But this uniqueness has its dangers. The latest research suggests that people choosing natural burial now do so more for spiritual reasons and not, as in the past, for the environment. This suggests that the celebrancy role needs more training, not less, on many skills and not least on the environment. Added to this, in anthropological terms, the celebrant needs the ability to replace the shaman of the distant past; a ritual intermediary with the spiritual world.

Perhaps this explains why many celebrants offer to do all things, such as civil, secular, green and spiritual, and not stand out from the crowd. Perhaps, also, this is why a significant number of celebrants avoid funerals altogether, restricting themselves to weddings and namings. Defining the celebrant role such that it can be marketed well remains the challenge, particularly if there is a desire to move away from the rather negative request for a 'non-religious service'.

As to the future, I am confident that the internet is the new force. The latest figures suggest that 50% of all funeral arrangements are being researched on the web and the principal wordsearch is 'cheap' or 'low cost'. Recently, the first funeral price comparison website, called [yourfuneralchoice.com](http://yourfuneralchoice.com) went live. These initiatives have arisen because funeral costs have risen well above inflation for perhaps two decades, and this is going to continue. The 'Direct Cremation' is the latest internet innovation because it avoids the use of a conventional funeral director. For around £1500, under half the cost of a traditional funeral, a firm will collect the body, have it cremated without ceremony, and the ashes placed in the Garden of Remembrance or returned to the applicant. If the ashes are returned home, this is an opportunity for the celebrant to work with the family in arranging a Memorial Service wherever they choose, and enhancing their support and advisory role with the bereaved. This would require the celebrant to find ways to be more proactive in meeting the bereaved, or potential bereaved, before they are referred to them by a funeral director, the reactive approach. This suggests that the truly independent celebrancy role might need to be extended into finding ways to get people talking about death and dying, preparing a will and preferably, an advance funeral directive, before they die, and the death becomes a crisis funeral purchase. The charity Dying Matters and death cafes are all part of this new approach, much of it utilising the internet. I can say with confidence that where the bereaved follow an advance directive filled in by the deceased, which perhaps names a celebrant, they find it the most satisfying and therapeutic funeral. The problem for any celebrant taking this independent approach is whether it would irritate conventional funeral directors, and lose them referrals.

Before I conclude, I would like to return to the continuum I mentioned earlier, because it has dramatically changed. To the left, the committed Christian ceremonies have declined further, and to the right, the committed Humanists, atheists and pagans have increased to some degree. But what I described as the indeterminate and less satisfied majority, the middle ground, the vicarious, those people who used the rota service in Wolverhampton, have now turned to the celebrant. For the bereaved, that is a much better place to be.

As attendance at church continues to decline by 1% each year, this continuum will change. Yet it might be careless to assume that as science expands our horizons, the supernatural paradise, one which rejects dogs because they have no soul, would make us more secular. The Good Funeral

Blog only recently included an item which put belief in an afterlife as high as 36%, many of these people calling themselves secular. Are these the new 'seekers', those people looking for spiritual enlightenment outside religion, and mostly women? Perhaps they no longer accept my distinction between secular and religious.

The clergy, the Church of England ritual, the language, the paternalism and even the parish process, was found wanting. The celebrant has replaced them, allowing the bereaved a multiplicity of choice, whether they be atheist or religious, and for the seekers there is also a celebrant, the one whose website states, 'let me enwrap you in stardust'.