

# **Celebrants and the Church – ways to work together**

National Convention for Celebrants  
National Memorial Arboretum  
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## **A. Introduction**

I'd like to start with a quotation from a website entitled County Celebrants Network.biz. It caught my eye when I was writing a book on funeral practice aimed at Church of England ministers and families wanting to think about planning their own funerals. It was a description of a funeral that the webmaster had taken.

*The family is seated. The flowers are beautiful. The seats in the chapel are full of friends and acquaintances. The prelude music fades out. And then something amazing happens.*

*The officiant stands up and takes everyone in attendance on a journey of the deceased's life....At the end of the service, each person in attendance is handed a piece from a Scrabble game because this lady loved to play Scrabble. They are invited to put that tile in a special place in order to remember this life in the coming days.*

*To close the service, everyone stands and sings "The Fishy Song" together.*

*The family is thrilled that their loved one was given such a special and sacred time of remembrance. The attendees hug the family and tell them that they were so glad they came<sup>1</sup>.*

I have to confess that as I read it through, my instinct was that a scrabble piece was not a particularly powerful and weighty symbol to carry a life. And I was intrigued by the Fishy Song – and have to report that my searching of YouTube has not been able to discover which particular song would have been sung with such earnest by all the attendees.

So I duly quoted this story in my chapter on the symbols of death and life and my secret thought was that the church symbols had something a bit more powerful to offer. However I conducted a funeral a couple of weeks ago for a family whose father had died. As it happens, the family had a copy of my book and the thing that struck them more than anything was that story about the scrabble piece. As it happened, the father had been an avid fan of concrete and worked for the Institute of Concrete. It was generally known never to start a conversation with Mike about concrete because you could guarantee you would never get away. I knew that, his family knew that, all his friends knew that. And his son had discovered that on the strength of my story about scrabble pieces that it was also possible to get a jigsaw made out of concrete which would be the perfect symbol for his father. Sure enough at the funeral, there was a jigsaw funeral and as we all left the church, we were

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<sup>1</sup> From the website of County Celebrants Network – see <http://www.countycelebrantsnetwork.biz/A-Civil-Funeral-Ceremony.html>

encouraged to take a piece (attached to a fridge magnet) so we could take it home and every time we looked at the fridge magnet, remember Mike.

Ken Livingstone famously remarked that Church of England funerals are about as moving as a supermarket checkout queue. Ah, I thought, he obviously hasn't been to one of mine when we hand out bits of concrete jigsaw! And of course the point is that Ken Livingstone made his quote in the late 1980s when Church of England funerals were about the only choice you could make, and it felt like none of the clergy really cared whether the funeral was moving or not, because there wasn't much other choice.

The first gift that we must acknowledge that the increase in celebrants have brought to Britain is choice when it comes to significant life events. I have been a priest now for 20 years and in that time, I have probably done about 750 funerals, 500 christenings and 250 weddings. However, I also know – given the changing patterns for clergy on all those 3 things – that in the next twenty years, very sadly for me, I am unlikely to do another 750 funerals, 500 christenings and 250 weddings. The rate of decline for the church is massive in all those three areas.

So one response that you as celebrants could make to a title like 'Celebrants and the Church – ways to work together' is to say simply 'we don't need to. We can see the trajectory and it will only be a generation or two before the church's role will be utterly marginal.'

I hope that there are ways in which we can work together for a couple of reasons. Firstly, I know huge numbers of people who come to be celebrants feel it be a vocation – and for many, they would point to that vocation as coming from God or some other greater power. Sadly the church has been much too slow in recognising the gift that they have brought and are only now beginning to recognise what they could offer the church.

Secondly we know that we bring different things to this space and if we can acknowledge the gift that each brings, we can ensure that the best of both is combined.

Can I also say – so that we get it out of the way – that I know that there are some clergy who are dreadful. I suspect that some of you will look at the title of the talk and think, there is no way that I am working with the church if that means the vicar down the road from me. I have been to one of their weddings/christenings/ funerals (delete as appropriate) and I was ashamed to have been associated with it.

So yes, the church has to acknowledge that. But as two groups of people concerned with similar things, - and made up of lots of people who are really passionate about doing a good job when it comes to funerals, weddings and namings – then I hope there are ways in which we can work together. I want to highlight 3 particular areas.

## **B. Ritual: Tradition and Innovation**

Firstly, ritual. That is what we are all doing. The earliest evidence of ritual goes back to death rites: it is the earliest evidence of religion and the earliest evidence that human beings took time to mark things. There is a wonderful American commentator on funerals called Thomas G Long – who was over here in Britain in June for the National Funerals

Conference for clergy that the Church of England runs – and he has traced some of the history of where this all began. He points to evidence from caves in Northern Iraq dating back fifty thousand years, which suggests that the beginnings of religion may well have been connected with death rites. Surrounding the bones of Neanderthals were found pollen grains, suggesting flowers had been placed around the bodies in tenderness and awe. Similarly, Cro-Magnon graves have been found near Moscow, dating back some thirty thousand years, around which numerous artefacts have been placed which anthropologists have interpreted as indicating some ritual surrounding death. Long does not choose to be too dogmatic on this point, as to which came first, ‘the ritual rhythms of death or religious awe’<sup>2</sup>, but argues that death and religion have always been linked: ‘the dance of death moves to the music of the holy’.<sup>3</sup>

One thing that so many of us know that in these moments of ritual, there are times in which we are transported to something beyond. We may be uncomfortable with words of religion, or even words like holy, but we know that there is something transcendent, something spiritual – indeed, to allow for these moments is absolutely key in preparing a good ritual.

And perhaps what religion brings to ritual is tradition and familiarity. My colleague Sandra Millar was at a conference a couple of years ago of celebrants, who were asked to say how long they had been doing their work. Of course, it is a new industry, so no one could claim to have done it that long: when it came to Sandra, she simply said ‘two thousand years’.

That is the strength of religion, but that of course is also its weakness. It was only with reforms as recently as 1969 that it became impossible to conduct a funeral service in the Church of England without mentioning the dead person by name. Until then, it was quite possible just to refer to our dearly beloved departed brother/sister and names were fairly irrelevant. No wonder Ken Livingstone found himself unmoved.

But actually the familiarity is also its strength. We bring a whole culture and resource which is underpinned by familiarity – and particularly at funerals that is what makes it safe to go on. How many of you conduct funerals where the family insist that they are not religious, but they absolutely want to say the Lord’s Prayer. Because those words are familiar and are needed at a time of crisis.

There was a story in the press last week about a humanist celebrant who had conducted a naming ceremony – as it happened it was a high society affair and included in the godparents were Yasmin Le Bon and Kate Moss. Of course, it also made its way into Hello Magazine, who described it as a christening and called the stars, ‘godparents’. But of course by definition, a humanist does not appoint people to be anything to do with god, and the celebrant was understandably upset that it was referred to as a christening. But the

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<sup>2</sup> Thomas G Long *Accompany them with singing The Christian Funeral* Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009 p4

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid* p4

traditions of the church ceremony run deep and people still want them for themselves, even without the trappings of religion.

But if the church has offered tradition, it has been celebrants who have offered innovation. I know that Tony Walter, who has been involved in training celebrants from the very beginning, in his book *Funerals and how to Improve them* commented back in the early 1990s that people were beginning to yearn for 'person-centred' funerals focussing on the beliefs and value systems of the person who has died not an external religion or philosophy. The reason that funerals have changed so much in the last 20 years is that we have all had to take that much more seriously. We can credit Princess Diana for that at one level, but it has been implemented in the way that it has because it is the core philosophy of celebrants. And it has ensured that Ken Livingstone can no longer throw out his jibe at all of us.

### **C. Learning Together**

As we look ahead, I hope that there will be increasing times when we can share learning together. It has been great to have had Ann Barber at our National Funerals Conference on the last two occasions on which it has been held. And thank you again for having me here today: the more that we can work together and recognise that we are looking to provide the same levels of care and the same memorable occasions for those who use our services.

I hope that there will be more that we can do of this in the future. A friend, who was a vicar for many years, decided a year or so back to become an independent celebrant and went on Anne's course with the Institute of Civil Celebrants. The comment that he made was how moved he was to be in the company of people who so clearly had a commitment to doing this well and how seriously they committed themselves to what was ahead. This from a man who had spent most of his adult life as a professional vicar, whom most people would think are known for a certain level of commitment and vocation to the task that they had. But he saw it far more clearly in his fellow celebrants.

Really as a response to how many people are coming forward to train as celebrants, the Church is finally awakening to recognise that it needs to do something about it. In my own area – the Diocese of Oxford – I am running a training course for lay people who want to become funeral ministers. It recognises precisely that sense of vocation which so many people feel towards this work. Of course, weddings and christenings are a bit more tricky for us to licence lay people – in the first instance, because the clergy act as legal registrars at church weddings, so we can't hand that over to lay people, and in christenings, because the church says that this is a sacrament so like Holy Communion can't be done by a lay person. And already on our pilot course we have had enquiries from people who want to be celebrants saying, can I learn something of my trade from you. Indeed, we have also had people who are funeral directors approaching us and saying that we want to know more about what goes on.

A couple of years ago, my wife was asked to give a blessing to a young friend of ours who was marrying her partner. Because it was a same sex relationship, sadly it wasn't an option for them to choose a church wedding, but it was incredibly important to our friend to have some form of prayer and religious significance. It has always struck me as one of the

difficult things about civil weddings that anything vaguely religious is absolutely banned. In this particular instance, the registrar taking the ceremony was extremely twitchy about the whole thing and made it very clear that she had to be well off the premises before my wife uttered anything as dodgy as a prayer. But this seems to imply that people are either religious or not: either they get that spiritual thing, or they don't. But we all know that this is far from the truth. One of the things I find liberating about conducting weddings in church is that I am fairly free to allow all sorts of music and readings. At a wedding this coming Saturday, two teenage sisters who are members of my congregation are singing a song from *Wicked* whilst the register is being signed. Nothing remarkable about that all, but I know that it would be harder to have *Jesu Joy of Man's Desiring* at a civil ceremony – and they certainly couldn't say the Lord's Prayer together. Surely the time has come when we need to move beyond this and say we learn from each other.

So are there new areas when we can learn together? I am in the process of putting together a symposium next year on the whole issue of what happens with ashes after cremation. At the heart of the issue, is the problem that it is unaddressed by most of us. Cremations and burials do not leave us in the same place. The American poet and Funeral director Thomas Lynch defines a good funeral as one that 'takes the living where they need to be, by taking the dead where they need to go'. But the problem with cremation is that it does not finish the job. A burial leaves the body where it ends up – in the ground. But a cremation leaves the ashes with another stage to happen. What do you do with the ashes?

The answer to that question is now myriad and varied – and anyone who has been to the National Funerals Exhibition will know some of the solutions! However, the Church has always been clear – you keep them together and you put them in a churchyard, cemetery or memorial garden. Full stop. None of the other options are available. You cannot scatter them, you cannot split them and you certainly can't turn them into a diamond ring. But we don't really know why. And we maybe don't even know that we can't! So we are organising a conference to look at these issues – and think through the rituals that need to be co-created for. But the reality is that once again the tradition may be brought by the church, but the innovation rests with you – and unless we listen to the innovators, I suspect that the ritual crafted will lack connection with the people who want it.

## **D. Relationships**

The final area where I think we can work together is in relationships. One of the messages that we are trying to get across to clergy at the moment is that the most important person in the world of creating funerals is – surprise surprise – not us! Of course we want to say that the people involved are the most important – whether that is for a naming ceremony, a wedding or a funeral – but when it comes to funerals we have to recognise the significance of the relationship with the funeral director. At any gathering of clergy at any time and in any time, it won't take too long before they get to complain about their local funeral directors. And nearly all those complaints are based on the fact that they haven't taken the time to build relationships with them. We have assumed that they will direct their services in our direction. You on the other hand, know that most important relationship you have is with your local funeral directors. If you don't cherish that relationship, frankly you won't

get any business. Unless we take a leaf out of your book we can only expect those numbers to go down again.

But we do know about relationships with people. The relationships that go on beyond the day of the wedding, or the christening or perhaps even more vitally of the funeral. Because those relationships matter. And I wonder if that is something that we can work together. Particularly with a funeral, where a widow or survivor can be left feeling that they are going mad and just need the reassurance of human company to get through their grief. One of the things I know that has been important about celebrant ministry is that it ends at the chapel door – but I wonder if we need to start working together to recognise that rarely does a family's need end at the chapel door . And how can we see how we support families together better.

## **E. Conclusion**

Once again, I want to say thank you to Anne for inviting me to speak at this conference. Church and celebrant can sometimes be seen as being on opposite sides and it has been impressive to see so many of you willing to hear how we can work together. I hope that it will lead to greater cooperation and a recognition of the ways in which we can support one another in this particular work that we are all called to do.

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## **Books published:**

*Heaven's Morning Breaks* Stowmarket: Kevin Mayhew Publishing, 2013

*Whispers of Love* Stowmarket: Kevin Mayhew, 2015