

Michael Hannah

CELEBRANT



The celebrant shift in Scotland: how do celebrants view the rise of their profession and its impact on the contemporary Scottish funeral?

A dissertation for the degree of MSc in End of Life Studies, University of Glasgow, 2023

Executive summary

In December 2023 I completed the dissertation module for my MSc course in End of Life Studies at the University of Glasgow. This was the final module in the course and it kept me busy for the best part of a year. My research topic was the shift in the way funerals are conducted in Scotland. Twenty years ago, the majority of services would have been led by the clergy, with only a handful being explicitly “non-religious” or Humanist. Today around 60% of funerals are conducted by professional officiants who identify as “independent celebrants”, “civil celebrants” or simply “celebrants”. The services they lead may indeed be largely non-religious, but they can also include a variety of religious or spiritual elements such as prayers and hymns – and these may be drawn from diverse traditions, sometimes within the same ceremony.

It would be easy to explain this shift as being simply the result of living in an increasingly secular society, and there’s no doubt that religious adherence in Scotland has declined. But I wondered if this was the whole story. I thought it would be interesting to look at what we mean by secularization and how this might relate to ideas of spirituality. I wanted to examine the importance of personalization, something we see in many areas of society, in driving the celebrant shift. I also thought it would be helpful to look at how the skills that celebrants bring to their work across the entire funeral trajectory might have affected and fuelled the growth of the profession.

With sufficient time and resources I would ideally have liked to seek a wide range of views regarding the celebrant phenomenon. Members of the clergy, funeral directors, crematorium staff – all would have interesting and relevant observations. In particular, the opinions of bereaved families would make for compelling information. Sadly, time and resources were strictly limited. As a practising celebrant myself, I therefore decided to focus on exploring the views of my peers. I set out to interview celebrants from across Scotland and with a range of experience, from pioneers to those recently embarked on their celebrant careers. My aim was to answer the following research questions:

- What do funeral celebrants in Scotland regard as the main causes for the growth of their profession over the last 20 years?
- What are independent celebrants’ views on the meaning of the different elements of the life-centred funeral process (including preliminary conversations and follow-up actions) in Scotland?

In total I carried out 11 interviews by Zoom. I recorded the sessions and prepared transcriptions of the interviews. I then used a technique called thematic analysis to examine the texts and to identify themes in the participants's answers that were relevant to my research questions. Thematic analysis involves multiple readings of the text during which I tagged sections (a word, a sentence, even a longer chunk of text) with a descriptive code or label whenever the interviewee says something that seems relevant to the aims of the research. There is a lot of going back and forth with the codes and the texts in order to collate a list of these tags from all the interviews. I then used this list to identify patterns and themes that in effect represent a distilled version of the research findings. I also earmarked quotes that seemed especially relevant or illuminating for use in the final dissertation write-up.

Given that my research was being conducted as part of an interdisciplinary MSc programme within the social sciences, it was important for me to situate my findings with reference to appropriate academic research and thinking. I therefore read extensively around ideas of secularization, personalization, meaning-making, emotional labour, and theories of grief, and attempted to link my findings with existing theoretical insights and frameworks. In total I described three main themes arising from the interviews:

- Liquid celebrancy: adapting to a shifting funeral landscape.
- Celebrants as storytellers.
- The celebrant as an emotional guide for the bereaved.

The first theme employs the image of liquidity in a nod to the work of the sociologist and philosopher Zygmunt Bauman who used the phrase “liquid modernity” to explore ideas about the postmodern world. I found it a useful metaphor in trying to describe the world of the contemporary funeral where we see a very shifting and changing landscape. I looked at this in terms of secularization, of the use of the word spirituality, and of personalization. In each case, the results of my interviews suggest that things are never as simple as they at first seem. We are a less religious society than before – but people still value having hymns or prayers at funerals and often describe their loved ones being in a “better place”, for example. We see a rise in the use of the word spirituality rather than religion – but there's often confusion about what that precisely means. We look for more personalization in our ceremonies – but still value tradition and doing “the right thing”. In all cases I think the response of celebrants has been a willingness to adapt and I think that adaptability or “liquidity” has played a big part in the rise of celebrant-led services. As things continue to evolve in the world of funerals, that adaptability will continue to be a necessary part of the celebrants' approach.

The second theme of storytelling will come as little surprise to celebrants themselves. However, to me it emphasizes the importance of the funeral rite both to the bereaved family and friends, and to the wider community. Storytelling carries great power and can help people make some sense of their loss. This may be why, in spite of the changes in the funeral and all the challenges we face, from COVID to direct cremations to completely new forms of “disposal”, people still seem to need some form of space where their loved one's story is told. And by placing that story at the core of what they do, celebrants have been able to meet that need and this in turn has led to the rise in demand for the celebrant's services.

The third theme recognizes that a funeral is not just a single event but a process. The celebrant's involvement in this usually begins with a family visit. This may appear to be simply an information exchange: the celebrant explains what can happen in a funeral – the family speak about the person who has died to give the celebrant the detail with which to craft a eulogy. This is certainly the visible work of the visit, but my interviewees all

noted that there was other, less visible, work going on at the same time. Interviewees frequently used the words “trust”, “reassure”, “putting at ease” or “safe” in relation to the family visit and all participants noted that this meeting is potentially difficult for the bereaved. In order to create a safe space in which families feel able to speak openly, celebrants engage in what we might call “emotional work”. It is easy to overlook or undervalue this but it represents a significant part of the celebrant role. And when this work is done well, the family visit can be of great help and comfort in and of itself to the bereaved.

My research revealed a lack of work in this area resulting in the dissertation being a potentially significant contribution to understanding the contemporary Scottish funeral. In terms of practical takeaways for celebrants I believe it highlights the continuing importance of adapting to a fast-changing world without losing sight of tradition and continuity. It acknowledges the power of words and the importance of storytelling. It reveals the key role of the family visit and the necessity of recognising the emotional work that goes there and of how the celebrant is not merely an officiant at a ceremony but rather an emotional guide through a funeral process.

I am very happy to receive comment and feedback on my work.

Michael Hannah

CELEBRANT



07712 892479

michael@mhcelebrant.scot

www.mhcelebrant.scot