

Find a celebrant

You don't have to have someone official to create and lead the funeral ceremony – unless you or the person who has died wants a religious funeral in which case you'll need an authorised religious appointee. Consult the appropriate faith group.

Anyone can lead a funeral service. Reminder: **a funeral has no legal status**. You can create your own funeral ceremony and lead it yourself if you want. But if that's going to be too much for you, your best bet is to find a good **celebrant**.

People who conduct non-religious, semi-religious and spiritual funerals are all called celebrants. It's not a great word but there doesn't seem to be a better one.

A semi-religious funeral is one that may have a hymn or two and a prayer in it, but the service is not led by a religious minister.

Celebrants

Most celebrants conduct both non-religious and semi-religious funerals.

[Humanist celebrants](#) only conduct non-religious funerals and say they'll say no to the inclusion of any act of worship.—like a hymn or a prayer. If you want to sing a hymn for what they call cultural reasons – eg, Abide With Me because of its FA Cup Final association – they'll be happy with that. The same goes for a poem with religious references.

If you want a funeral which expresses spirituality, find an [Interfaith](#) minister.

It's a good idea to do the choosing

You can rely on your funeral director to choose a celebrant for you but it's **a much better idea to find your own**. Start looking as soon as you can. Ring round, talk to them and go with the one you rate highest. Find out how to track down a celebrant below.

Letting the funeral director choose for you

Very few funeral directors will offer you a choice of celebrant. They are happy for you to take your time choosing your flowers, your music, your coffin, all sorts of things, but very few offer a choice of celebrant.

Why not? Two reasons. First, because they pride themselves on being able to match you with the right celebrant. They know their local celebrants, they know what people think of them; some of them have even seen them work. And a few funeral directors *are* very careful to make sure you get the celebrant who's right for you. Not all funeral directors, mind. Some think they're experts but they're not. Some don't try, they just settle for anybody. In any case, even the experts don't know you 1/10th as well as you know yourself, do they?

The second reason why undertakers are reluctant to offer you a choice of celebrant is this: urgent administrative necessity.

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Your funeral director can only make a firm booking with the crematorium or other venue at your preferred time if, *all at the same time*, a) he or she is free, b) the venue is free and c) a celebrant is free. So they make two phone calls, one to the crematorium/venue, the second to the celebrant. If it turns out that exactly the right celebrant is already booked for another funeral, you may be assigned a next-best celebrant (you won't know that).

Most funeral directors would very much rather not wait while you go home, interview celebrants, check when they're available and plump for the one you fancy. Someone else may get in and book the venue. They need to know *now*.

So it all depends very much on you and the sort of funeral you want to create. Perhaps any competent celebrant will do. Or it may be that only exactly the right one will do. So you need to prioritise. Which is more important to you:

- the day and time of the funeral?
- exactly the right celebrant?

If you want to hold out for exactly the right celebrant you'll need to work around their availability and be flexible about the time of the service. That's why it's important to start looking for a celebrant as soon as you can.

Religious?

If it's a religious funeral you want, you probably already know all you need to know. But just in case you don't...

If you want a non-Church of England funeral (Roman Catholic, Muslim, Sikh...) contact your nearest place of worship.

In England, you are entitled to a C of E funeral in your parish church whether or not you've ever been to church. This is because the C of E is the state religion. So Muslims and Sikhs are entitled to a C of E funeral, too (not that they choose to have one, obviously).

Because a lot of people have a semi-detached relationship with the Church of England, but want a C of E funeral, the workload for parish priests can be heavy. If you want your parish priest to conduct the service, dig your toes in and insist. You'll have to work around their availability. If you want a minister who is *not* the local vicar, you can ask your funeral director to find one. If you are not using a funeral director, contact the crematorium and see if they can put you in touch with someone.

Many people, and funeral directors, find that when they phone the parish priest he or she is busy and can't answer. They can be hard to get hold of. A number of parish priests don't like conducting funerals for people they don't know – it's just work. Some parishes will be members of a central hub: when you or the funeral director call they will be able to assign someone at once – though that person may be a Lay Reader, not an ordained priest.

There's likely to be quite a big pool of retired vicars and ministers of other denominations in your area. They don't advertise, so you'll have to contact them through a funeral director, though your crematorium is likely to be able to help you.

Celebrants – what are they like?

A good celebrant will work closely with you, to your instructions, either to create, or help you create, a ceremony that is right for you.

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Celebrants have expertise and experience that will almost certainly be very useful to you, and they'll do as much or as little as you want. They know what works. Their advice is worth taking. Even if you don't think you'll be up to speaking, you can make sure that every word spoken at the funeral is yours or approved by you.

What are they like? Celebrants tend to be middle-aged and well-educated. The best aren't in it for the money if they've got any sense because there's little money to be made. A few excellent celebrants work flat out, make a modest living from their work and somehow manage to stay focussed and sane. Many take no more than three or four services a week or fewer.

It's the sort of job that best suits someone who is self-employed with a portfolio career, or someone who has retired.

Hardly any have a funeral industry background.

Why do they do it? Many were inspired by especially bad or good funerals they have been to. They think funerals are important and they think they have the skills required to deliver good ones. They are driven by a strong sense of vocation.

Not all celebrants are excellent. Some are appalling moneygrubbers and should be thrown off a cliff.

Celebrants have evolved to meet the needs of people for whom a mainstream religious funeral would miss the point. These people want a funeral which

- expresses their own beliefs
- focuses on the life of the person who has died.

Remember: celebrants who specialise in funerals with no act of worship are called humanists. Other celebrants will be happy to conduct a non-religious funeral or include prayers and hymns.

What skills do celebrants have?

A good funeral celebrant needs to be:

- a good listener
- a good writer
- a good performer

That's a rare combination. Just shows you how careful you need to be when choosing one.

Some are trained, others not. Training standards vary greatly, but it is not great training that makes a great celebrant. Training can only get them started. The standard of celebrants, even from the best organisations, varies greatly.

How important will your celebrant be to you?

Many funeral directors regard celebrants as suppliers of an ancillary service. But for you the funeral ceremony is likely to be of the highest importance. The quality of the ceremony will owe a great deal to the relationship you strike up with your celebrant and the quality of their work.

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Your funeral director may show little interest in the funeral service itself. For them, the climax of the event is the arrival of the cortege. Once there, they hand over and play no part in the funeral itself after they have got everyone seated.

Your celebrant will be at least as important to you, in the days leading up to the funeral, as your funeral director – probably more so. That's why you need to choose one yourself, and choose carefully.

How do you choose a celebrant?

Your celebrant works for *you*, not the undertaker. So you can book one direct.

You want a celebrant who shares your values and is demonstrably good. Evidence of training, together with commitment to best practice and continuing professional development, may also be important to you.

Your celebrant will be your chosen representative at the funeral. In short, you are looking for ***'my sort of person'***.

It's worth asking around your friends and finding out if any of them has been to a well-run funeral.

Proceed with caution. The market has been flooded with new celebrants in the last few years. Many of them are substandard.

Some celebrants have websites but, because so many of them get all their work from funeral directors, most don't.

Check out <http://funeralcelebrants.org.uk/>, which lists all funeral celebrants. Search by postcode. Ring around and make a judgement according to what they say about themselves.

Then draw up a shortlist.

Here's who you're looking for

The right celebrant for you won't necessarily be the right celebrant for someone else. It's a very personal choice. Here are most of the attributes and qualities you are looking for. Tick those which are most important to you.

- gender
- personality
- appearance
- training
- membership of a professional body
- accent
- social class
- education
- performance style
- fee

When you make contact with a celebrant, find out how busy they are. You don't want one who spreads him/herself too thin.

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If, after you've called, you still can't decide, ask them to give you the phone number of someone whose funeral they have led. Get a second opinion.

Questions to ask when you phone

When you phone a celebrant, be sure to ask the questions that are important to you. Take a pencil and tick the ones you want to ask.

- How many funerals do you do a week?
- Will you come and see me at home?
- Will it be easy for me to reach you to talk to during the day and in the evenings?
- Can we go on working on the funeral, making changes to it, right up to the day of the funeral?
- Will you check every word with me before the funeral?
- Will you give me a presentation copy of the script afterwards?
- What is the most memorable funeral you have ever taken?
- I'd like to speak to one of your clients. Can you give put me in touch?
- How much do you charge?

Professional bodies

There are organisations which train people, hold them to a code of conduct and list them on their websites. Some of these organisations are reputable. Some are so new that we cannot yet make a judgement.

Some of the best celebrants don't belong to any organisation. The worst don't, either.

The following training and professional organisations offer a degree of reliability and are selective in their entry requirements.

The British Humanist Association (BHA)

The **British Humanist Association** is the pioneer in the field of providing an alternative to a religious funeral. The reputation of its Humanist Ceremonies™ network rides high; everyone speaks well of **humanist celebrants**. Humanist Ceremonies™ celebrants are trained and accredited by the BHA and the network extends across England and Wales. The BHA's sister organisation, the Humanist Society of Scotland, also trains and runs a network of humanist celebrants. All trained and accredited celebrants in the BHA's Humanist Ceremonies™ network agree to abide by its code of conduct.

If you want a hymn or a prayer in the funeral, a humanist celebrant is not for you. He or she will, though, include a period of silence in the ceremony where anyone who wants can say a silent prayer.

Here is what they say about themselves: *"Nothing in a humanist ceremony would offend people who may be uneasy about a non-religious funeral. The idea is not to be hostile to religious beliefs, but to focus in a sincere way on the reality of the life that has ended."*

Humanist celebrants offer a highly personal funeral ceremony.

There are quite a few BHA-trained celebrants who are no longer members of the BHA and will allow some religious elements in the ceremony; and there are celebrants who call themselves humanists but have not been trained by the BHA.

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- Find a BHA-trained **humanist celebrant in England or Wales** at: <http://www.humanism.org.uk/ceremonies/search-for-a-celebrant>
- Find a trained humanist celebrant in Scotland by contacting the Humanist Society of Scotland here: <http://www.humanism-scotland.org.uk/content/celebrants/>

If you'd like to conduct your own humanist funeral, the BHA publishes a helpful book, [*Funerals Without God*](#).

The Institute of Civil Funerals (IoCF)

The Institute of Civil Funerals is the only organisation whose members are holders of the Ofqual accredited national qualification Level 3 Diploma in Funeral Celebrancy. They work with clients who don't want a full religious ceremony, but may want to incorporate some religious elements – a hymn, a prayer. They also work with people who want a godless funeral. A civil funeral is, in their words, *“a funeral 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”*. In other words, it doesn't matter what the celebrant thinks: he or she says what *you* think.

All members of the IoCF abide by a code of conduct, are committed to continuing professional development and have their work monitored by the Institute. Some of them term themselves civil celebrants.

There are Civil Ceremonies-trained funeral celebrants who are not members of the IoCF and there are people out there who call themselves civil celebrants who have not been trained by Civil Ceremonies.

- Find a **Civil Ceremonies**-trained celebrant [here](#).

green fuse

green fuse is run by Totnes-based couple Jane Morrell and Simon Smith, authors of *We Need To Talk About The Funeral—101 Practical Ways To Commemorate and Celebrate a Life*. green fuse offers consultancy, funeral directing and celebrant training. Their celebrants offer the same service as the IoCF and the AOIC. They're mostly really good.

- Find a **green fuse** celebrant [here](#).

The Interfaith Seminary

The **Interfaith Seminary** trains people in a two-year course to “serve the spiritual needs of people from all faiths and none”. Its ministers do not sign up to just one religion. Instead, “the Interfaith Seminary, believing that there is One God/Truth and many paths leading to the Source of All, is grounded in a universal and inclusive approach to spirituality. It is not designed as a rival to traditional religions.”

Interfaith ministers are well suited to people who have their own, personal spiritual beliefs but have not signed up to a mainstream religion. They are also happy to conduct funerals for people who have no faith at all. They specialise in creating highly personal ceremonies and are noted for the care they take.

Find out more [here](#). Click [here](#) to see if there is an interfaith minister near you.

Fellowship of Independent Celebrants Ltd (FOIC)

FOIC celebrants are holders of a NOCN Level 3 qualification in 'Civil Celebrancy in the UK' and they sign up to a code of ethics. They conduct non-religious and semi-religious funerals. Celebrant members are listed on the FOIC website, which you can find [here](#).

Other funeral celebrant organisations

We can't make a judgement about the quality of celebrants trained by any of the following organisations at the moment (we're working on it). Pick up the vibe from their websites. We may have missed some.

[Association of Independent Celebrants](#)

[Fellowship of Independent Celebrants Ltd](#)

[Fellowship of Professional Celebrants](#)

[United Kingdom Society of Celebrants](#)

[County Celebrants Network](#)

[Mulberry Days](#)

[Bespoke Civil Ceremonies](#)

[Ceremony UK](#)

How much does a celebrant cost?

Celebrants cost a lot less than most people spend on flowers. All work for a fixed fee, but may add on mileage if they have to come far. You can contact them as many times as you want for no extra charge.

Reckon to pay from £110-200+ including travel, for which you ought to get ten or more hours' work. The best are usually those who charge the most, of course, but there are superb celebrants out there who come cheap because they are committed to making themselves available to the less well-off. At these rates, none of them is getting rich.

Most undertakers will expect to pay your celebrant's fee on your behalf and invoice it as a third party payment (undertakers term it a disbursement). You may prefer to pay your celebrant direct and of course you can do that.

Can you plan a funeral before someone dies? Before you die?

A celebrant will be pleased to come and see you before you or someone else dies. Highly recommended.

If you have a life limiting illness, or simply want to plan your own funeral, it is a good idea to have the support and agreement of those who will take over where you leave off, so be sure to keep them onside.

Does a celebrant have the same powers as a priest?

A celebrant does not have the powers of a priest. Priestly powers vary from faith group to faith group, but all priests have special powers.

So if you don't want a full-blown religious service but you do want, say, the words of the committal (when the coffin goes into the grave or the curtains are drawn at a crematorium) to be spoken by a priest in order to give them full spiritual power, you are going to need to find a priest to work alongside either you or a celebrant. Most priests like to run the show completely and will not settle for playing a bit part. Remember, a religious funeral is not a tailor-made ceremony, it is a universal ritual which can only be personalised up to a point. Some priests, though, will be quite happy to perform just the religious bits.