

## PROFESSIONAL ORGANISATION

# The Institute of Civil Funerals

St Neots, Cambs, UK

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In recent years in Britain there has been a quiet revolution in the world of funeral ceremonies. It is now common practice for the person leading the funeral to modify or even generate a ceremony based on a visit to the family to talk about the deceased. The ceremony then may include a spoken tribute, music, readings and, if desired, participation by family or friends. As well as the traditional church service, options for ceremonies now include humanist funerals, funerals conducted by an independent celebrant or by clergy flexible about what beliefs are expressed and, since 2002, civil funerals.

A civil funeral is one that 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. This idea originated in Australia over 30 years ago and civil celebrancy is now well-established there, with training courses offered by many colleges, professional associations providing accreditation, and a nationwide advertising network, now via websites. As in the UK, Australians are not bound by any legal requirements or the necessity for a license to conduct funerals.

In the UK, the recently established Institute of Civil Funerals is a non-profitmaking organisation working to improve the quality of funeral ceremonies by encouraging civil funerals and supporting the work of its members. Membership to the institute is usually via a four-day residential course run by a group of full-time tutors, including Tony Walter and the author. The course is externally accredited by the National Open College Network at level three, so that those who pass not only become members of the institute but also receive a recognised qualification.

### Why civil funerals?

Until recently the alternatives open to those who did not want a funeral led by a member of the clergy were a

humanist or an independent celebrant. The British Humanist Association operates as a professional association, with a network of accredited officiants and a selection and training procedure for members, with a supervised probationary period.

In many ways the process and content of civil and humanist funerals are similar as in both cases the ceremony is created entirely by the family and celebrant. However, humanism is an approach to life based on humanity and reason, rather than spirituality, so a humanist ceremony should not include any religious reference. In a civil funeral, on the other hand, the celebrant is free to read a prayer or include hymns or religious music and spiritual references if these are wanted. This reflects the 'pick-and-mix' spirituality of many people today who do not identify with a church, yet are not atheists.

Independent celebrants are, like civil celebrants, able to reflect in the funeral the beliefs and values of the family and the deceased, rather than those of the celebrant. However, they may not have had any specific training or belong to a professional association. Encouragingly, increasing numbers of independents are joining the Institute of Civil Funerals which aims to become the professional body for all those delivering funerals not committed to a particular religious or anti-religious ideology. In all respects a whole new profession has been created with a supporting professional association.

A wide range of individuals is volunteering to train as civil celebrants. They are often inspired by personal experiences of funerals they felt could have been done better, or by a disappointing funeral for a loved one. Most come from a professional background, such as teaching or the police force, which has furnished them with many of the required interpersonal skills.

Newly qualified celebrants introduce

themselves to their local funeral directors. When they are invited to do their first funeral, the institute provides back-up support to give them confidence. The professional service offered to clients includes checking ceremony scripts for accuracy before the funeral, follow-up questionnaires and providing a full ceremony text to the family. After they have conducted a funeral successfully, celebrants become full members of the institute, and this leads to additional training courses and continuous professional development to hone their skills. For example, there is an advanced writing course, and a course on conducting baby and child funerals run by the Child Bereavement Trust.

Although funeral directors and families wishing to organise funerals privately used to have limited choice as to whom they could ask to conduct a ceremony, in many areas of the UK that choice is increasing. The Institute of Civil Funerals and the British Humanist Association now have celebrants in most areas. Funeral directors can often make recommendations, which may include independent celebrants, and suggest the best person to suit a particular family's needs or the wishes of the deceased. ●

Institute of Civil Funerals  
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British Humanist Association  
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