

Godless funerals thrive in ‘post-Catholic’ Ireland

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DUBLIN (RNS) Patricia Wojnar left a 32-year career in interior design to pursue a degree that wasn't in demand: a master's in bereavement studies.

Having seen four family members die early, she wanted to understand how to adapt.

As it turned out, the degree perfectly prepared her to enter one of Ireland's emerging professions.

Wojnar is now a registered civil celebrant, presiding over funerals and weddings for people who refuse to associate with Ireland's scandal-tarred Roman Catholic Church. She's not alone; many newly minted civil celebrants are starting their own businesses as part of Ireland's "post-Catholic" economy.

Although many observers have noted the impact of secularization and child abuse scandals on church membership and finances, only now are the Irish seeing the cultural and socioeconomic reverberations. These include a class of people willing to observe life's most significant milestones outside the church.

"People only get one opportunity to get a funeral right," Wojnar said. "I help them prepare a service which honors the bereaved without being constrained by the convention of religion."

Irish funeral directors estimate that 10 percent of the nearly 30,000 funerals conducted annually are nonreligious. Government data show that about 30 percent of the 21,000 weddings annually are outside any church, up from 5 percent two decades ago.

The growth has come amid a backdrop of church decline. The number of people who call themselves Catholics is at an all-time low. Seminaries have grown barren. And as the government scales back church control of schools, fewer children may be exposed to Catholic rites of passage.

Wojnar takes an occasional interior design assignment to supplement the \$500 for each ceremony. But some among the few dozen civil celebrants in Ireland have turned full time.

Brian Whiteside, the director of ceremonies for the Humanist Association of Ireland, led more than 100 weddings, funerals or naming ceremonies in 2012.

“We’re busier than we ever thought we would be,” Whiteside said. “I thought I would do this as a sideline, but it’s taken over my life.”

Humanists – who believe in ethical values and a sense of compassion – have been at the forefront of performing nonreligious ceremonies. Whiteside said he and his 10 fellow Humanist-sanctioned celebrants have seen consistent growth, topping off at 78 funerals and 200 weddings in 2012.

Deirdre Lonergan is among those who chose a nonreligious wedding because she felt disillusioned with the church. But she needed two ceremonies to marry Eoghan Murphy.

The couple had a government-sanctioned ceremony in a small, unadorned government office without rings, vows, music or a priest. Three days later, they had a ceremony at a hotel with friends, a civil celebrant and all the normal regalia.

The dual ceremonies were needed because Ireland requires someone from the government’s Register of Solemnizers to perform an “official” marriage. Of the 5,600 people on the government’s roster, 4,300 are Catholic clergy.

Until last December, only religious leaders or government workers could become registered. Whiteside performed his first official wedding this spring, meaning couples such as Lonergan and Murphy now have a secular option that allows them to avoid the drab government ceremony altogether.

Funeral directors, chaplains, government registers and singers are among those who have signed up to become nonreligious celebrants. Hotels have hosted wedding fairs to showcase themselves as possible secular locales, and a few funeral directors have

also recognized that customer preferences are changing.

Massey's, a Dublin funeral home, spent \$200,000 last year to open the first venue designed specifically to host civil funerals. Another Dublin funeral home, Legacy, launched a first-of-its-kind service last May that allows people to book funerals entirely online.

These entrepreneurs see themselves replacing the shrinking pool of priests. By one estimate, the number of Irish parish priests will drop from 2,000 today to a few hundred by 2042. If they want to bury a loved one without a lengthy wait for a priest, Wojnar said many families may soon have to choose a civil celebrant.

Compared to a church service, civil celebrations are more likely to include poems, pop music and personal messages. Wojnar has led ceremonies where families played songs by Bob Dylan or the Rolling Stones. She's even performed a funeral for an animal lover with dogs and cats in the room.

The church is still debating its response to the cultural shifts. Some priests have relaxed church protocols to allow similar personalization, but at least one leader prefers that people who lack a commitment to Catholicism stay away.

"I don't want a church which people use at particular moments or use as a comfort zone," said Dublin Archbishop Diarmuid Martin.

Meanwhile, leaders on the religious right in Ireland say the move toward liberalization will come to an end, and religious institutions will once again thrive.

"It will eventually dawn on people that our dominant philosophy of individualism at all costs is doing no good," said David Quinn, who runs the Iona Institute, a conservative think tank.

Yet even if religion rebounds under pressure to reform, Wojnar said her new profession is here to stay.

"People who respect, even practice a religion, will and do choose the civil option for many reasons," she said. "I see this as a profession in growth despite what happens on the religious map."