**Four Funerals and a Wedding – the Life of a Celebrant, Jane Arnold**

Those of you who were at the October meeting of the Stratford Guild may have been wondering exactly what a celebrant does and how they become a celebrant. Jane gave us some background on the subject but I decided to ‘Google’ it for myself. What a surprise I got. There is so much to read on the subject but to start with just how one can become a celebrant.

Jane introduced herself and started by describing the training that was involved before she was able to be licensed as a celebrant. The licensed celebrant can then officiate at weddings, funerals, naming ceremonies, renewal of vows and animal ceremonies. Jane’s training, which lasted 6 months, was done on-line through Skype; she was nervous at first but found it worked very effectively for her. At first she only wanted to perform ‘happy things’ but soon found that being a celebrant for funerals and memorial ceremonies was very moving.

The ceremonies can be performed anywhere, with the choice of venue decided by the families involved. Funerals can, for example, be performed at woodland burial sites. With the help of the celebrant the family can choose to have hymns, readings, poems.

When she talked about her experiences of weddings she described how she met up with the wedding couple several times so that she could get to know them and help them decide just how their ceremony could be made personal for themselves. Jane will encourage the couple to write their own vows. This reminded me of the wedding ceremony of our younger son and his now wife which was performed in a wooded glade just outside Johannesburg, South Africa. In this case the celebrant was a husband and wife team. The experience was completely designed to reflect their wishes. We were welcomed to the ceremony by a group of school children playing steel drums (our son was teaching at the time). Although it did seem strange to us the whole wedding was moving. The celebrant couple also carried out the legal side of the wedding. This is not the case here so the couple will still have a ceremony with a registrar.

Jane did add that she often keeps a small piece of chocolate to hand to give to the groom if he is very nervous. That helps to calm him down.

Jane talked quite a bit about naming ceremonies and the items that she will suggest be used. For instance, a large lit candle for the child who is being named and then friends/relatives be given smaller candles which they light from the child’s candle. She often uses balloons too.

It was clear that not only did Jane give a lot of guidance and support to the people involved in the ceremonies at which she officiates but she also got a lot out of it herself. There is clearly a place in our society for a secular approach to important rites of passage in people’s lives.

**Heather Balston**