



Prayer and Sacred Place Project

Publications Arising from Empirical Studies on Prayer and Sacred Place in England and Wales

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Journal Articles

Listening to prayers: An analysis of prayers left in a country church in rural England

ap Siôn, T. (2007). Listening to prayers: An analysis of prayers left in a country church in rural England. *Archiv für Religionspsychologie*, 29, 199-226.

Abstract

This study builds on a long-established tradition within the psychology of religion concerned with the analysis and interpretation of prayer. Drawing on 917 prayer-cards left in one rural church over a sixteenth-month period, the analysis distinguishes between three aspects of intercessory and supplicatory prayer defined as reference, intention, and objective. Results of the analysis showed that only 4% of prayer requests had the prayer author as a key focus, and that there was a preference to pray for other people and for world or global issues (90%). Specific concrete issues were not included in 29% of prayer requests, but in the 71% of requests where concrete contexts were provided, 76% of these were concerned with illness, death, and conflict or disaster. Overall, there were more examples of secondary control (57%) than primary control (43%), and primary control was found more often in requests which had the prayer author as a key focus and in the categories of illness, growth, work, relationships, and general requests. These results give rise to a number of hypotheses regarding prayers authors' perceptions of prayer and its purpose.

Distinguishing between intention, reference and objective in an analysis of prayer requests for health and well-being: Eavesdropping from the rural vestry

ap Siôn, T. (2008). Distinguishing between intention, reference and objective in an analysis of prayer requests for health and well-being: Eavesdropping from the rural vestry. *Mental Health, Religion, and Culture*, 11 (1), 53-65.

Abstract

The present study proposes an approach to analysing prayer for health and well-being within the developing research context of exploring written prayer requests. This approach, building on and modifying the conceptual framework devised for analysing prayer requests left in churches, is examined on a total of 1067 prayer cards left in one rural church over a 16-month period. The conceptual framework distinguishes between three aspects of intercessory and supplicatory prayer defined as reference, intention, and objective. For prayer reference, only 5% of prayer examples were for the prayer author alone, while the majority of prayer examples were for other people who were usually family members and friends (81%). For prayer intention, nearly one-third of all the requests made were for explicit physical and mental-health concerns. Many of the requests also included important affective intentions where, for example, prayer authors communicated with others, expressed emotions, empathized with others, and identified needs. For prayer objective, prayer examples relating to health and well-being were largely part of primary control requests (69%) where the prayer authors sought to influence and suggest desirable outcomes to their prayers. From the results of the analysis, a number of conclusions are then drawn.

Ordinary prayer and the rural church: An empirical study of prayer cards

ap Siôn, T. (2009). Ordinary prayer and the rural church: An empirical study of prayer cards. *Rural Theology*, 7 (1), 17-31.

Abstract

The study explores the content of ordinary people's prayers by analysing 1,067 prayer cards left in one rural church over a sixteenth-month period. The analysis is placed in the theoretical context of ordinary theology, and it uses a conceptual framework which distinguishes between three aspects of ordinary intercessory and ordinary supplicatory prayer defined as reference, intention, and objective (ap Siôn, 2007). Results of the analysis show that specific concrete issues were not included in 30% of prayer requests, but in the 70% of requests where concrete contexts were provided, 29% cited illness and 20% death. Overall, there were more examples of primary control (55%) than secondary control (45%). The results, alongside selected exemplification of categories, identify the concerns of ordinary theologians expressed in a rural ministry context and their contribution to the empirical study of ordinary theology.

Implicit religion and ordinary prayer

ap Siôn, T. (2010). Implicit religion and ordinary prayer. *Implicit Religion*, 13 (3), 275-294.

Abstract

Research in implicit religion has been conducted in a wide range of contexts, including those commonly associated with explicit religion. This study explores ordinary prayer by analysing 1,067 prayer cards left in one rural church over a sixteenth-month period. The analysis is placed in theoretical contexts defined by the study of implicit religion and the study of ordinary prayer. It uses a conceptual framework which distinguishes between three aspects of ordinary—intercessory and supplicatory—prayer, defined as reference, intention, and objective (ap Siôn 2007), and explores areas relevant to implicit religion by drawing on Lord's (2006) nine types of implicit religion. Results of the analysis show that specific concrete issues were not included in 30% of prayer requests, but in the 70% of requests where concrete contexts were provided, 29% cited illness and 20% death. Overall, there were more examples of primary control (55%) than secondary control (45%), and primary control was found more often in requests which had the prayer author as a key focus and in the categories of illness, growth, work, relationships, conflict or disaster, sport or recreation, travel and general requests. Secondary control was found mainly in death and the open intention category. These results, alongside the exemplification of categories, give rise to a number of hypotheses regarding ordinary prayer and implicit religion.

Praying ‘online’: The ordinary theology of prayer intentions posted on the internet

ap Siôn, T. & Edwards, O. (2012). Praying ‘online’: The ordinary theology of prayer intentions posted on the internet. *Journal of beliefs and values*, 33 (1), 95-109.

Abstract

Astley’s construct of ordinary theology takes seriously listening to the religious expression and experience of ordinary people, both churched and unchurched. One method by which this has already been achieved is through the empirical analysis of the content of ordinary people’s intercessory prayer requests left in hospitals and churches. Building on this research tradition, the current study analyses 290 prayer requests posted on the Church of England’s ‘Say one for Me’ website using ap Siôn’s ‘general’ framework for analysing intercessory prayer requests. This general framework distinguishes between three aspects of intercessory prayer styled as prayer intention, prayer reference, and prayer objective. Results demonstrated that the ‘general’ framework performed well within the new context of online prayer requests and enabled the findings to be compared with those from two earlier prayer card studies by ap Siôn. The main findings show that, in terms of prayer reference, the majority of prayer requests were for other people known to the prayer author (57%), although a significant proportion were for the prayer authors themselves (34%); in terms of prayer intention, most prayer requests were concerned with illness (26%), relationships (24%), work (19%), and growth (18%); and in terms of prayer objective, most prayer requests employed primary control (84%) rather than secondary control (16%). When the online prayer results were compared with previous prayer card results, using the same analytical framework, online prayer authors were found to be distinctive in terms of prayer reference, prayer intention, and prayer objective. The reasons for these differences are discussed and applied to the Church’s provision for intercessory prayer.

Keywords: prayer; ordinary theology; Church of England; online church; internet

Coping through prayer: An empirical study in implicit religion concerning prayers for children in hospital

ap Siôn, T. & Nash, P. (2013). Coping through prayer: An empirical study in implicit religion concerning prayers for children in hospital. *Mental Health, Religion and Culture*, 16 (9), 936-952.

Abstract

This study links two fields of empirical research. The first field (grounded in empirical theology) is concerned with ordinary prayer and that aspect of implicit religion discernable within explicit religious expressions. The second field (grounded in the psychology of religion) is concerned with private prayer as a significant method of coping in health-related contexts. Few previous studies, however, have focussed on the specific components comprising the content of such prayers and their concern for health issues relating to others, such as family and friends. The present study addresses this gap by employing the analytical framework for health and well-being devised previously in a content analysis of 583 prayers left in the chapel of a children's hospital in England. The conceptual and practical applications of the new research findings are discussed.

Keywords: prayer; health and well being; coping; hospital chaplaincy; ordinary theology; implicit religion

Say One for Me: The implicit religion of prayers from the street

ap Siôn, T. & Edwards, O. (2013). Say One |For Me: The implicit religion of prayers from the street. *Mental Health, Religion and Culture*, 16 (9), 922-935.

Abstract

Within the field of the psychology of prayer, there has been a growing interest in empirical studies concerned with the analysis of the content of ordinary people's private prayers, with a view to providing a more nuanced understanding of the psychological correlates of prayer among those who engage in the activity. One research tradition has focused on the content analysis of intercessory prayer requests left in church-related settings, and it is within this context that the present study is located, examining 417 intercessory prayer requests, collected on the streets by bishops in the Church of England as part of the 2011 "Say One for Me" Lent Prayer initiative. The study was informed by the constructs of implicit religion and ordinary theology, and employed ap Siôn's general analytical framework for intercessory prayer requests. Three types of implicit religion were found to be present in the prayer content: societal consensus, the source of explicit religion, and the effect of explicit religion, and the significance of these results is discussed.

Keywords: implicit religion; psychology; prayer; bishops; Church of England

Listening to the prayer board in Southwark Cathedral

ap Siôn, T. (2015). Prayers from the inner city: Listening to the prayer board in Southwark Cathedral. *Research in the Social Scientific Study of Religion*, 26, 99-119.

Abstract

Although there are numerous empirical studies of the practice of prayer among ordinary people, there have been far fewer empirical studies exploring the content of personal prayer and the influence of location and situation on what people pray. The ap Siôn Analytic Framework for Intercessory Prayer (apSAFIP) model was developed to enable multiple studies to be conducted within different church-related contexts with a view to addressing this issue. This study presents an analysis of 958 prayer requests posted on the prayer board of Southwark Cathedral in London, UK, using the apSAFIP model which distinguishes among prayer intention, prayer reference and prayer objective. The results are compared with other cathedral prayer studies that have employed the same analytic tool, using ‘ordinary theology’ as an interpretative lens.

The Church of England's Pray One for Me intercessory prayer site:

A virtual cathedral?

ap Siôn, T. (2016). The Church of England's Pray One for Me intercessory prayer site: A virtual cathedral? *Journal of Beliefs and Values*, 37, 78-92.

Abstract

Over the past decade there has been a growing number of studies examining the prayer content of people's personal prayers left in intercessory church-related contexts. Since 2012, these studies have extended to include the cathedral intercessory prayer board and the online intercessory prayer site. Both 'the cathedral' and 'the online site' are distinctive contexts for intercessory prayer in terms of their openness and accessibility for a broad range of people, who are allowed to enter and use these prayer facilities. What is not known, however, is whether the cathedral prayer board and the online site are functioning in similar ways. This study presents an analysis of 500 prayers posted on the Church of England's 'Pray One for Me' (POFM) website over a period of six months in 2012. The analysis employs the ap Siôn Analytic Framework for Intercessory Prayer (apSAFIP), which distinguishes among prayer intention, prayer reference, and prayer objective. The results of the analysis are compared with the results from recent cathedral studies employing the same analytic tool, and it is concluded that these two prayer contexts are functioning differently.

Creating a place of prayer for the ‘other’: A comparative case study in Wales exploring the effects of re-shaping congregational space in an Anglican cathedral

ap Siôn, T. (2017). Creating a place of prayer for the ‘other’: A comparative case study in Wales exploring the effects of re-shaping congregational space in an Anglican cathedral. *Journal of Empirical Theology*, 30, 218-235.

Abstract

Provision of spaces for personal prayer and reflection has become a common phenomenon within historic churches and cathedrals in England and Wales, offering an example of devotional activity that operates largely outside that of traditional gathered congregations, but also in relationship with them. Over the past decade, the apSAFIP (the ap Siôn Analytic Framework for Intercessory Prayer) has been employed to examine the content of personal prayer requests left in various church-related locations, mapping similarities and differences in prayers’ concerns. Building on this research tradition, the present study examines whether changes to physical environment in an Anglican cathedral in Wales has an effect on the personal prayer activity occurring within it, with a particular focus on intercessory prayer requests.

Keywords: intercessory prayer – personal prayer – congregational studies – sacred place – cathedral studies – apSAFIP

Lighting candles and writing prayers: Observing opportunities for spiritual practices in churches in rural Cornwall

ap Siôn, T. (2018). Lighting candles and writing prayers: Observing opportunities for spiritual practices in churches in rural Cornwall. *Research in the Social Scientific Study of Religion*, 29, 54-74.

Abstract

Although there has been a growing number of empirical studies examining the content of written prayer requests left on prayer boards and in prayer books in cathedrals and churches, there has been no study of the contexts in which such personal devotional activities take place. In a survey of provision in nineteen churches in North Cornwall during August 2013, the present study aimed to explore whether and how rural churches provide for personal prayer and reflection for those outside their gathered congregations. Results indicated that where provision for personal prayer and reflection was evident, it usually took one or more forms, including opportunity to: enter an ‘open’ church; write prayer requests; light votive candles; or add names to memorial books. It is argued that analyses of these physical contexts may offer important insights into and educational opportunities for how churches understand and express their ministry to visitors seeking this kind of personal devotional space within their church buildings.

Keywords: prayer, sacred place, congregational studies, rural church, church visitors, church buildings.

Such faith

ap Siôn (2018). Such faith. *Rural Theology*, 16 (1), 51-53.

Abstract

Drawing on Luke7: 1–10 (The Centurion’s Slave), this study offers an example of ‘standing theology’ reflecting on the complexity of faith and the relationships inspired by faith within the distinctive sacred space of cathedral and church buildings. The occasion was the united service of the Bro Tysilio Ministry Area, at St Mary’s Church, Pentraeth, on the last Sunday in May.

Book Chapters

Interpreting God's activity in the public square: Accessing the ordinary theology of personal prayer

ap Siôn, T. (2011). Interpreting God's activity in the public square: Accessing the ordinary theology of personal prayer. In L.J. Francis and H.G. Ziebertz (Eds.), *The public significance of religion*, (pp. 315-342). Leiden: Brill.

This study sets out to explore the ordinary theology of prayer requests in order to illuminate ways in which ordinary individuals envisage God impacting on matters of significance to the public square. This is approached by locating the study within the research tradition of ordinary prayer, before introducing an analytical framework devised to access the ordinary theology of the authors of 1,067 prayer-request cards left in a rural Anglican church. Selected results of the analyses are presented and these form the basis for a series of conclusions of relevance to matters of significance to the public square.

Ordinary prayer and the rural church: An empirical study of prayer cards

ap Siôn, T. (2012). Ordinary prayer and the rural church: An empirical study of prayer cards. In L.J. Francis and M. Robbins (Eds.), *Rural life and rural church* (pp. 64-79). London: Equinox.

Many rural churches offer an invitation to those passing through their doors to pause, to reflect and to compose a request for prayer. The present study was established to listen to and to analyse the prayer requests left by ordinary people within one rural church. The analysis is placed within the context of ordinary theology and its practical expression through ordinary prayer.

Ordinary prayer and the activity of God: Reading a cathedral prayer board

ap Siôn, T. (2013). Ordinary prayer and the activity of God: Reading a cathedral prayer board. In J. Astley and L.J. Francis (Eds.). *Exploring ordinary theology: Everyday Christian believing and the Church*, (pp. 147-158). Farnham: Ashgate.

A number of empirical studies have examined the beliefs of ordinary theologians in relation to central Christian doctrines, through interviews with churchgoers. A complementary tradition of empirical studies has also sought to gain insight into the beliefs of ordinary theologians, both churched and unchurched, through content analyses of personal intercessory prayer requests left in church or chapelrelated settings in England (Brown and Burton, 2007; Burton, 2009, 2010; ap Siôn, 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010, 2011, 2012; ap Siôn and Edwards, 2012a, 2012b; Hancocks and Lardner, 2007), the USA (Cadge and Daglian, 2008; Grossoehme, 1996; Grossoehme et al., 2011; Grossoehme et al., 2010) and Germany (Lee, 2009; Schmied, 2002). Qualitative data of this type has enabled relatively large, broadly based groups to be surveyed within the contexts of church, hospital, shrine and website, where both churchgoers and non-churchgoers used open-access intercessory prayer facilities.

Applying and testing the ap Siôn Analytic Framework for Intercessory Prayer

ap Siôn, T. (2015). Applying and testing the ap Siôn Analytic Framework for Intercessory Prayer (apSAFIP): Exploring prayer requests left in an English cathedral. In L. Woodhead and G. Giordan (Eds.), *A sociology of prayer* (pp. 169-189). Farnham: Ashgate.

This chapter aims to describe and justify the approach taken by the ap Siôn Analytic Framework for Intercessory Prayer (apSAFIP), rooted within theoretical frameworks proposed by empirical theology, ordinary theology and the psychology of religion, and to review the findings of those initial studies through which the approach was developed. It also aims to apply the approach to a discrete sample of 1,658 prayer requests taken from over 10,000 prayer requests systematically harvested from Lichfield Cathedral over an 18-month period. Three main conclusions are drawn as a result of this process. Firstly, the apSAFIP worked well in the new intercessory prayer context of an English cathedral. Secondly, when the results of this study are compared with previous studies employing the apSAFIP a number of similarities and differences are found. Thirdly, it is recommended that more replications of studies using the apSAFIP.

Ministry of the cathedral prayer-board

ap Siôn, T. (2015). Ministry of the cathedral prayer-board. In L.J. Francis (Ed.), *Anglican cathedrals in modern life* (pp.131-153). New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Although church congregations in England and Wales continue to decline, churches and cathedrals are reaching out in new ways to respond to the spiritual quest of those who choose to visit these ancient buildings. In this environment the prayer board at Bangor Cathedral has attracted increasing interest in recent years. This study presents an analysis of one thousand prayer requests posted on this prayer board, drawing on two fields of theory. The first field of theory concerns ordinary theology as defined by Jeff Astley. The second field of theory concerns an analytic framework for identifying the constituent components of ordinary prayer, distinguishing between prayer intention, prayer reference, and prayer objective.