Prayers from the Inner City: Listening to the Prayer Board in Southwark Cathedral

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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.

Keywords


There have been numerous, largely quantitative, empirical studies concerned with mapping the practice of prayer in ordinary people’s lives, which have made a significant contribution to knowledge of the practice of prayer in four important areas (ap Siôn & Francis, 2009). The first area explores who prays, drawing on data from social surveys (Francis, 1982; Halman, 2001), studies on behaviour, attitudes and values of religious people (Kaldor, Dixon & Powell, 1999; Woolever & Bruce, 2002), and surveys that quantify and contextualize prayer in people’s lives (Poloma & Gallup, 1991; Krause & Chatters, 2005). The second area explores when people pray, looking at a range of contexts such as personal health and physical illness (McCaffrey, Eisenberg, Legedza, Davis, & Phillips, 2004), parents with ill children (De Vellis, De Vellis & Spilsburg, 1988),

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marital conflict (Butler, Gardner & Bird, 1998), general coping (Ellison & Taylor, 1996), finance and work-related problems (Francis, 1984), and those working in care contexts (Schneider & Kastenbaum, 1993). The third area explores the objective effects of prayer on people (Byrd, 1988; Krucoff et al., 2005) or on living organisms (Loehr, 1959). The fourth area explores the subjective effects of prayer on behaviour and attitudes (Lambert, Fincham, Braithwaite, Graham, & Beach, 2009), positive self-perception (Krause, 2004), anxiety and related states (Harris, Schoneman & Carrera, 2005), resilience and coping (Brown & Nicassio, 1987), and spiritual health (Francis & Robbins, 2005). There has been less research on the content of personal prayer and the relationship between personal prayer, location and situation. Although quantifying aspects of prayer is both useful and predictive, a more detailed knowledge and understanding of prayer content can provide a better indication of which aspects of prayer are significant in particular contexts.

Studying Prayer Content

Studies examining prayer content fall into two main categories: studies accessing the content of prayers through surveys of people's reported experience (Janssen, de Hart & den Draak, 1990; Ladd & Spilka, 2002; Bade & Cook, 2008) and studies that access the content of prayers directly, for which there is a growing body of research literature. For example, there are analyses of the content of personal intercessory prayer requests left in church or chapel-related settings in England or Wales (Brown & Burton, 2007; Burton, 2009, 2010; ap Siôn, 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010, 2011, 2012; ap Siôn & Edwards, 2012, 2013; ap Siôn & Nash, 2013; Hancocks & Lardner, 2007), the USA (Cadge & 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 outside the contexts of formal church-related worship. Recently, this literature has been extended to include analyses of prayer requests left in cathedrals in England and Wales (ap Siôn, 2013; ap Siôn, 2015a, in press; ap Siôn, 2015b, in press).

An Analytic Model for Personal Intercessory Prayer: The ApSAFIP

A weakness in exploring the content of personal intercessory prayer requests is that they mainly comprise single studies, which are not replicated in multiple