

**Original citation:**

ap Siôn, Tania. (2016) The Church of England's pray one for me intercessory prayer site : a virtual cathedral? Journal of Beliefs & Values, 37 (1). pp. 78-92.

**Permanent WRAP URL:**

<http://wrap.warwick.ac.uk/78828>

**Copyright and reuse:**

The Warwick Research Archive Portal (WRAP) makes this work by researchers of the University of Warwick available open access under the following conditions. Copyright © and all moral rights to the version of the paper presented here belong to the individual author(s) and/or other copyright owners. To the extent reasonable and practicable the material made available in WRAP has been checked for eligibility before being made available.

Copies of full items can be used for personal research or study, educational, or not-for profit purposes without prior permission or charge. Provided that the authors, title and full bibliographic details are credited, a hyperlink and/or URL is given for the original metadata page and the content is not changed in any way.

**Publisher's statement:**

"This is an Authors Original Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in Journal of Beliefs & Values on 08/03/2016 available online:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/10.1080/13617672.2016.1141531>

**A note on versions:**

The version presented here may differ from the published version or, version of record, if you wish to cite this item you are advised to consult the publisher's version. Please see the 'permanent WRAP url' above for details on accessing the published version and note that access may require a subscription.

For more information, please contact the WRAP Team at: [wrap@warwick.ac.uk](mailto:wrap@warwick.ac.uk)

The Church of England's Pray One for Me intercessory prayer site: a virtual cathedral?

Tania ap Siôn

University of Warwick, Coventry, UK

*Correspondence*

Dr Tania ap Siôn  
St Mary's Centre  
Llys Onnen  
Abergwyngregyn  
Gwynedd  
Wales, UK  
LL33 0LD

*e-mail*            [t.ap-sion@warwick.ac.uk](mailto:t.ap-sion@warwick.ac.uk)

*website*         [www.st-marys-centre.org](http://www.st-marys-centre.org)

### **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' 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.

*Keywords:* intercessory prayer, online prayer, religion online, online religion, cathedral studies, Church of England, virtual religion, Internet

## **Introduction**

Intercessory prayer is commonly understood as prayer that is offered on behalf of others. Although there has been a large number and variety of studies relating to the practice of prayer, studies exploring intercessory prayer specifically are relatively limited, both in quantity and scope. In addition, serious empirical enquiry concerning the features of online prayer is almost non-existent. The present study is contextualized within the constructs of ‘intercessory prayer’ and ‘religion and the Internet’, and seeks to investigate characteristics relating to the practice of online intercessory prayer.

### **Intercessory prayer**

A range of empirical studies has focused on the practice of intercessory prayer. These studies have largely been concerned with exploring the question of whether praying for others has any discernible objective effects on those who are being prayed for. This interest may be traced back as far as the early empirical enquiries of Sir Francis Galton (1872) in relation to people and to the experiments of Loehr (1959) in relation to other living organisms. However, it was not until the 1960s onwards that research exploring the objective effects of intercessory prayer began to burgeon, applying research methodologies derived from contemporary medical science to the question. As such, many of these studies are set within medical contexts and utilise distant, double-blind or triple-blind random control trials to minimize the risk of contaminating influences in order to test the efficacy of intercessory prayer as a medical intervention. Reviews of the literature in the form of meta-analyses provide a useful and comparative overview of methodologies and results (for example, Hodge, 2007, and Roberts, Ahmed and Hall, 2008), which indicate that the experiments have produced mixed results, providing limited evidence to support the position that intercessory prayer has objective effects when measured within these defined parameters.

A considerably smaller and more recent group of studies has begun to explore whether intercessory prayer has any subjective effects on those doing the praying through the use of randomized controlled trials, and has produced some initial positive results. For example, Krause and Arbor (2003) examined the relationship between praying for others, financial strain, and physical health status in later life, which concluded that praying for others may protect against the negative effects of financial strain on physical health, while praying for material things have no such buffer effect. Bremner and Arbor (2011) studied the effect of offering prayers for those who ‘mistreat’ the pray-er on anger and aggression, and found that participants who ‘prayed for’ rather than ‘thought about’ a person who had angered them displayed less aggressive attitudes.

Over the past two decades, there has been a growing body of research interested in the intercessory prayer content of prayers left in *physical* church-related contexts, including hospital chapels, churches (or shrines), and cathedrals, as well as prayers gathered on the street. Prayers left in hospital chapels have been studied in England (Hancocks & Lardner, 2007; ap Siôn & Nash, 2013) and the USA (Cadge & Daglian, 2008; Grossoehme, 1996, Grossoehme, VanDyke *et al*, 2010; Grossoehme, Jacobson *et al*, 2011); prayers left in churches (or shrines) have been studied in England (ap Siôn, 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010, 2011; Brown & Burton, 2007; Burton, 2009, 2010) and Germany (Lee, 2009; Schmied, 2002); prayers left in cathedrals have been studied in England (ap Siôn, 2015a, 2015b) and Wales (ap Siôn, 2013, 2015c); and one study examined prayers gathered by Anglican bishops on the streets of English cities (ap Siôn & Edwards, 2013). These studies have provided valuable information about what people pray for in physical intercessory contexts, when they are given the opportunity to do so, and they have also drawn on interpretive insights from a number of fields such as empirical theology, the psychology of religion, and sociology, for example.

Within this research tradition, the ap Siôn Analytic Framework for Intercessory Prayer (apSAFIP) was developed to address the lack of general analytical framework available to replicate analyses of intercessory prayer across a variety of different locations and contexts (ap Siôn, 2015a). It was contended that replications of this kind would increase understanding of intercessory prayer and help inform the provision offered. Comparative results from studies employing the apSAFIP (which differentiates between three primary foci – prayer reference, prayer intention, and prayer objective) have demonstrated that, although there are similarities among intercessory prayers offered in different contexts and locations in England and Wales, there are also significant variances, supporting the conclusion that intercessory prayer may be working differently according to context (church, cathedral, hospital chapel, street) and location (rural, urban, shrine, parish).

There has been only one small-scale study examining the content of intercessory prayers left on an online Christian prayer site (ap Siôn & Edwards, 2012), and this also employed the apSAFIP. The analysis of the 290 prayer requests posted on the Church of England's Say One For Me (SOFM) website indicated differences between prayers left on the online prayer site and prayers left in the physical church-building context for all three foci comprising the analytic framework (prayer reference, prayer intention, and prayer objective), and recommended that a second, larger study of online intercessory prayer requests was required to test these findings.

### **Religion and the Internet**

Although the Internet has been in existence since the 1960s, it has only been during the past couple of decades that rapid technological developments and widespread accessibility to the World Wide Web have transformed its position and influence on everyday life in most contemporary societies. There is no aspect of contemporary living that has

remained unaffected by the Internet, and that includes religion. The relationship between the 'online' and 'offline' worlds has been described in these terms:

The Internet is both a mirror and a shadow of the offline world. That is, there is very little in the real world that is not electronically reproduced online, and very little online that has no offline foundation or referent. (Dawson & Cowan, 2004, p. 5)

When approaching the study of religion and the Internet, Helland (2000) was the first to identify and distinguish between two significant conceptual categories of 'religion online' and 'online religion'. 'Religion online' is defined as focused on the provision of information about and from a religious organisation or group (as one way interaction), while 'online religion' invites people to participate online in religious activities such as prayer, for example (as reciprocal interaction). It is recognised, however, that frequently both 'religion online' and 'online religion' are present in any one site associated with religion on the Internet. Using and exploring the 'religion online' and the 'online religion' paradigm, Young (2004) investigated how mainstream Christian traditions have made use of the Internet to 'bridge the gap' between the provision of information (religion online) and the provision of experiential religious practice on the Internet (online religion). After examining 'case study' websites in the USA belonging to the Episcopal Church, Lutheran Church and United Methodist Church as well as the sites Catholic Online, and the Church for All, Young concludes by arguing that the two types of religious activity found on the Internet (religion online and online religion) co-exist in a complementary relationship with one another:

Religion online and online religion often exist in continuity rather than opposition in Internet Christianity. Christian websites that appear to be oriented primarily toward the provision of information also include components that connect that information in some way to religious practice. Similarly, instances of online Christian religious practice do not sever themselves from the offline world. (Young, 2004, p. 96)

When approaching the question of whether anything radically new is happening in ‘online religion’, Jacobs (2007) suggests that the virtual is being constructed as simulation rather than as a ‘real’ or a ‘radical new thing’ by its website creators, although it may be possible and useful to identify clear online ‘sacred spaces’ in which people participate in various ritual activities, such as the posting of online prayer in the online church and the offering of puja in the online Hindu temple. Foltz and Foltz (2003) explored the extent to which the Internet was ‘recreating’ religious community online by surveying site users in five distinctive contexts, and they found that in their sample there was no evidence to show that such sites were being seen as replacements of local church communities but were being viewed as extensions of the ministry of the church.

However, other studies have presented the relationship between religion and the Internet in different terms. For example, Campbell (2005) finds the notion of ‘sacramental space’ in relation to the Internet a useful conceptual model. While recognising that people utilize the Internet in a wide variety of ways, ‘sacramental space’ gives explicit recognition to a significant and growing way in which the Internet is being used in relation to spiritual activity. Therefore, ‘sacramental space’ directs the focus to how the Internet is used to ‘help form religious identity, as a space for personal spiritual pursuits, as a social spiritual support sphere, and as a spiritual tool’ (p.20). Another study by Hutchings (2010) also complexifies and enriches the picture. Hutchings’ (2010) four-year ethnographic study of five online churches, specifically concerned with the fluid and complex relationships between online and offline activity of those who use Christian blogs, forums, chat rooms, video streams and virtual worlds, raises both possibilities and areas of concern for churches as they are traditionally conceived. Online religion is located within the much broader phenomenon of the wider Internet, which itself ‘is part of a shift in society towards “personal communities” and “networked individualism”, with support and relationships increasingly provided through

ever-changing, loosely-tied webs of connections maintained through digital communications' (p. 18), and, in addition, it is argued that this may mean that 'the traditional emphasis of the parish church on service in the community and mutual support may prove difficult to maintain, and the boundaries of "Christian" society and theology could well be eroded' (p. 18). Campbell (2012) also places online religion within the wider context of current societal shifts in the Western world, and uses the term 'networked religion' (comprising networked community, storied identities, shifting authority, convergent practice, and a multi-site reality) to describe how religion is functioning online.

Many commentators discussing online religion have raised the issue of the changing face of religious authority, which has particular resonance for traditional religions built around this concept, although as Dawson and Cowan (2004, p.2) point out a 'crisis of authority' is also evident in contemporary religious traditions like Neopaganism. Campbell (2007) investigating authority in religious contexts with reference to mainstream Christian, Jewish and Muslim religious traditions, cautions against an approach that does not recognise the complex multi-layered nature of authority in these religions. She writes:

Attempts to answer the question, "How does the Internet affect religious authority?" need to identify clearly what specific form of authority is at play, if not, they [researchers] are in danger of failing to capture the complexity of the relationship between the online and the offline religious communities. (Campbell, 2007, p. 1058)

The four layers of authority Campbell (2007) identifies are: religious hierarchy, religious structures, religious ideology, and religious text, while recognising that what religious authority may be will probably be specific to both religious community and context.

Although studies of online and offline religion have begun to build up a significant body of research over the past decade from both theoretical and empirical perspectives, there

continues to be a need for further rigorous empirical studies which are able to explore how religion is being practised online, and how this relates to offline contexts.

### **Research agenda**

Prayer requests posted on prayer boards, prayer books and online sites are examples of intercessory prayer provision and participation within a growing number of church-related contexts in England and Wales. In these contexts, intercessory prayer is often present in a number of different ways: first, through the Christian community or group providing the prayer facility and acting as intercessors for the pray-er; second, often through the pray-ers themselves when they offer prayers on behalf of others or the world; third, on occasions when another person (for example, Jesus or a saint) or agency (for example, spirit or light) is invoked by the pray-er to intercede on his or her behalf. In any single prayer request one or more of these ‘intercessory’ elements may be present.

Both ‘the cathedral’ and ‘the online site’ are distinctive contexts for intercessory prayer in terms of their openness and accessibility to a broad range of people, who are allowed to enter and to use their intercessory prayer facilities. It is not known, however, whether the cathedral prayer board and the online site are functioning in similar or different ways. This study employs the ap Siôn Analytic Framework for Intercessory Prayer (apSAFIP) in an analysis of prayers posted on a national Church of England intercessory prayer website – the Pray One For Me (POFM) site – with the aim of comparing the results with other relevant prayer request studies, which have employed the same analytic framework. In the first instance, the results of the current POFM analysis will be compared with the results of a small online prayer study (ap Siôn & Edwards, 2012) conducted using prayers from an earlier version of the POFM site called Say One For Me (SOFM), with a view to testing the results emerging from the apSAFIP within an online context. In the second instance, the results of the current POFM study will be compared with the results from three

recent cathedral prayer studies (ap Siôn, 2015a, 2015b, 2015c), with a view to engaging specifically with the research question: Does intercessory prayer in ‘online religion’ contexts function in the same or different ways to their physical cathedral counterparts?

## **Method**

### **Location and sample**

The Pray One for Me (POFM) online prayer site was launched at the beginning of Lent 2012 as a Church of England initiative designed to offer provision for people to post prayers which were then prayed by prayer groups and prayer communities across the Church of England. This new site replaced the Say One for Me (SOFM) online prayer site, which was available during the periods of Lent 2010 and 2011. On the new POFM online prayer site there was also opportunity to read prayers posted by others on the site, and these were organised according to category, such as ‘thanksgiving’, ‘wisdom’, ‘healing’ and ‘guidance’, and as part of this feature, it was possible to ‘click’ on a prayer in order to pray the posted prayer of another. Prayers could be marked ‘private’, indicating that they would not be posted online publically but would be available to the prayer groups and communities praying the prayers. The present study is based on a sample of 500 prayers posted on the POFM online prayer site during a six-month period in 2012.

### **Analysis**

The analyses took place in three phases. In *phase one*, the 500 prayers posted on the POFM online prayer site were analysed using the ap Siôn Analytic Framework for Intercessory Prayer (apSAFIP) (ap Siôn, 2015a). The analyses relating to petitionary prayer content were based on 467 prayer postings that were focused, either wholly or in part, on petitionary prayer. Excluded from the analyses were 27 thanksgiving-only prayers, 4 confession-only prayers, and 2 adoration-only prayers.

Within these 467 prayer postings, there were a total of 577 individual petitionary prayer requests, which were analysed using the apSAFIP model (ap Siôn, 2015), distinguishing between three elements defined as prayer intention, prayer reference, and prayer objective.

*Prayer intention* distinguished among eleven key areas with which the individual authors were concerned: health and illness, death, growth, work, relationships, conflict or disaster, sport or recreation, travel, housing, open intention, and general. As a broad guide the intention categories may exhibit the following features. ‘Health and illness’ includes prayers for physical and mental illness, addiction, pregnancy and birth, continued good health. ‘Death’ includes prayers for people who have died and their families, and also long life. ‘Growth’ includes prayers for spiritual, religious, moral (that is, non-physical or material) growth. ‘Work’ includes prayers for jobs-related issues, education (such as school or university), exams or tests, unemployment, money, and legal cases. ‘Relationships’ includes prayers for partners and partnerships, explicit wider relationship concerns, as well as lack of relationships and loneliness. ‘Conflict or disaster’ includes prayers for wars, disasters, accidents, poverty, and the natural environment. ‘Sport or recreation’ includes prayers for sport-related issues, hobbies and other recreational interests. ‘Travel’ includes prayers for holidays and traveling away from home, and transport. ‘Housing’ includes prayers for moving home, housing concerns, and lack of home (homelessness). ‘Open intention’ includes prayers that indicate the recipient for the prayer but include no other contextualising information. ‘General’ includes prayers that either have an affective intention only, without any concrete intention or are too non-specific to be placed in any other ‘intention’ category.

*Prayer reference* distinguished among four key foci with which the individual authors were concerned: self (the prayer author), other people (friends, family and others known to the prayer author), animals (companion animals known to the prayer author), and the world

or global context (people, animals, the natural world, events, for example, which have a wider global reference point beyond the personal and local community).

*Prayer objective* distinguished between two effects that the individual authors envisaged as a consequence of their petitionary prayers: primary control (where desired outcomes of the request were stated) and secondary control (where no desired outcomes were stated). The primary control component of *prayer objective* was further delineated between prayer authors who requested material changes to the physical world and those who requested affective changes. The former was labelled primary control one (PC1) and the latter was labelled primary control two (PC2). Secondary control was referred to as SC.

In *phase two*, the results of this analysis of POFM online prayers were compared with the results of the earlier SOFM online prayer study (ap Siôn & Edwards, 2012) in order to test the reliability of the apSAFIP model in predicting trends in online prayer contexts.

In *phase three*, the results of this analysis of POFM online prayers were compared with the results from three cathedral studies pertaining to Lichfield Cathedral (ap Siôn, 2015a), Southwark Cathedral (ap Siôn, 2015b), and Bangor Cathedral (ap Siôn, 2015c), which also employed the apSAFIP in order to explore similarities and differences in online and offline intercessory prayer contexts.

## Results

### Phase 1: analysis of the online POFM prayers

The results of the content analysis of the 577 prayer requests from the Pray One for Me (POFM) prayer site employing the apSAFIP model are presented in Table 1 and differentiate between the three constructs of the analytic framework: prayer intention, prayer reference, and prayer objective.

- insert table 1 about here -

In relation to *prayer intention*, 189 (33%) requests were ‘health and illness’, followed by 124 (21%) for ‘growth’, 107 (19%) for ‘work’, 73 (13%) for ‘relationships’, 32 (6%) for ‘general’, 18 (3%) for ‘death’, 18 (3%) for ‘conflict/disaster’, 11 (2%) for ‘housing’, 3 (1%) for ‘open intention’, 1 (0.2%) for ‘sport’, and 1 (0.2%) for ‘travel’.

In relation to *prayer reference*, 260 (45%) requests were for ‘self’, followed by 243 (42%) for ‘other people’ known to the prayer author, 72 (12%) for a ‘world / global’ focus, and 2 (0.3%) for ‘animals’ known to the prayer author.

In relation to *prayer objective* 90 (16%) of requests employed ‘secondary control’ (SC), where no desired outcome was articulated, and 487 (84%) employed ‘primary control’, where a desired outcome for the prayer was identified. Of the ‘primary control’ requests, 413 (85%) were ‘primary control two’, where the desired outcome was affective in nature, and 74 (15%) were ‘primary control one’, where the desired outcome involved material changes to the physical world.

Overall, results indicated that the online POFM prayers were largely concerned with the prayer intentions of ‘health and illness’, ‘growth’, ‘work’ and ‘relationships’, with the prayers references of prayers for ‘self’ and prayers for ‘others’, and with the prayer objective of ‘primary control’, which sought to suggest the desired outcome of prayer.

## **Phase 2: Comparison of online POFM prayers with online SOFM**

When the results of the online POFM prayers are compared with the earlier small-scale study of 290 online SOFM prayers (ap Siôn & Edwards, 2012), a number of similarities and differences emerge between the two studies in terms of frequency pertaining to prayer intention, prayer reference and prayer objective.

Table 2 illustrates that in relation to *prayer intention* prayers for health/illness, growth, work and relationships were the most frequent categories employed by the pray-ers in both online prayer studies. However, within these categories there was a smaller

proportion of prayers for ‘relationships’ among POFM prayer requests when compared with SOFM prayer requests. All the other prayer intention categories (general, death, conflict/disaster, housing, open intention, sport/recreation, and travel) accounted for considerably fewer prayer requests for both studies.

Table 3 illustrates that in relation to *prayer reference* prayers for ‘self’ and ‘others’ were the most frequent categories employed by the pray-ers in both online studies. However, within these categories there was a larger proportion of prayers for ‘self’ and a smaller proportion of prayers for ‘others’ among POFM prayer requests when compared with SOFM prayer requests. The other prayer reference categories ‘global’ and ‘animals’ accounted for very few prayer requests in both studies.

Table 4 illustrates that in relation to *prayer objective* most prayers employed ‘primary control’ in both online studies, and within this category only a small difference emerged between the studies in terms of PC1 and PC2 usage.

Overall, the results relating to the three components of the apSAFIP showed similarities between the online POFM study and the online SOFM study, which support the use of the apSAFIP as an analytic tool for online intercessory prayer requests and also affirm the validity of using the POFM study as a relevant online model for comparison with other studies employing the apSAFIP in offline contexts.

### **Phase 3: Comparison of online POFM prayers with three cathedral study prayers**

When the results of the online POFM prayers are compared with the three studies of 1160 prayers from Bangor Cathedral (ap Siôn, 2015c), 1658 prayers from Lichfield Cathedral (ap Siôn, 2015c), and 958 prayers from Southwark Cathedral (ap Siôn, 2015b), a number of similarities and differences emerge between the online POFM prayer study and the offline cathedral studies.

Table 5 illustrates that in relation to *prayer intention* prayer for ‘health and illness’ was the most frequent prayer intention category for both the online POFM prayers (33%) and the cathedral prayers (Bangor 29%, Lichfield 28%, and Southwark 15%), where a concrete prayer intention was specified (which excludes the ‘open intention’ category). In addition, both the online POFM prayers and the cathedral prayers have considerably fewer prayers for some intention categories, such as ‘conflict/disaster’, ‘housing’, ‘sport/recreation’ and ‘travel’, which range between 6% and under 1% per context and category. However, in other aspects the prayers left on the cathedral prayer boards differed from the online POFM prayers. The intention category ‘death’ appeared more frequently in the cathedral prayers (Bangor 13%, Lichfield 27% and Southwark 15%) than in the POFM prayers (3%), and this was also the case for the ‘open intention’ category where, apart from Bangor (6%), the cathedrals of Lichfield (19%) and Southwark (46%) had considerably more prayers falling into this category than found among the POFM prayers (1%). In addition, the three cathedrals had considerably fewer prayers for ‘growth’, ‘work’ and ‘relationships’ when compared with the POFM prayers, where these types of prayer were among the most frequent.

- insert table 5 about here -

Table 6 illustrates that in relation to *prayer reference* prayers for ‘others’ featured prominently in both the online POFM prayers (42%) and the cathedral prayers (Bangor 73%, Lichfield 86%, and Southwark 82%), although there was significant difference in the relative frequency and emphasis of prayers for ‘others’ in the online and offline contexts. Therefore, among the POFM prayers, prayers for ‘self’ (at 45%) were more frequent than prayers offered for ‘others’, while very few prayers were explicitly identified as prayers for ‘self’ among those left in the cathedral contexts (Bangor, 14%, Lichfield, 5%, and Southwark, 9%) and these numbers were on a par with the frequency of prayers left in the cathedrals for world

or ‘global’ contexts (Bangor 13%, Lichfield 8% and Southwark 7%). There were very few prayers for ‘animals’ in either the POFM context or the cathedral contexts.

- insert table 6 about here -

Table 7 illustrates that in relation to *prayer objective* there was considerable divergence between the results emerging from the online POFM prayers and the cathedral prayers, as well as differences among the prayers left in the individual cathedral locations. However, overall, the POFM prayers were considerably more likely to be primary control requests (84%), suggesting a desired outcome for prayer, than was the case for prayers left in the cathedrals (Bangor 75%, Lichfield 51%, and Southwark 35%), where there were higher instances of secondary control requests in which the outcomes of prayers were not explicitly stated, and so were being left in the hands of another.

- insert table 7 about here -

The quantitative results of the current Pray One for Me website study are presented, and then these results are set alongside the results of the previous online study (ap Siôn & Edwards, 2012), the Bangor Cathedral study (ap Siôn, 2015b), the Lichfield Cathedral study (ap Siôn, 2015a) and the Southwark Cathedral study (ap Siôn, 2015c).

Overall, although there were some similarities between the online POFM prayers and the offline cathedral prayers, there were also significant differences observable in all three components of the apSAFIP – prayer intention, prayer reference and prayer objective.

### **Conclusion**

This study is set within the broader empirical contexts of both intercessory prayer research and research concerned with religion and the Internet. It responds to a call for more research on specific aspects of ‘online religion’, including how the Internet is being used to engage with prayer and to what effect (Dawson & Cowan, 2004, p. 9). It also responds to an identified issue within the intercessory prayer research literature, which highlights the need

for more studies concerned with certain aspects of intercessory prayer such as its subjective effects and also its content, including particular reference to online / offline intercessory prayer contexts. The current study addresses the research question of whether online intercessory prayer provision functions in the same way as the physical offline intercessory prayer boards in Anglican cathedrals in England and Wales, employing a tested analytic tool, the ap Siôn Analytic Framework for Intercessory Prayer (apSAFIP), to a study of prayer content. Cathedrals were selected for this study because, like websites, they are distinctive in their openness and accessibility to a broad range of people, and cathedrals were also the closest offline equivalent to an official Church of England website, such as the Pray One For Me (POFM), which provided the data for this study.

Five conclusions emerge from the analyses conducted in this study, which are of relevance both to the respective fields of research in the Academy and research-based reflective practice within the Church. The first conclusion relates to the instrument employed in the study, the ap Siôn Analytic Framework for Intercessory Prayer (apSAFIP). The apSAFIP has been applied to the content of intercessory prayers in a wide-range of physical offline church-related contexts and it has been shown to be a reliable indicator of trends in intercessory prayer. Results from phase 1 and phase 2 of the current analyses indicate that the apSAFIP is also a valid tool for use in online intercessory prayer contexts, and as a consequence may be used to enable reliable comparisons to be made between intercessory prayers left in online contexts and offline contexts.

The second conclusion relates to the research question identified in this study: Does online intercessory prayer provision function in the same way as the physical offline intercessory prayer boards in Anglican cathedrals in England and Wales? Results from phase 3 of the current analyses would indicate that, in terms of prayer content, intercessory prayer functions in very different ways in online contexts when compared with offline contexts in all

three components of the apSAFIP (prayer intention, prayer reference, and prayer objective). Although 'health and illness' was a primary concern in both online and offline contexts, prayers left on the online site were significantly more concerned with prayers for 'self' than prayers for 'others', with identifying the desired outcome of their prayer ('primary control') and with 'growth' (spiritual, religious and moral), 'work' and 'relationships' than the cathedral prayers. Conversely, prayers left on the offline cathedral sites were significantly more concerned with prayers for 'others', with leaving the desired outcome of the prayer in the hands of another ('secondary control'), and with 'death' or leaving an 'open intention' than the online site prayers.

The third conclusion relates to the nature of religious authority and how this is reflected in the online site and the offline site. Drawing on Campbell's (2007) multi-layered conceptualisation of religious authority, observations may be made about authority in terms of its expression within the 'religious hierarchy' category and the 'religious structure' category. When people enter a cathedral building to offer an intercessory prayer request, they encounter a range of explicit and implicit signs and symbols relating to these two kinds of religious authority (for example, altars, candles, prayer stools, bishop, priest, intercessors, pray-ers, and so on), which lends a certain clarity about who is responsible for and offering the intercessory prayer provision and the ways in which the processes of intercession may work in ritual contexts. Therefore, people may acquire a sense of these kinds of religious authority and be affected in various ways simply by stepping into the space of the provider in which the whole intercessory process takes place. Turning to the online prayer site, the question is raised: in what ways might religious authority in terms of 'religious hierarchy' and 'religious structure' be different in online prayer sites? What is accessible and experienced in terms of religious authority when stepping into the online space of the provider? In terms of the POFM site, there may be institutional logos, links to other church-

related websites, some information about the intercessors and the POFM project, sign-posted categories of prayer that illustrate the kinds of prayer that may be offered, the implicit presence of the administrator who is responsible for managing the prayers on the site, and the presence of the other pray-ers and their prayers which are an explicit focus for the site. The experience of religious authority looks very different for the online site when compared with the cathedral sites. However, in practice, does this make a difference to the prayers and the pray-ers who are engaging in what is a private devotional activity in both the online and offline sites? The results of this study have indicated that prayers from the online POFM site were significantly more concerned with ‘self’ (rather than the cathedral focus on ‘others’) and with shaping the desired outcome of prayers (rather than the cathedral preference for leaving the outcome of prayers in the hands of another). This trend would appear to point to a more individualistic and ‘control’ orientated approach to intercessory prayer within online contexts, and this may be related to a very different understanding and experience of religious authority in the online context, which may then be contrasted with the traditional forms of religious authority that are present and ‘transmitted’ through the physical cathedral context.

The fourth conclusion relates to religious community and also draws on the results of the current study indicating that online prayers are more concerned with the individual ‘self’ and with establishing ‘control’ over the prayer outcome than the prayers written in cathedral contexts. This would appear to support and illustrate the claim that there has been a discernible cultural shift towards ‘personal communities’ and ‘networked individualism’ in Western societies that is reflected in online activity. Conversely, it may also be postulated that in the physical cathedral building and the writing of intercessory prayer request, this cultural trend is less strong, which raises questions about why this may be the case. Are those who use online prayer sites more likely to exhibit these qualities than those who leave prayer requests in cathedrals? Or are there qualities in the context in which the respective

communities meet, which shape the prayers, and in this sense, is the cathedral context exerting a counter-cultural influence? Researchers of online religion describe the nature of the relationships formed in online worlds as ‘ever-changing, loosely-tied networks of connection’ (Hutchings, 2010, p.18) and although the content of online prayer requests attest to the existence of some explicit relational activity between pray-ers through their prayers, it is not known for how long and with what intensity online pray-ers remain engaged with using the site. What is known, however, is that there is some evidence in the content of prayer requests in cathedrals over a relatively extensive period of time to suggest that some people keep returning to that particular intercessory prayer space. It would be useful to conduct more research in this area for both online and offline contexts in order to understand how those who use these intercessory prayer facilities understand their relationship with the intercessory prayer site and how this expresses itself in practice.

The fifth conclusion relates to religious experience as it is manifested in this particular context of intercessory prayer. Offering intercessory prayer in a cathedral is a sensory physical experience, beginning with the journey to the cathedral, and continued perhaps through the lighting of votive candles, gazing at and sometimes touching statues or icons or other devotional objects, experiencing the smells and the sounds of the cathedral building and the enormity of the sacred space, writing (by hand) and perhaps reading and touching other people’s prayer requests, and apprehending that your prayer alongside the prayers of others will be offered at one of the altars in some liturgical way. This kind of religious experience is deeply connected to the sensory and the physical, and is shared among Roman Catholic, Orthodox and Anglican Christian traditions. This raises questions concerning the nature of religious experience in online intercessory prayer contexts, and in Anglican, Roman Catholic, and Orthodox contexts, perceived relationships between online and offline provision. The current study of intercessory prayer content is unable to respond to this issue directly (apart

from identifying that real differences appear to exist between many online prayers when compared with cathedral prayers), and further research is needed exploring aspects of religious experience in both online and offline sites.

The findings of this study suggest that there may be considerable differences between intercessory prayer in online contexts and offline cathedral contexts, which contribute to empirical research in intercessory prayer and religion and the Internet. The findings may also serve to inform reflection on the part of the Church as it considers its ministry and mission through the provision of intercessory prayer requests in online and offline sites.

### References

- 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.
- 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, 53-65.
- ap Siôn, T. (2009). Ordinary prayer and the rural church: an empirical study of prayer cards. *Rural Theology*, 7, 17-31.
- ap Siôn, T. (2010). Implicit religion and ordinary prayer. *Implicit Religion*, 13, 275-294.
- ap Siôn, T. (2011). Interpreting God's activity in the public square: Accessing the ordinary theology of personal prayer. In L. J. Francis & H. G. Ziebertz (Eds.), *The public significance of religion* (pp. 315-342). Brill: Leiden.
- 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.
- ap Siôn, T. (2015a). Applying and testing the ap Siôn Analytic Framework for Intercessory Prayer (apSAFIP): exploring prayer requests left in an English cathedral. In L. Woodhead, & G. Giordan (Eds.), *A sociology of prayer* (pp.169-189). Farnham: Ashgate.
- ap Siôn, T. (2015b). Prayers from the inner city: Listening to the prayer board in Southwark Cathedral. *Research in the Social Scientific Study of Religion*, 26, 99-119.
- ap Siôn, T. (2015c). Ministry of the cathedral prayer-board. In L. J. Francis (Ed.), *Anglican Cathedrals in modern life: The science of cathedral studies* (pp 131-153). New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

- ap Siôn, T., & Edwards, O. (2012). Praying 'Online': The ordinary theology of prayer intentions posted on the internet. *Journal of Beliefs and Values, 33*, 95-109.
- ap Siôn, T., & Edwards, O. (2013). Say One for Me: The implicit religion of prayers from the street. *Mental Health, Religion and Culture, 16*, 922-935.
- 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*, 936-952.
- Bremner, R. H., & Arbor, A. (2011). "Pray for those who mistreat you": Effects of prayer on anger and aggression. *Personality and Social Bulletin, 37*, 830-837.
- Brown, A., & Burton, L. (2007). Learning from prayer requests in a rural church: An exercise in ordinary theology'. *Rural Theology, 5*, 45-52.
- Burton, L. (2009). The Dear Departed: Prayers for the dead on a prayer tree in a rural English parish church. *Rural Theology, 7*, 17-34.
- Burton, L. (2010). Prayers on a prayer tree: Ordinary theology from a tourist village. *Rural Theology, 8*, 62-77.
- Cadge, W., & Daglian, M. (2008). Blessings, strength, and guidance: Prayer frames in a hospital prayer book'. *Poetics, 36*, 358-373.
- Campbell, H. A. (2005). Considering spiritual dimensions within computer-mediated communication studies. *New Media and Society, 7*, 110-134.
- Campbell, H. A. (2007). Who's got the power? Religious authority and the Internet. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication, 12*, 1043-1062.
- Campbell, H. A. (2012). Understanding the relationship between Religion Online and Offline in a networked society. *Journal of the American Academy of Religion, 80*, 64-93.

Dawson, L. L., & Cowan, D. E. (2004). Introduction. In L. L. Dawson & D. E. Cowan (Eds.).

*Religion Online: Finding faith on the Internet* (pp. 1-15). New York and London: Routledge.

Foltz, F., & Foltz, F. (2003). Religion on the Internet: Community and virtual existence.

*Bulletin of Science, Technology and Society*, 23, 321-330.

Galton, F. (1872). Statistical inquiries into the efficacy of prayer. *Fortnightly Review*, 12, 125-135.

Grossoehme, D. H. (1996). Prayer reveals belief: Images of God from hospital prayers.

*Journal of Pastoral Care*, 50, 33-39.

Grossoehme, D. H., Jacobson, C., Cotton, S., Ragsdale J. R., VanDyke, R., & Seid, M.

(2011). Written prayers and religious coping in a paediatric hospital setting. *Mental Health, Religion and Culture*, 14, 423-432.

Grossoehme, D. H., VanDyke, R., Jacobson, C., Cotton, S., Ragsdale, J. R., & Seid, M.

(2010). Written prayers in a pediatric hospital: Linguistic analysis. *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality*, 2, 227-233.

Hancocks, G., & Lardner, M. (2007). I Say a little prayer for you: What do hospital prayers reveal about people's perceptions of God? *Journal of Health Care Chaplaincy*, 8, 29-42.

Helland, C. (2000). Online Religion/Religion Online and virtual communitas. In J. K. Hadden

& D. E. Cowan (Eds.), *Religion on the Internet: Research prospects and promises* (pp. 205-224). New York: JAI Press.

Hodge, D. R. (2007). A systematic review of the empirical literature on intercessory prayer.

*Research on Social Work Practice*, 17, 174-187.

Hutchings, T. (2010). The internet and the church: An introduction. *The Expository Times*,

122, 11-19.

- Jacobs, S. (2007). Virtually sacred: The performance of asynchronous cyber-rituals in online spaces. *Journal of Computer Mediated Communication*, 12, 1103-1121.
- Krause, N., & Arbor, A. (2003). Praying for others: Financial strain, and physical health status in late life. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 42, 377-391.
- Lee, D. B. (2009). Maria of the Oak: Society and the problem of divine intervention'. *Sociology of Religion*, 70, 213-31.
- Loehr, F. (1959). *The power of prayer on plants*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday.
- Roberts, L., Ahmed, I., & Hall, S. (2008). *Intercessory prayer for the alleviation of ill health (review)*. The Cochrane Library 2008, Issue 3: New York: John Wiley and Sons Ltd.
- Schmied, G. (2002). God images in prayer intention books. *Implicit Religion*, 5, 121-126.
- Young, G. (2004). Reading and praying online: The continuity of religion online and online religion in internet Christianity. In L. L. Dawson & D. E. Cowan (Eds.). *Religion Online: Finding faith on the Internet* (pp. 86-96). New York and London: Routledge.

Table 1

*Pray One for Me (POFM) prayer site. Content of intercessory and supplicatory prayer by intention, reference, and objective*

Intention	Others			Self			Global			Animals			Total			Total
	PC1	PC2	SC	PC1	PC2	SC	PC1	PC2	SC	PC1	PC2	SC	PC1	PC2	SC	
health/illness	28	63	28	17	33	4	3	7	4	2	0	0	50	103	36	189
growth	0	31	2	2	63	4	3	16	3	0	0	0	5	110	9	124
work	1	25	3	10	53	4	0	8	3	0	0	0	11	86	10	107
relationships	0	18	5	3	35	7	0	3	2	0	0	0	3	56	14	73
general	0	17	1	0	9	1	0	3	1	0	0	0	0	29	3	32
death	0	7	7	0	0	0	0	2	2	0	0	0	0	9	9	18
conflict/disaster	1	1	0	2	3	1	0	7	3	0	0	0	3	11	4	18
housing	0	1	0	1	6	2	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	8	2	11
open intention	0	0	3	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	3	3
sport/recreation	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1
travel	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1
Total	31	163	49	35	202	23	6	48	18	2	0	0	74	413	90	577
Total	243			260			72			2						

Note: N = 577

Table 2

*Comparison of POFM online prayers with SOFM online prayers by prayer intention*

prayer intention	online POFM %	online SOFM %
health/illness	33	26
growth	21	18
work	19	18
relationships	13	24
general	6	4
death	3	4
conflict/disaster	3	4
housing	2	n/a
open intention	1	1
sport/recreation	0.2	0
travel	0.2	1

Note: N= 577, POFM online prayers

N = 290, SOFM online prayers

Table 3

*Comparison of POFM online prayers with SOFM online prayers by prayer reference*

prayer reference	POFM %	SOFM %
self	45	34
others	42	57
global	12	9
animals	0.3	0

Note: N = 577, POFM online prayers

N = 290, SOFM online prayers

Table 4

*Comparison of POFM online prayers with SOFM online prayers by prayer objective*

prayer objective	POFM %	SOFM %
primary control:	84	83
PC1	15	5
PC2	85	95
secondary control	16	17

Note: N = 577, POFM online prayers

N = 290, SOFM online prayers

Table 5

*Comparison of POFM online prayers with prayers from Bangor Cathedral, Lichfield Cathedral, and Southwark Cathedral by prayer intention*

prayer intention	online POFM %	Bangor Cathedral %	Lichfield Cathedral %	Southwark Cathedral %
health/illness	33	29	28	15
growth	21	14	5	4
work	19	3	3	3
relationships	13	8	4	6
general	6	17	9	7
death	3	13	27	15
conflict/disaster	3	6	4	2
housing	2	2	0.4	0.4
open intention	1	6	19	46
sport/recreation	0.2	0.3	0.1	0.4
travel	0.2	1	0.4	1

Note: N = 577, POFM online prayers

N = 1160, prayers from Bangor Cathedral

N = 1658, prayers from Lichfield Cathedral

N = 958, prayers from Southwark Cathedral

Table 6

*Comparison of POFM online prayers with prayers from Bangor Cathedral, Lichfield Cathedral, and Southwark Cathedral by prayer reference*

prayer reference	online POFM %	Bangor Cathedral %	Lichfield Cathedral %	Southwark Cathedral %
self	45	14	5	9
others	42	73	86	82
global	12	13	8	7
animals	0.3	1	1	2

Note: N = 577, POFM online prayers

N = 1160, prayers from Bangor Cathedral

N = 1658, prayers from Lichfield Cathedral

N = 958, prayers from Southwark Cathedral

Table 7

*Comparison of POFM online prayers with prayers from Bangor Cathedral, Lichfield Cathedral, and Southwark Cathedral by prayer objective*

prayer objective	online POFM %	Bangor Cathedral %	Lichfield Cathedral %	Southwark Cathedral %
primary control:	84	75	51	35
PC1	15	n/a	4	8
PC2	85	n/a	96	92
secondary control	16	25	49	65

Note: N = 577, POFM online prayers

N = 1160, prayers from Bangor Cathedral

N = 1658, prayers from Lichfield Cathedral

N = 958, prayers from Southwark Cathedral