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

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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.

Introduction

Providing space for personal prayer and reflection outside the usual congregational services and activities is a frequent phenomenon in Anglican churches and cathedrals in England and Wales. Such provision may take a number of forms, including facilities affording opportunity to write prayer requests, to light votive candles, and to add names to memorial books, for example, as well as allowing open access to churches and cathedrals for personal prayer and reflection.

Personal prayer and reflection of this kind has three basic distinctive characteristics that are helpful for contextualising these phenomena appropriately and for shaping study of them. In the first instance, this personal prayer and reflection is closely connected to *place*. Those engaging in these activities are drawn, in one way or another, to a physical public place of explicit religious significance in which their personal prayer and reflection occurs. They are not in the virtual space of an online church or shrine, nor at a non-religiously affiliated ‘popular’ site where tokens are left, for example; rather, they are physically located in a very particular sense. In the second instance, this personal prayer and reflection, in its various manifestations, is a *public act* because of where it happens. Those engaging in such public acts, however, often remain largely ‘hidden’, and they are known by what they may leave behind, in a material sense, in the place where their personal prayer and reflection occurred.

These activities are different from acts taking place in the privacy of the home or at an individually-chosen location in isolation from the acts of others, for example; rather, these are personal acts taking place in an intentional public space, collectively alongside others, although without the physical presence of such others. In the third instance, this personal prayer and reflection exists in some kind of *relationship* with a Christian community or congregation that is (or has been) physically located within

the particular religious place. This Christian community or congregation may have the capacity to enable or to hinder the access of others to the religious place, and may or may not recognise or cultivate the relational dynamics present when others enter the religious place in a different way, for personal prayer and reflection. This is a different kind of relationship to that found between individuals and civic organisations or other 'public' groups, where the relationship may be set out and clarified in concrete formal terms, for example; rather, the nature of *this* relationship is largely undefined and fluid, and it will vary according to the particularity of people and place, and understandings of belonging.

Of all the activities relating to personal prayer and reflection within churches and cathedrals, the most researched over the past two decades has been the writing and leaving of personal prayer requests. This growing body of empirical research has examined the content of prayers left in a variety of church-related contexts, including hospital chapels, churches (or shrines), and cathedrals, online prayer sites, 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, 2016); prayers gathered in the street have been studied in England (ap Sion & Edwards, 2013), and prayers left on Anglican online prayer sites have been studied in England (ap Sion & Edwards, 2012; ap Sion, 2016a).

These studies have provided valuable insights into the concerns of those who write prayer requests, and the series of replicated studies by ap Siôn using the apSAFIP (ap Siôn Analytic Framework for Intercessory Prayer) have enabled a more nuanced picture of these ‘hidden’ prayer authors to emerge. For example, the apSAFIP studies have shown the diverse range of people accessing personal prayer request facilities (ap Siôn, 2015c), and identified who and what they pray for, and their expectations in prayer (for example, ap Siôn, 2007, 2015a). The influence of ‘place’ on the prayer request content has also been demonstrated through the differences among prayers left in various types of cathedral such as ‘rural’ cathedral, shrinal-focus cathedral, and inner-city cathedral (ap Siôn, 2015a,b,c), and through the differences between prayers left in physical churches and cathedrals and prayers left on online prayer sites (ap Siôn & Edwards, 2012; ap Siôn, 2016a). In addition, through noting addressees included in prayers, there is evidence that many prayer authors have an awareness of some kind of relational engagement in the prayer request activity, in terms of relationship with God (variously expressed), relationship with others living and dead, relationship with the community offering the prayer request facility, and relationship with one another. It has also been demonstrated that when intentional changes were made to a prayer and reflective space within a cathedral, there were also changes in the personal prayer requests left in terms of both prayer number and particular aspects of prayer type and prayer content (ap Siôn, 2016b).

These results have raised questions concerning the role and effect of ‘place’ for those who enter churches and cathedrals for personal prayer and reflection, and also the nature of relationships existing between the various ‘actors’ in this specific context. A detailed study of places (and by inference, people) that provide spaces for

personal prayer and reflection, therefore, would serve to illuminate these questions further.

Research agenda

Previous empirical studies have focused on what visitors leave behind when they enter church and cathedral buildings through analysing and recording the content of prayer requests from prayer boards and prayer books. Although much has been discovered about the concerns of such pray-ers and how such prayers may be shaped by location and space, there has been no attempt to gain a more detailed knowledge about the places and spaces for personal prayer and reflection specifically through a survey of the provision offered by churches. The aims of this study, therefore, were to explore whether and how churches within a selected geographical area provided in an ‘intentional’ manner for personal prayer and reflection (with a particular, though not exclusive, focus on prayer requests), and then to discuss what insights this kind of mapping activity may offer to churches’ understanding of their ministry to those outside this non-congregational context.

Method

Location

The survey was conducted in North Cornwall, an area well known for its popularity with tourists, during a two-week period in August 2013. The nineteen churches included in the survey were drawn from seven benefices or parishes within the Church of England’s Diocese of Truro, and were situated in a diverse range of locations, including churches set within villages, towns, countryside, and beside the sea.

Sample

The benefices and churches in the survey were a convenience sample within one particular geographical area within easy access from the Atlantic Highway in North Cornwall. Most of the churches had historic roots, ranging from the eleventh century to the sixteenth century, while a few churches were of later date, ranging from the 1830s to the 1930s. In every case, all churches within a benefice were surveyed:

Benefice A included six churches;

Benefice B included two churches;

Benefice C included three churches;

Benefice D included three churches;

Benefice E included two churches;

Benefice F included two churches;

Benefice G comprised one church;

Pseudonyms have been used for the benefices and churches included in this study.

Analysis

For each of the nineteen churches included in the survey, information relevant to the church's provision for personal prayer and reflection was recorded. First, the most important issue of access was noted; that is, whether or not the church was left 'open' for visitors to enter outside service times. Second, after gaining access, any 'explicit' provision for personal prayer and reflection was noted. 'Explicit' provision included three main types: namely, the opportunity to write prayer requests, to light votive candles, and to view memorial books. In addition to these types of 'explicit' provision, the church was also examined for other possible instances of intentional

provision for personal prayer and reflection, and examples of these were recorded as ‘other’. Although lying outside the parameters of this study (which focuses on a church’s ‘intentional’ provision for prayer and reflection only and what this might reveal about relationships of congregations and visitors seeking such spiritual connection), it was also recognised that many ‘implicit’ opportunities for personal prayer and reflection would naturally exist when a church was open (such as ‘sitting’ in sacred space or gazing at a stained-glass window or painting).

As well as gathering specific information relating to a church’s provision for personal prayer and reflection, other general information was gathered for each church, including the church’s geographical location (village, town, countryside, or beside the sea, for example), organisational arrangement (benefice or other church grouping), and age. A detailed photographic and written record was made for each church, which provided the basis for the exemplification of provision for personal prayer and reflection.

Results

Overall provision

Of the nineteen churches included in the survey, eighteen churches were ‘open’ when the survey was conducted, enabling their provision for personal prayer and reflection to be explored. Of these eighteen churches, over half (eleven churches) offered explicit provision for personal prayer and reflection with opportunity to write prayer requests in ten churches, to light votive candles in seven churches, and to access memorial books for the dead in six churches, while there was opportunity to engage in ‘other’ possible relevant activities in four churches. Half of the churches (nine) provided no explicit provision for personal prayer and reflection (as expressed

through prayer requests, votive candles and memorial books) in addition to the provision of access through maintaining an ‘open’ church, although this number dropped to one third (six churches) when ‘other’ possible instances of ‘intentional’ provision were taken into account.

INSERT TABLE 1 AROUND HERE.

In terms of the distribution of explicit provision for personal prayer and reflection among the eighteen churches, seven of the eleven churches offered two or more kinds with: five churches having prayer requests, votive candles, and memorial books; one church having prayer requests and votive candles; and one church having prayer requests and a memorial book. Within those eleven churches, three of the remaining churches provided prayer requests only and one church provided votive candles only.

A selection of benefices and churches are exemplified to illustrate the kinds of provision observed and how these were recorded in written form. To anonymize the churches, saint names associated with Cornwall were randomly allocated.

Benefice A

Of the six churches in Benefice A, opportunities for prayer and reflection were identified in four churches, with two providing explicit provision (votive candles and prayer requests in one church and votive candles in the another), and two providing ‘other’ possible ‘intentional’ provision. St Nectan’s church is profiled.

St Nectan's church is situated in a village and dates back to the thirteenth century.

Two kinds of explicit provision for prayer and reflection were found in the church: votive candles and prayer requests.

On entry to the church, a prayer space created on a table occupied a prominent position in a transitional environment by the main aisle, and was clearly visible.

Placed on the table were a terracotta-style bowl of sand, a box of candles and a lighter, together with a sign reading:

Jesus said, "I am the Light of the World". As you light a candle for yourself or somebody else the light of Jesus penetrates the darkness bringing hope to the faint hearted, comfort to those who are sad, and peace to those who are troubled. As you contemplate the light of Jesus let his love dispel the shadows which frighten you so that you are more perfectly abandoned to his purpose.

To one side of the bowl there were blank prayer request proforma and a pen, with an invitation to write a prayer request, which they would 'normally use' at the Holy Communion service the following Wednesday. At the bottom of the prayer request proforma were the words: 'In prayer it is better to have a heart without words than words without a heart Mahatma Gandhi'.

There was also the instruction that completed prayer requests should be placed in the box by the vestry door. Although this made an assumption that the 'vestry' would be an intelligible term for visitors and may also have made the writing of a prayer request more complex, the prayer box (a wicker basket) was clearly visible on a side altar in the south aisle next to the vestry, and labelled 'prayer tray', giving the impression that this was the altar on which the prayers would be offered. The action of pray-ers physically moving their prayer into a place of offering was interesting, and perhaps experientially differentiated between the offering of personal prayer through

a votive candle and the offering of intercessory prayer in relationship with the church community and its liturgical life. In addition, the presence of the pencil in the prayer tray showed appreciation of how people might move from one prayer space to another, anticipating their possible actions and needs.

Returning to the prayer space visible on entry to the church by the main aisle, there was also a long prayer addressed to 'Heavenly Father' about NAME's ministry with young people in the local community, which was placed on a small reading desk beside the table. The positioning of the reading desk gave a sense that the prayer was associated with or part of the prayer space on the table. The addressee 'Heavenly Father' introduced a fifth person into the prayer space (alongside Jesus, Gandhi, the local youth worker and the implicit church community). The whole prayer space area was tidy, uncluttered and cared for; for example, the table was covered with a simple white cloth, the sand was raked into a circular pattern, signage was simple with accessible language, all lighting and writing equipment was in place, and the altar on which it was assumed that the prayers were offered was well presented. The prayer space had no requests for financial support or financial contributions for making use of the provision. The requests for financial support were located by the visitors' book, where there was also a welcome to visitors, which clearly linked the present church building to worship and prayer through the centuries, and invoked those who entered to pray for the people they love, for those in need and for the parish, providing another instance of a relationship understood as existing between church and visitor based on prayer.

Benefice B

Both of the churches in Benefice B had opportunities for prayer and reflection, with one providing explicit provision (votive candles, prayer requests and memorial book) and the other providing 'other' possible provision. St Breaca's church is profiled.

St Breaca's church is situated in an isolated location close to coastal cliffs and dates back to the Norman period (eleventh/twelfth centuries). In this church there was one instance of provision falling loosely into the 'other' category.

At the back of the church there was a small altar with two wooden candlesticks and cross, with an old-looking wooden notice on the wall beside it. The notice referred to the origin of the altar, candlesticks and cross (related to a well-known nineteenth century vicar of the church), directed that contributions should be placed in the 'alms box', and ended with a request to pilgrims: "Pilgrim here we ask you to pray for the Reunion of Christendom". This altar area in the church gave an impression of being mainly of historical interest because it was unclear why a small 'dressed' altar had been placed in such a position, although from an experiential perspective the altar created a sense of devotional space.

Benefice C

All three churches in Benefice C had examples of explicit provision for prayer and reflection, with two providing votive candles, prayer requests and memorial books and one providing votive candles and a memorial book. St Sulien's church and St Materiana's church are profiled.

St Sulien's church is situated in the centre of a village and dates back to the fifteenth century. Three kinds of explicit provision for prayer and reflection were found in the church: prayer requests, memorial book, and votive candles.

On entering the church, directly facing the visitor, the first prayer request area was plainly visible, positioned in a transitional environment on a table set against a stone pillar. The sign on the small cork notice board propped upright against the pillar invited people to write a prayer request on the sheets provided, to note whether or not prayer was required for an extended period, and to be informed that the prayers would be offered at the Sunday services. Propped up beside the prayer board, and equally visible, was a framed sign welcoming visitors to this 'ancient' church, written in accessible language, trusting that they may find God's presence and peace in the church, and requesting that they 'pray for us as we pray for you'. Laid out in front of the prayer board and visitors' welcome sign was the visitors' book, and to one side of the visitors' book were photocopied proformas to write names and details required for the Book of Remembrance (the details asked for and process were quite complex and extensive). The table was covered in a white cloth and the area was neatly presented, giving visitors' a clear impression that prayer was a significant activity in the church into which they were explicitly invited as active participants.

On closer inspection of this first prayer area, there were a number of additional notes pinned onto the prayer board. Alongside the prayer requests proformas, a picture, and paper slips containing the email address for use for confidential prayer requests, there was also a simple all-embracing prayer (presumably a prayer prompt or a gathering together and offering of prayers left in a way different from the offering in the Sunday service), which read: 'Dear God, We bring before you the people and things that are on our hearts. We thank you that you

hear our prayers and hold our lives in your love. Amen.’ There were two kinds of prayer request proforma available: one kind displayed a photograph of the church with the simple statement, ‘Dear God, we bring before you the things that are on our hearts. Prayer request’; and the second kind displayed a line drawing of the church, repeating the words of the simple all-embracing prayer pinned on the board. In practical terms, it was difficult to find space to comfortably pin any prayers on the prayer board, and no completed prayer proforma had been added to the board at the time of the visit.

The second prayer request area was on the wall of the south aisle, directly in front of the vestry (which occupied the space behind the rood screen of a side chapel in the south aisle). This prayer request area formed part of a larger dedicated space for prayer and reflection which included: a small altar, covered with a white cloth on which was placed a granite cross; a tall votive candle stand with a collection box, a large wooden prayer board attached directly to the wall, on which five prayers had been stuck with post-it notes; and a couple of chairs. On the prayer board, the Salisbury Cathedral prayer was pinned, which appeared to connect the writing of prayer requests and the lighting of votive candles with the themes, ‘lighting a candle is a prayer, lighting a candle is a parable and lighting a candle is a symbol’, rather than understanding these as two discrete kinds of prayer activity. The source of the post-it notes and pens and means of lighting a candle was not evident, and no candles had been lit.

St Materiana’s church is situated in a village near a moor and the present church dates back to the fifteenth century. Three kinds of explicit provision for prayer and

reflection were found in the church: prayer requests, memorial book, and votive candles.

In this church some similarity with the prayer request board set up at St Sulien's church was apparent. There was a similar small cork prayer request board, although in this church it was positioned more discretely on the back west wall, but still visible on entry. The board was not placed in a position with any particular devotional foci close by; directly adjacent to the board was a large stone relief on the wall and in front of the board was a table with children's books. Much of the same content as that found in St Sulien's church was present on the prayer board, although without mention of the confidential email prayer request facility; however, in this case, over one quarter of the prayer board was occupied by a green card on which was written the text of three memorial slabs hidden under the red carpet, which brought to the fore questions relating to the positioning of prayer space and informational space. Two completed prayers had been placed on the board.

The book of remembrance and the votive candles were found together in the Lady Chapel along the north wall, which was also a 'Chapel of Remembrance', 'dedicated to the memory of those we love and have loved, and to remember special and happy occasions.' Signage also made clear that everyone was welcome to use the chapel and an invocation that 'the peace and serenity of this place do the work of God.' The small enclosed space of the Lady Chapel provided a light and warm devotional space and place for prayer and reflection. The small altar bore a colourful quilted frontal, simple wooden cross and wooden candlesticks and there was comfortable seating. On the north wall of the chapel there was a table covered with a white cloth on which the book of remembrance was placed on a bookstand. To one side of the book of remembrance table on the wall, the Salisbury Cathedral 'candle'

prayer was again present, and alongside it, a seventeenth century nun's prayer. To the other side of the book of remembrance table, there was a votive candle stand with locked contributions box. There was no means provided for the lighting of candles and none were lit.

The book of remembrance was particularly interesting because it was not enclosed in a display cabinet or kept open (to protect the pages from the sun), and people were invited to remove it from the stand and to sit with it with a request to return the book after reading. The content of the book of remembrance was also unusual because it included not only a person's name and a date but also a photograph and more specific information about that person or circumstance of their death. The well presented, more informal and personal nature of the book of remembrance fitted well with the warm, almost 'homely' character of the chapel. There was well-signposted, clear information about how to place an entry in the book of remembrance (for which no payment was required), and this included the facility of having photographs copied and returned by the church. There was a sense that the church placed a large investment in the Chapel of Remembrance, and that this was a distinctive and unique focus for the church and its ministry, made intentionally open to all. A list of people to be held 'in memory' for that year (2013) was also found in the back of the church, which contributed further to this impression.

Benefice E

Both churches in the Benefice E had explicit provision for prayer and reflection, with one providing votive candles, prayer requests and memorial book, and the other providing prayer requests. Each of the two churches will be profiled in turn.

St Carantoc's church is situated close to a beach and a canal and dates back to 1835.

Three kinds of explicit provision for prayer and reflection were found in the church: prayer requests, votive candles and a memorial book.

The prayer request area was placed in a particularly prominent and stark position close to the entrance in a transitional environment, located exactly at the head of the central aisle, and elevated on a step. The positioning of the prayer request area indicated a priority given to an intercessory prayer facility, which was well catered for by an organised and minimal set up, set clearly outside devotional space. The wooden table was covered with a white cloth on which were placed three items: a small wooden letter rack holding the prayer request proforma, a pencil, and a closed metal box labelled 'prayer requests' in which the prayer requests were to be placed.

The prayer request proforma required that the name of the prayer recipient was written clearly, and this was followed by a prompt to add more information about the nature of the request. This request for the prayer recipient's name was in bold and underlined with another reminder at the bottom of the proforma, reiterating the importance of the name. The pray-er was informed that the prayers would be offered at the Mass on weekdays and pointed to the pew sheets on which the times of the Mass could be found. This kind of information signaled that the intercessory prayer facility was open to all who entered the church. Although at first sight there appeared to be no obvious material to direct the content of the prayers written (such as another prayer as a prompt), certain basic assumptions were being made: first, the recording of a person's name was necessary and second, the prayers would be for people known to the prayer author rather than for animals, the natural world, global issues, or abstract concerns. It would be interesting to read the prayer requests to see how many followed such directives. In addition, by posting the prayer requests in a closed box,

the relationship in this activity was one existing between the individual and the gathered community at the weekday Mass, unlike a prayer board or book where there is also a relationship between individuals and other pray-ers.

The votive candle stand was placed in a devotional position outside the altar rail of the Lady Chapel in the south aisle. A votive candle in a glass container was already lit to enable the lighting of the large votive candles provided. There was no mention of leaving a donation or payment (and no place to do so), which gave a sense of this being a generous 'gift' of the church, especially in view of the candle size.

The memorial book was placed open on the day's date in a discrete corner in the north aisle in an ornate wooden display cabinet, which complemented the surrounding wooden paneled walls depicting colourful carvings of wildlife. The display cabinet had a dedication to a soldier who died in World War II and a wreath of poppies was placed on it.

St Tallanus' church is situated in a village and most of the current building dates back to the fourteenth century. One kind of explicit provision for prayer and reflection was found in the church: prayer requests.

On entering the church, some framed text made a powerful connection between the activity of prayer and this church, and between the visitor and the church. It gave an open invitation to all who entered, inspiring both devotion and prayer. The text read:

When you come into this church remember that our Lord Jesus Christ is here; he is present and to be adored under the form of his blessed Sacrament reserved for holy communion. Kneel down and worship him. Give thanks for your blessings. Bring to him your needs. Remember all in distress, sorrow and

pain. Pray that the dead may rest in peace. And do not forget those who minister and worship here.

A smart locked wooden box labelled 'For your prayers' was found on a tidy but full table set against bookshelves on the back wall of the church. No other information relating to the prayer request box (such as, what happened to the prayer requests once they were posted) was found. Beside the box was a stack of plain notepaper with a pen, and prayer requests had been placed inside it. In the immediate vicinity of the box was a leaflet detailing the church-related events for that week, and church-related magazines, service books, bibles and other kinds of Christian reading material. There was also the visitors' book, a guide to the church and postcards for sale. A number of chairs were present to enable sitting whilst writing or reading. This area, positioned discretely at the back of the church, attempted to bring together a number of diverse elements that might interest different kinds of visitor, all of which had a strong focus on the written word. In the same area the donation box was built into the wall. This whole area had a 'secluded' aspect about it, created through being partially obscured by a pillar and the seating arrangement, facing the back wall. This whole area raised questions concerning the use of space for different kinds of activity and assumptions made about what visitors might want or need.

Benefice F

Both churches in Benefice F had explicit provision for prayer and reflection, with one providing votive candles, prayer requests and memorial book, and the other providing prayer requests. St Felec's church is profiled.

St Felec's church is situated in the centre of a small town and largely dates back to the fourteenth century. Three kinds of explicit provision for prayer and reflection were found in the church: prayer requests, votive candles and a memorial book.

On entering the church, book shelves and a wooden table were clearly visible, drawing the attention of the visitor. On top of the bookshelves (filled with hymn books) was a framed welcome notice entitled: 'Do you care?' The notice welcomed visitors to the church, with the hope that peace and inspiration would be found there. The remaining text concerned financing the church building and activities and how the visitor could help by offering one pound of sponsorship for twenty minutes. The notice concluded with an invitation to place a cross by your name in the visitors' book if you wished to be remembered in the church's prayers. On the bookshelves there were also additional information about donations and the practical means to make a donation. Beside the shelves, underneath a rack of postcards for sale, the visitors' book was placed open on a table, with a pen and further leaflets about the church. Looking through the visitors' book the cross requesting prayer was evident beside some of the entries.

A clear space for prayer and reflection had been created in the south aisle in front of the screen leading to a side chapel, and in this space all three signs of explicit provision were found: prayer requests, votive candles, and a memorial book. An exercise book and pen were provided for the writing of prayer requests, placed on a long wooden chest clear of all other items. Prayers had been written in the book following the format suggested by the headings: date, person or cause for whom prayer is asked, reason for prayer if appropriate. On a lectern beside the prayer request book, there was an open memorial book. The votive candle area was placed nearby, evoking a sense of both connection with and separation from the prayer

request and memorial book activity. The area looked attractive and well presented, with two tall brass candle sticks placed on either side of a seven-branched votive candle stand before which were placed flowers on a small table and a sign, which read:

The Lord is your light and salvation. You are welcome to Light a Votive Candle as a sign of placing yourself together with those for whom you pray in the light and love of God's keeping. Please place 20p for each candle in the GENERAL EXPENSES BOX on the bookcase to the right of the Font. May the Lord bless your going out and your coming in.'

At the time of the visit, however, no candles were lit and there was no means of lighting any. Some of the questions raised by these examples of explicit provision for prayer and reflection were concerned with how money and prayer is held together within this kind of ministry and how much written text is used to frame it (these are questions which also came to the fore with some of the provision in the other churches surveyed).

Discussion and conclusion

This study builds on existing literature with a view to extending knowledge in the area of personal prayer and reflection within Anglican church-related contexts in England and Wales. The study set out to examine through a survey of nineteen Anglican churches in North Cornwall whether and how churches may provide 'intentional' spaces for visitors to engage in personal prayer and reflection outside their usual congregational service or other activity times. Drawing on recorded observations and analyses, attention was then given to what may be learnt (by using such data) about the churches' understanding of their ministries in this area, the

assumptions being made, and the nature of relationships between ‘congregations’ and these particular visitors. As a result of this process, six areas are identified for comment. The conclusions drawn form a new body of knowledge, which may in turn provide churches with educational ‘tools’ for engaging with their own practice in this area.

The first conclusion relates to the overall provision for personal prayer and reflection. The results of the study revealed a rich presence and diversity of practice in relation to opportunities for personal prayer and reflection in the churches surveyed. With the exception of one church, all the churches were open to visitors, offering the most basic and essential provision of public access. In addition, over half of the churches made some kind of explicit provision for personal prayer and reflection in the form of written prayer requests, votive candles, and memorial books, and this figure rose to around three quarters of the churches when ‘other’ possible examples of ‘intentional’ provision were included. It is concluded, therefore, that the churches surveyed exhibited some kind of awareness of a relationship with and a ministry to those who visited outside service times, and by its very nature, this awareness was specifically related to a sense of physical place.

The second conclusion proposes that this kind of survey data may enable a variety of descriptive ‘styles’ to be generated relating to how an individual church presents its ministry to visitors seeking a place for personal prayer and reflection. In this endeavour, it should be acknowledged that any open church may show signs reflecting one or more of the descriptive ‘styles’, which may or may not be in intentional relationship with one another. Emerging directly from the current set of data, therefore, six descriptive ‘styles’ have been identified, and labelled consecutively from 1 to 6.

Style 1 presents a view that providing access to a sacred place (a church) is of significance and value. It recognises that the attraction of the church extends beyond that of its immediate congregation and its planned services and activities, and that others may wish to visit the church for a variety of reasons, including opportunities for personal prayer and reflection. Anyone from the wider local community or from further afield, therefore, should be able to enter the church as far as practical circumstances permit. A church in this style, therefore, would have regular periods when it would be open (or at the very least, provide contact details for a person with keys to the church).

Style 2 presents a view that the church should serve all who come there in one or more senses. For example, in terms of personal prayer and reflection, the serving might be displayed in the opportunity to light votive candles, offer prayer requests, or enter a name in a memorial book. In addition to providing the facilities, the community or congregation inhabiting the place may also provide an intercessory role, particularly in relation to prayer, and they may also show an on-going commitment to maintaining the memorial book, such as keeping it visible, up to date, and with regular turning of pages. Personal prayer and remembering within the rooted continuity of sacred place may be seen as key ways in which this service is articulated.

Style 3 presents a view that the church should educate or nurture those who come into contact with it, and that visitors to the church provide a good opportunity for this. The forms that the education or nurture take may be complex and various, ranging from simple and open facilitation in prayer to detailed explanations of what is happening in prayer or how to pray, for example. The positioning of literature in the church and the kind of literature available to visitors, especially around areas selected

as spaces for intentional personal prayer and reflection, may also reveal ‘educational’ intentions.

Style 4 presents a view that visitors in general and visitors seeking a place for personal prayer and reflection in particular provide a source of revenue. In terms of the latter, this may be seen in notices linking prayer and revenue (sometimes with explicit links with building maintenance) or in the request to make a monetary offering for use of a votive candle, for example. (By contrast, in some churches, there may be use of notices explicitly indicating that no payment is required for such services, perhaps highlighting this as a contentious issue.) These requests for money take a number of forms and may appear to be transactional or to offer a donation for a service provided or to enable the continued provision of a service or to be simply opportunistic. Although set in a different socio-cultural context, the small study by Trinkaus (2004) focusing on the decline in making payment for votive candles in a large Catholic church in the USA, speculates on user perception of these facilities (and by implication expectations of the provider) set within a particular ‘value system’ context, which again suggests contention around this area.

Style 5 presents a view that the church is a place of meeting for ‘hidden’ but recognised and valued relationships. Examples of this may be seen in churches that connect the praying activity of the congregation with that of the visitor, requesting that they pray for one another and inviting the visitor into a relationship built on prayer, for example. There may also be signs in the church that are explicitly connective, linking in their particularity the place, people, and God through the ages. Such a notion falls within a similar frame of reference as Inge (2003, 2016), who draws on a biblical model to describe a relationship that works three ways between God, people and place, in which all three are significant. Inge develops this into an

incarnational and sacramental understanding of sacred place, which is also central to the thinking of other writers such as Hjalmarson (2014)

Style 6 presents a view that the church is not a place for personal prayer and reflection for use by those outside the congregation or by groups not determined by the congregation. Visitors may be welcomed to services or other events and access the occasional offices of baptism, marriage and funerals, and there may be an active ministry to others, directed outside the church walls; however, there appears to be little awareness of (or perhaps resource to respond to) the visitors who may be seeking personal prayer and reflection in a sacred place. Writers such as Inge (2016, p.155) argue that, for some, this kind of outlook has arisen from a pietism which reserves a church building for public worship only while other activities happen elsewhere. This is neither a traditional use of a church building nor an inevitable model to be retained in churches today (c.f. Tavinor, 2007, p.40).

It is argued that the presentation of groupings such as these may act as one interpretative lens for exploring how churches appear to be presenting themselves to visitors who come to them for a place for personal prayer and reflection.

The third conclusion is concerned with the relationship between the particularities of place and the shaping of space for personal prayer and reflection. Each church in the survey identified some of its own particular individual characteristics in the literature provided for visitors; however, the various presentations of intentional spaces for personal prayer and reflection raised questions about the extent to which appreciation of the particularities of place and space were also perceived as relevant for this context. For example, some churches adopted a generic approach to provision for personal prayer and reflection with the same type of facility available across churches within a benefice, and with minor differences

occurring mainly through pragmatic constraints. This raises questions about the intentionality behind generic presentation of space for personal prayer and reflection in a benefice – is it part of a ‘corporate identity’ or does it arise through pragmatic or unconsidered approaches? Other churches, though, to varying degrees and in different ways, explicitly introduced individual local details to their provision or shaped more comprehensively their provision according to the specific nature of the place in question. An example of the former was the church bringing together prayer for local witness with space set aside for personal prayer and reflection. An example of the latter was the church that brought together a ministry of remembrance with an individual shaping of the space within a small enclosed Lady Chapel to create a unique Chapel of Remembrance. The question of attention to the particularities of place and space was also observed in what some churches did not fully develop. Examples of this included the rather underplayed ‘pilgrims’ altar’ at the back of one church and the almost invisible presence of a holy well in the graveyard of another. In the case of the latter, the neglect of the holy well and the loss of potential drew specific comment in the visitors’ book (not exemplified in the results). The observation of Lyndon and Moore (1994) as cited in Sheldrake (2001, p. 1) is insightful and calls for an active engagement with place: ‘We need to think about where we are and what is unique and special about our surroundings so that we can better understand ourselves and how we relate to others’.

The fourth conclusion proposes that the results of the survey raise some interesting questions about the position and power of words, symbol and action in the creation of spaces for personal prayer and reflection in churches. Different churches recognised and placed different emphases on each of these elements, and it is relevant to consider the effects of each church configuration on those who make use of the

facilities and also what the configuration may be saying about the preferences and attitudes of those who devise it. It was found that the best way to determine how a space 'works' and its effectiveness was to test it experientially to discover what happens, in practice, when it is used. Through this approach, for example, questions were raised about the use of words and whether economy in this regard was preferable to more extended prose in terms of making a space more accessible for personal prayer and reflection. When does the 'unsaid' offer more than the 'said'? When is the power of a symbol enhanced by words and when is it restricted by them? Questions were also raised about how connections are made in space and what happens when they are missing. For example, when a votive candle stand is unconnected with a devotional focus, does a disjuncture occur in practice? Or the example of the unexpected connective effect between individual prayer and the liturgical life of the church produced by writing a prayer request in one part of a church, followed by carrying it to the altar for it to be offered by the community at a specified Eucharist service. This dimension of acts relating to personal prayer and reflection was noted by ap Siôn (2016a), who described the offering of personal written prayer requests as a sensory physical experience, often involving movement and symbol, where connections are made in places other than the written word.

The fifth conclusion relates to the importance of caring for and maintaining a space for personal prayer and reflection, which was an issue highlighted in the survey. From the perspective of visitors, a well-maintained space was not just more invitational, it also enabled their use of the facilities offered. In the churches surveyed some spaces were more well ordered than others. For example some churches had carefully thought through what might be required in terms of paper, pens, lighting implements, seating, and even how people might move in the space, for example,

while others were missing some basic resources in this respect. In addition, the appearance and maintenance of such spaces carried with them impressions of the significance of this ministry in the life of the church and perhaps even the state of the vitality and health of the church. Writers such as Tavinor (2007, p. 37) take seriously presentation of sacred space, arguing that ‘we totally underestimate the “turn off” effect of dirt and lack of care in our sacred space ... Careful presentation says to us, and to our visitors and pilgrims, that what we are entering is important’; however, Tavinor also notes (with reference to French cathedrals and cluttered space) that the power to be awe-inspiring remains in spite of this, although it could be so much greater.

The sixth conclusion focuses on weaknesses in the study and aspects for further research. Although the survey has made a useful contribution to the literature concerned with personal prayer and reflection in church-related contexts by systematically exploring the spaces provided by groups of churches from one geographical area, one weakness of the survey was the lack of systematic inclusion of information relating to the visitors’ book. The survey results have shown that the presence and positioning of the visitors’ book is often in some kind of relationship with the spaces being observed, and that some of the content of the visitors’ book is also relevant to the area of personal prayer and reflection (see Burton, 2015). In light of this, it is recommended that future surveys of this kind include visitors’ books in a more systematic way. In addition, the aim of this survey was to observe what was being made available to visitors seeking space for personal prayer and reflection in a sample of churches and to discuss what could be learnt from this about the churches offering the provision and about relationships between congregations and these visitors. Building on the foundations of this study, it would now be useful to explore

through an interview or questionnaire study how congregations and ministers understand these relationships and their place within their own Christian ministry.

Notes

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Table 1: Opportunities for personal prayer and reflection in a sample of North Cornwall churches (N = 20)

benefice	open church	prayer requests	votive candles	memorial book	other
benefice A (6 churches)	6	1	2	0	2
benefice B (2 churches)	2	1	1	1	1
benefice C (3 churches)	3	3	2	3	1
benefice D (3 churches)	2	0	0	0	0
benefice E (2 churches)	2	2	1	1	0
benefice F (2 churches)	2	2	1	1	0
benefice G (1 church)	1	1	0	0	0
TOTAL	18	10	7	6	4