

Muskett, Judith A. (2021) Reading Other People's Prayers: A Pilot Study around a Prayer Tree at a Church Christmas Tree Festival. *Rural Theology*, 19 (2). pp. 100-109.

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Reading Other People's Prayers.

A Pilot Study around a Prayer Tree at a Church Christmas Tree Festival.

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November 2020

# **Reading Other People's Prayers. A Pilot Study around a Prayer Tree at a Church Christmas Tree Festival**

## **ABSTRACT**

This pilot study explores the extent to which adults attending a Christmas tree festival in a parish church read prayers hung by others on the festival prayer tree. While there is a growing body of empirical research on the content of prayers left in public prayer spaces (hospital chapels, the Millennium Dome and places of worship), prayer content is often analysed in isolation from the context in which it was composed; and comparatively little attention has been paid to the putative practice of reading other people's prayers in such settings. The practice has tended to be inferred from copying patterns evident in prayer books, rather than evidenced from on-site observation. For a pilot study to discover whether on-site observation is feasible, four 30-minute observations were conducted over two days around the festival prayer tree. Use of two hand tally counters during these sessions revealed that on average 40% of festivalgoers who entered the chapel where the prayer tree was located read at least one prayer written and hung by someone else. Possible motivations are discussed. On the basis of this limited pilot study, it is recommended that more sophisticated ethnographic work be carried out in prayer facilities of public spaces.

## **KEYWORDS**

Christmas tree festival; Michel Faber; prayer content; public prayer facilities; reading prayers

In an early scene of Michel Faber's novel *The book of strange new things*, Peter Leigh enters the Heathrow Airport chapel. Peter is a Christian missionary about to take a one-way flight to the USA before leaving Earth for another planet. The prayer room is one place that Peter can locate without difficulty in several UK airports. It tends to be 'the ugliest, dowdiest room in the entire complex, a far cry from the glittery hives of commerce' (Faber, 2015, p. 16).

Despite this characteristic, an airport prayer room is a place 'with soul in it', according to Peter (p. 16).

Peter checks a timetable on the prayer room door to see if he might catch a rare communion service, but he is unlucky. Once inside the room, he opens up the visitors book and turns the large pages. This day, three pages of comments have already been written by travellers from all over the world: most comments are written in English, but a few are in Chinese characters or Arabic script. Peter muses on the paradox that faces him in an airport: the consumerism radiates a presumption that no-one has need for God there, yet plenty of the hoards who mill around sneak into the little chapel and communicate earnest messages to God and fellow believers. Peter reads heartfelt messages in the visitors book. These messages are interspersed with glib entries about an awful smell and the appearance of the prayer room.

The novelist sets out a series of entries from the visitors book. Among them are intercessory prayers, thanksgiving prayers and prayers of proclamation. There are prayers for self and for departed loved ones. Perhaps surprisingly, safe travel is the theme of just two entries. Some writers address God directly ('Dear God ...'); some earnestly entreat the chaplain or chapel community to pray ('Please pray that ...'); and others are subjective ('I pray for ...'). Peter thinks one entry has been penned by a child:

*Dear God, please take all the bad parts out of the world. Johnathan.* (p. 19, original italics)

The rest of the entries set out by Michel Faber appear to have been inscribed by adults. Here are some examples from his list (p. 19, original italics):

*Charlotte Hogg, Birmingham. Please pray that my beloved daughter and grandson will be able to accept my illness. And pray for everyone in distress.*

*Jill, England. Please pray for my late mother's soul to rest peacefully and pray for my family who are not united and hate each other.*

*Moirra Venger, South Africa. God is in control.*

*Jamie Shapcott, 27 Pinley Grove, Yeovil, Somerset. Please can my BA plane to Newcastle not crash. Thank you.*

Broadly consistent with exemplars in recent prayer content studies (for example, ap Siôn, 2015a, 2015b, 2015c; Gilliat-Ray, 2005), the style of Faber's entries rings true. What the protagonist Peter reads could well be found in a book in a real chapel or prayer room. The content rings true because, as an interview with Faber revealed, reading other people's prayers in chapels is something he does every time he passes through an airport (O'Keeffe, 2014).

So, are Faber and his alter ego Peter perverse in their activity? It would seem not. In an essay about cathedrals and growth, Oliver (2017) wrote about visitors' habit of 'reading prayers which other people leave behind' (pp. 32-3); the children's character Teddy Horsley (a bear who lives with a Christian family and likes visiting cathedrals) 'writes a prayer for others to read and pray' (Horsley, 2017); and, among the growing strand of empirical research on the use of prayer facilities in public prayer spaces, mention has been made of people taking an interest in others' prayers.

### **Prayer studies**

Prayers written in books, posted on boards and hung on prayer trees in various public locations both in the UK and elsewhere and some norms associated with such prayer facilities

have been researched by a range of different analytical methods. The methods illustrate the breadth and variety of prayer (Woodhead, 2015). The fields of study have included hospital chapels (ap Siôn & Nash, 2013; Cadge & Daglian, 2008; Collins, 2015; Grossoehme, 1996; Grossoehme, Jacobson, Cotton, Ragsdale, VanDyke, & Seid, 2011; Hancocks & Lardner, 2007; Langford, 2015; O'Reilly, 1995, 2000), churches (ap Siôn, 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010, 2011; Brown & Burton, 2007; Burton, 2009, 2010; Lukenbill & Young, 2020; Schmeid, 2002) and cathedrals (ap Siôn, 2013, 2015a, 2015b, 2015c, 2017). The prayer requests collected by Church of England bishops on the street as part of a Lent initiative have also been studied (ap Siôn & Edwards, 2013), as have prayers left on certain Church of England internet sites (ap Siôn & Edwards, 2012; ap Siôn, 2016).

Typically, these researchers took delivery of batches of prayer books or cards from relevant authorities and analysed prayer content in isolation from the context within which it was composed. An exception is the four-year study conducted by ap Siôn (2017) in Bangor Cathedral, where space for prayer and reflection in the Lady Chapel was purposely shaped, and conceptualized as either 'congregational space' (where congregational activity was the primary focus or orientation of the physical presentation of the sacred space) (years 1, 3 and 4) or 'space for personal prayer and reflection' (where personal religious or spiritual activity was the primary focus or orientation of the physical presentation of the sacred space) (year 2). ap Siôn analysed left during the months of May to August of each year. In year 1 (the original 'congregational space'), prayers were pinned onto a prayer board, whereas in year 2 (when the chapel was shaped as 'space for personal prayer and reflection' and announced as such on a simple notice) and in years 3 and 4 (when the chapel reverted to 'congregational space') prayers were inscribed in a spiral-bound book provided for the purpose. A comparison was made of prayer frequency (number of prayers left in the four periods); and also of prayer length (word count, years 1 and 2), prayer type (years 1 and 2), prayer

relationships (addressees of prayer, years 1 and 2) and petitionary prayer content (years 1 and 2). Analysis of prayer relationships comprised three groups: ‘community’ (identified as either the cathedral community providing the prayer request facility or the community of fellow pray-ers who wrote and left prayers on the board or in the book), ‘The Divine’, or ‘others’ (living or dead, addressed directly). Major differences were revealed in the relationships identified between pray-ers and addressees in the two years: in particular, those who wrote prayers in the year 2 book were more likely to show explicit recognition that they related in some way to the cathedral community and other pray-ers writing prayer requests. The study provides evidence to suggest that the way physical space is shaped has observable effects on the written prayer requests, and by implication on those who write them. The priority of ap Siôn’s study was to examine whether changes to physical environment have an effect upon personal prayer activity; the study does not speculate on whether differences in any aspect(s) of the sampled prayers may be associated with the mode of leaving prayers, whether pinned to a prayer board or written within the pages of a spiral-bound book.

When other studies have mentioned the norms of prayer authors or of visitors to a prayer facility, such norms have tended to be assumed or inferred from primary material, rather than evidenced directly. In a conclusion about the types of implicit religion evident in prayer requests in a children’s hospital chapel, ap Siôn and Nash alluded to the reading of prayers by others, but provided no evidence of this activity (2013, p. 949). Likewise, the scope of the online prayer studies (ap Siôn & Edwards, 2012; ap Siôn, 2016) did not extend beyond analysis of prayer content posted on the sites. Nonetheless, descriptions of the Church of England Lent initiatives highlighted the fact that the 2010 ‘Say one for me’ website included a facility to view other people’s prayers (ap Siôn & Edwards, 2012, p. 99) and that the 2012 ‘Pray one for me’ site provided an opportunity to read prayers posted by others and allowed visitors to click on a prayer in order to pray it (ap Siôn, 2016, p. 82).

Gilliat-Ray (2005) adopted a mixed methods approach to study the Prayer Space in the Millennium Dome (the leisure attraction constructed in Greenwich, England to celebrate the year 2000); and her prayer content analysis was complemented by two weeks' fieldwork comprising interviews, questionnaires and on-site ethnographic observation. Gilliat-Ray observed that visitors to the Prayer Space who chose not to write in the prayer books nonetheless read the entries of others and 'were often visibly moved by the depth of feeling contained in the books'. Her view was that 'the space became sacralized not simply on account of the work of those who wrote the entries, but also by the efforts of those who read them and those who offered them for prayer' (p. 368). Although Gilliat-Ray witnessed people reading others' prayers, she did not quantify the practice. Speculating on the possible influences of this phenomenon, she suggested that some contributors copied the style or theme of a previous entry (p. 362).

Copying the format of previous entries, and to a lesser extent the content, was a theme picked up by Cadge and Daglian (2008). They concluded that prayers written in a hospital chapel were likely to have been written by people from a range of religious and social backgrounds, for whom the act of composing prayers may be unusual and who were largely improvising. Borrowing a term from Day (2004), Cadge and Daglian referred to the chapel prayer books as 'content-fixing objects' – tools that influenced how prayers were offered. They recommended that the copying phenomenon was worthy of investigation in future studies. Another conspicuous example of a prayer book in the mode of content-fixing object is to be found in the study by O'Reilly (1995), who regarded the entries in hospital chapel prayer request journals (simple spiral-bound notebooks) as testament to the solidarity of a community of suffering strangers in a potentially overwhelming environment. Whereas the community discussed in ap Siôn's Bangor study (2017) was identified as that of the cathedral or of the fellow pray-ers who wrote and left prayer requests, the community to which



O'Reilly referred comprised patients, family members and staff who shared time and space together. 'Persons who come into the chapel read the previous entries', she remarked. 'The person/situation about which they've just read evokes compassion in the reader. Sometimes the reader makes a response directly to the previous writer' (p. 28).

This suggests that, as a research tool, the bound prayer book in public prayer facilities is idiosyncratic because the sequence of entries is indisputable. The practice of copying within a bound prayer book enables inferences to be drawn about the extent to which prayer authors read previous entries. According to Gilliat-Ray (2005), copying renders prayer books 'distinctive compared to many other public contexts in which people can make requests for prayer, usually on slips of paper deposited in a sealed box (e.g., in churches or cathedrals)' (p. 362).

The juxtaposition of prayer books and sealed box prayer facilities in Gilliat-Ray's sentence is striking because descriptions of prayer facilities in research studies such as the many cited above imply that the sealed box system is not necessarily as commonplace as she hinted. If bound books are not employed, then the most common option appears to be prayer boards or trees (see, for example, Atkinson, 2017, on cathedrals at prayer). However, if researchers are interested in the copying phenomenon as a predictor of reading others' prayers, prayer boards and trees would be challenging from a methodological perspective. To trace copying patterns through a series of prayers pinned at random on a board or hung haphazardly on a tree in a church or hospital chapel would be as problematic as in circumstances where prayers are posted into a sealed box. The order of hanging or posting is impossible to determine. This challenge suggests that, instead of relying on copying patterns to predict the reading of others' prayers in public spaces, a superior method would be on-site ethnographic research.

### **The pilot study**

An opportunity to employ ethnographic observation for a pilot study to explore the extent to which people read others' prayers in a public prayer facility arose during a Christmas tree festival in a parish church in England, where a prayer tree was provided for visitors. Ethical approval for the study was granted in 2017 by the research ethics committee for the School of Humanities, Religion and Philosophy of York St John University.

The sections that follow describe the festival and its prayer tree, outline the method adopted for the pilot study, report and discuss the findings, and reach some preliminary conclusions.

### **The Christmas tree festival and prayer tree**

The Christmas tree festival ran in the week leading up to Advent Sunday and attracted thousands of visitors. More than 100 Christmas trees lined the church aisles, the chancel and one of the chapels. The trees were decorated by local businesses, charities, other organisations, church groups and individuals. As well as decorated trees, the chapel contained a prayer tree: this was a very tall conifer lit with garlands of simple white lights. Festival attractions included an artificial skating rink in the nave and a ten-metre inflatable toboggan run. A fee was payable to enter the festival in the morning, afternoon or evening; and there was an additional charge for skating and/or tobogganing. Throughout the festival, secular seasonal music was played through the loudspeakers; and refreshments were available at the west end of the church.

There were two access points to the chapel where the prayer tree was situated: one was up a single step from the chancel and the other was up two steps from the south aisle. There were seven decorated Christmas trees in the chapel: three were secular in nature (provided by local shops) and four were church-related (representing regular activities within the church community, such as the Sunday Club, a group for toddlers and the monthly Teddy Bear service). The church's small prayer board and a votive candle stand were to be found in

their usual places at the foot of the altar steps. In front of the chapel altar was a statue of the Virgin Mary seated.

To the left of the prayer tree was a large 'Prayer Tree' sign. Immediately in front of the prayer tree was a wooden lectern bearing a large-print Bible, open at the first chapter of the Gospel according to St John ('In the beginning was the word ...'). In front of the lectern was a tall wooden table: an easy height for pray-ers to write while standing. On that table was a notice inviting prayers:

#### PRAYER TREE

You are invited to remember before God any people or places for whom you are concerned or for whom you wish to give thanks. Please use the tags provided and hang them on the Prayer Tree, and help us to decorate this tree with love!

Lord Jesus, bring light, we pray, to those whose lives are darkened by worry or pain, strengthen us with your hope and bind us all together with your love. In the name of your Son, our Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

#### **Method**

Four 30-minute ethnographic observations were conducted discretely by a single researcher walking around the chapel. Two of the observations took place on the festival Saturday and two on Advent Sunday. A pilot observation had been planned for a weekday evening during the festival, but it rapidly became evident that in the semi-darkness of the chapel no-one (however determined) could read prayers hung on branches of the prayer tree.

During each observation period, two hand tally counters were used to record the number of adults who entered the chapel (from either direction) and the number of adults who paused at the prayer tree and read at least one prayer hung there. Observations did not encompass the activity of any children or young people in the chapel. After each 30-minute

observation period, a journal was used to record any other notable actions observed around the prayer tree.

## **Findings**

The four separate observations provided a snapshot of activity in the chapel and around the prayer tree during the two busiest days of the festival. The chapel was transitional space: it led to and from the chancel displays, and to and from the ice rink, toboggan run and aisle displays. A gentle stream of festivalgoers (individuals and family groups) wandered at their own pace in and out of the chapel: roughly equal numbers entered from the chancel as from the south aisle. The space was not accessible to all; and one person with a pushchair and one wheelchair user were seen to be deterred by the steps. There was no structured pathway to follow inside the chapel: it was up to the individual visitor to decide what to look at, in what order, and how long to spend there. Most people glanced at each decorated tree in turn; and it was common for visitors to take smartphone photographs of certain trees, sometimes with a companion or family member posing beside the tree that was the focus of their interest. The loud music and sounds of excitement and laughter were audible in the chapel; nonetheless, it appeared possible for people to pause and engage in private contemplation around the prayer tree, if they wished.

During the two hours of observations, a total of 207 adults entered the chapel. The Sunday sessions were busier than the Saturday sessions. In total, 83 adults (40%) read at least one prayer hung by someone else on the prayer tree. Of those who read others' prayers, most appeared to read one or two cards at random; however, during each observation, a small number of people paused for a few minutes and studied several cards. A casual conversation with a festivalgoer in the refreshments area on the Saturday morning suggested that reading others' heartfelt offerings on the prayer tree could be a deeply moving experience.

Most visitors who were observed to read prayers hanging on the prayer tree did not proceed to write a prayer themselves. In one session, one individual composed a prayer and attached it to the regular prayer board in the chapel. A few people looked at the Bible in front of the prayer tree, sometimes turning pages before flipping back to John chapter 1. At one observation, a prayer author was observed to write and hang a prayer and then, using a smartphone, to take a close-up photograph of their card on the tree. On another occasion, one visitor took several photographs of companions positioned in front of the prayer tree.

### **Discussion and conclusion**

Studies of prayer content left in prayer facilities of public spaces may assume or infer the practice of reading other people's prayers in those contexts. Cadge and Daglian (2008) recommended that the copying phenomenon was worthy of examination in future studies. O'Reilly (1995) and ap Siôn (2017) found evidence of the solidarity of communities of pray-ers within the pages of spiral-bound prayer books in the setting of a hospital chapel and a cathedral respectively. Gilliat-Ray's (2005) ground-breaking mixed methods study of the use of the Prayer Space in the Millennium Dome in 2000 reported on the reading of others' prayers but did not seek to quantify the phenomenon. The aim of the pilot study reported here, conducted in the prayer facility of a church Christmas tree festival, was two-fold: to pilot an ethnographic method of enquiry in a public prayer facility and to demonstrate whether the putative phenomenon of reading other people's prayers posted in public prayer facilities is observable and thus quantifiable. The data gathered over a total of two hours in close proximity to the prayer tree indicate that the phenomenon is indeed observable: on average, four in every ten adults in the chapel where the prayer tree was sited read at least one prayer hung there by someone else.

Perhaps many people who read prayers were simply inspecting the prayer tree in the same way as they scrutinized decorated Christmas trees nearby; and, after focusing on a

prayer at random, they moved on when their interest was piqued by another display. A few people lingered beside the prayer tree and read several prayers offered by others. If reading was prompting any copying in this context, it was not conspicuous. The readers did not appear to be inarticulate pray-ers seeking inspiration from prior offerings in this setting. There seemed to be an alternative reason for reading. Perhaps the motivation was mild curiosity. Perhaps the reading of prayers was a part of implicit ritual behaviour in the chapel.

The observable phenomenon of reading prayers written and posted in public by other people may be consistent with the practice of reading intimate conversations between the living and the dead displayed at roadside shrines to victims of traffic accidents. As Clark (2008) noted, anyone can read such roadside messages and make use of that mourning for their own purposes, analogous to the way ‘the public mourning for Diana, Princess of Wales, served to focus the personal mourning of the British people on private events in their own pasts’ (pp. 38-39). People who had their photograph taken beside the festival prayer tree, or who took a photograph of their prayer hanging on the tree, may have been capturing evidence that they were there. Such action may also have been a pilgrimage-like phenomenon as witnessed in relation to shrine activity and the public mourning for Diana (Monger & Chandler, 1998).

The rudimentary procedure adopted for the pilot study, entailing the use of two hand tally counters, captured a limited amount of data. The observation protocol did not include distinguishing between the norms of men and women, so it is not known whether more men read others’ prayers or whether more women did so. Likewise, there was no tally of people who wrote and hung prayers during the observations, nor of those who read and then wrote prayers or vice versa. To record such additional data may require a second observer and would risk compromising the discretion exercised. On the basis of this limited pilot study, it is recommended that a more sophisticated ethnographic protocol be designed to document the

reading of others' prayers in prayer facilities of public spaces, perhaps with a view to categorising motivations for the activity and shedding further light on possible influences of the practice.

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