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The Power of Place: Listening to Visitors' Prayers Left in a Shrine in Rural Wales

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**The Power of Place: Listening to Visitors' Prayers Left in a Shrine in Rural  
Wales**

## **ABSTRACT**

Previous empirical studies of intercessory prayer-requests left in Christian locations in England and Wales have shown that aspects of prayer content may be shaped by place. Further studies relating to ‘place’ and ‘space’ for prayer and personal reflection have sought to explore this relationship further. The present study builds on and develops this research tradition with an analysis of 939 prayers left at the church and shrine of Saint Melangell in rural mid-Wales, which are read within the broader context of place. A number of ‘shaping place themes’ are identified in the visitors’ prayers, such as, Saint Melangell, place / sacred place, sanctuary / haven / refuge, pilgrimage / journey, a place to return, answered prayer, nature / environment, ecumenical openness, women, and shrine guardian. The study concludes by asking what rural churches may learn from such visitors about the significance of place and prayer in their ministries to those outside their gathered congregations.

## **KEYWORDS**

sacred place; prayer; church visitors; open churches; shrines; shaping place themes; spiritual tourism; rural

## **Intercessory prayer-requests and place**

In many Anglican cathedrals and open churches in England and Wales opportunities are provided for visitors to leave prayer requests, often on prayer boards or trees, or in prayer books or boxes. Empirical research interest in the content of such intercessory prayers was initiated by Grossoehme (1996) in his pioneering study, 'Prayer reveals belief: images of God from hospital prayers', which examined 63 prayers left in a chapel prayer book at a paediatric hospital in Ohio, USA over a six-month period. With the exception of a study by Schmied (2002), over a decade passed before further research concerning intercessory prayer content in church-related contexts began to emerge (see, ap Siôn, 2007; Brown & Burton, 2007; Hancock & Lardner, 2007). Focusing on methodological approaches, ap Siôn (2007, pp. 203-204) sought to create "a more elaborate and conceptually sophisticated framework within which the prayers left by ordinary people within ordinary churches can be analysed and interpreted," with a view to enabling the replication of prayer-request studies across a range of Christian contexts and places. This resulted in the developing and testing of the ap Siôn Analytic Framework for Intercessory Prayer (apSAFIP) using samples of prayer-requests from cathedrals and churches in England and Wales, a hospital chapel, 'the street', as well as a major Anglican online prayer site (ap Siôn, 2015, pp. 172-173). For the first time, the apSAFIP allowed basic similarities and differences to be empirically identified among prayer-request samples, lending weight to the argument that 'place' influences prayer-request content:

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, shrine-focused cathedral, and inner-city cathedral ..., and through the differences between prayers left in physical churches and cathedrals and prayers left on online prayer sites. (ap Siôn, 2018, p. 56)

In response to these findings two further empirical investigations were conducted, seeking to explore particular aspects of the relationship existing between personal prayer, and place and space. First, an experimental study investigated whether shaping the physical space in which prayer-requests were written had any effects on the prayer-requests left in the Lady Chapel of a cathedral in Wales (ap

Siôn, 2017). Results showed that after re-shaping space in the Lady Chapel (which involved moving from a ‘default’ congregational orientation to a new personal prayer and reflection orientation and then back to a ‘default’ congregational orientation), differences in prayer-request content were identifiable in the analyses of prayer-request content over the four-year period of the experiment. Of particular note, prayers left in the new personal prayer and reflection-oriented space saw an increase in ‘confession’ and ‘thankfulness’, as well as considerable shifts within intercessory prayer relationships:

Those leaving prayers in ‘space for prayer and reflection’ and in the spiral-bound book were much more likely to recognise explicitly that they were in some kind of relationship with the cathedral community and other pray-ers who were also writing prayer requests. (ap Siôn, 2017, pp. 233-234)

This emerging evidence for the presence and complexity of the relationship between personal prayer, and place and space was complemented by a second study which surveyed 19 ‘open’ Anglican churches in rural North Cornwall (ap Siôn, 2018). The survey recorded, described and interpreted through the eyes of a visitor the churches’ provision for ‘intentional’ opportunities to engage in personal prayer and reflection outside congregational gatherings. Through this study, six ‘descriptive styles’ of presentation were generated based on observable characteristics; connections were identified between the particularities of place and the shaping of space for prayer and reflection; and questions were raised in response to experiential interactions with the various spaces and provision offered. As Ellis’ (2019) philosophical approach to exploring the phenomenology surrounding writing a prayer-request also illustrates, what is involved in the writing of a prayer-request (or not) is inherently complex, and this complexity should to be taken seriously by researchers.

The present study builds on and develops this growing body of empirical research through a new analysis of intercessory prayer-requests left at the church and shrine of Saint Melangell in rural mid-Wales that are read within their broader context of ‘place’. The study begins by establishing a context of place, which will form the basis for the subsequent intercessory prayer-request analysis, investigating in greater detail the relationships between visitors’ prayers, place and space.

### **Establishing a context of place**

For the purposes of this study, the first step was to establish a context of place, and this focused on four main sources: first, the location itself; second, the originating legend of Saint Melangell; third, a visitor survey conducted in the church in 2004; and fourth, visits to Pennant Melangell and meetings with the third shrine guardian. The sources selected were not intended to provide an exhaustive picture of place; rather, they aimed to reveal a variety of insights that would be easily accessible and relevant to the average visitor as well as the connections being made between place and ministry.

### ***Location***

At first sight, the church and shrine of Saint Melangell appear to be centrally located with three major large towns nearby on the Welsh-English border. However, travel times indicate the rural realities of making a journey to Pennant Melangell. The nearest large town, Oswestry, is a distance of just under 20 miles, although a car journey takes over half an hour; while Shrewsbury and Wrexham are both slightly over 30 miles but with car journeys of around an hour. Even Bala, the nearest town in the heart of rural Wales (a distance of some 13 miles), is a 25-minute journey.

Towards the end of the journey, the visitor arrives first at the village of Llangynog, which lies at the foot of the Berwyn mountains, in the Tanat Valley. From here, a choice is made to continue either by foot or by car for a further two miles along a very narrow country road, following the course of the river Tanat to the mouth of the valley where the church and shrine of Saint Melangell are situated.

Therefore, unlike cathedrals and many churches popular with visitors, who are also often drawn by other tourist attractions in the vicinity, the church and shrine of Saint Melangell are not particularly accessible, and it would be reasonable to expect lower visitor footfall but with a certain intentionality on the part of those who choose to make that journey. The visitor has to make some effort to get there, and both journey and location give a sense of a place ‘set apart’, as the online film *Bringing Health and Healing* (ap Siôn, 2019) illustrates.

‘Shaping place themes’ emerging from the location itself might include the sense of place or sacred place; journey or pilgrimage; nature or the environment.

### *The legend of Saint Melangell*

Saint Melangell and the legend associated with her are prominently displayed throughout the church, creating strong connections between the saint and ‘place’ that are plainly observable to anyone visiting the church. For example, the legend of Saint Melangell is carved into the fifteenth century wooden rood screen and it is also told in detailed written material positioned carefully around the church; there are numerous icons of Saint Melangell, and a late fourteenth century female stone effigy of the saint lies to one side of the restored shrine of Saint Melangell; the stone slab marking the grave of Saint Melangell covered with offerings provides the focus of the apse set behind the altar and the shrine (*Cell-y-Bedd*); and Saint Melangell’s hare is a frequent image carved in stones set around the church.

Saint Melangell was believed to have lived in this part of the Tanat Valley around the sixth to the early seventh century, and archaeological evidence may indicate that the saint’s cult existed here from an early period (pre-Norman), possibly focused on Saint Melangell’s grave (Pryce, 1994, p. 33), although existent written accounts of her legend do not appear until much later. Huw Pryce (1994) argues that Thomas Price’s copy of the *Historia Divae Monacellae* is the “earliest and fullest account of the life of St Melangell and the early history of her church” (p. 27), originally written around the late fifteenth century or first part of the sixteenth century. The following summary of the legend draws on Huw Pryce’s (1994, pp. 37-40) ‘New Edition of the *Historia Divae Monacellae*’, which is based on Thomas Price’s copy.

A prince named Brochwel was out hunting when he began pursuing a hare, which fled into a thorny, bramble bush. In the brambles, he found a beautiful virgin ‘praying as devotedly as possible’ and ‘given up to divine contemplation’; there with her was the hare, ‘lying down under the hem or girdle of her garment, with its face turned towards the dogs boldly and calmly’. The prince urged the dogs forward, but the dogs retreated, howling. Astonished, the prince asked the virgin ‘for how long she had lived on his lands alone in such a wilderness’. The virgin replied that she had been there for fifteen years and at no point had she looked at a man during that time. She was the daughter of a king who fled from Ireland to escape marriage and had come to this place to serve God. Considering the ‘wellbeing of the virgin in her solitude’, the prince acknowledged her as a ‘true handmaiden of God’, and just as God had bestowed on the hare by her merits ‘safe conduct to this place and protection



from attack’, the prince would give these lands to her ‘for the service of God, and so that there shall be a perpetual asylum, refuge and protection in honour of your [Melangell’s] name’. The prince’s descendants also declared Pennant Melangell to be a place of ‘perpetual sanctuary, asylum or most secure refuge of the wretched’. Saint Melangell established a community of women there, ‘so that they might live holily and chastely, persevering in the love of God; intent upon divine services, they used to spend their days and nights doing nothing else’. She remained there for thirty-seven years and the wild hares were friends with her, and through the hares there were miracles for those seeking help.

Although, as Pryce (1994) argues, the legend follows certain hagiographical conventions and interests of the time, it draws on oral and written local sources for the ‘main substance of its account’ (p. 29). In addition, he illustrates how this written version of the legend has a ‘preoccupation with St Melangell’s rights of sanctuary’, a theme which runs throughout the *Historia*, connecting its various episodes, beginning with the ‘sanctuary or refuge’ found by the hare in folds of Saint Melangell’s clothing. Pryce maintains that the impetus for creating the written account, at this time, was likely to have been to establish indisputably the right of sanctuary in this place (p. 31).

Another interesting feature about the legend is the lack of detail surrounding the hare and Saint Melangell; it is known only that the hare sought ‘refuge’ and was bold and calm in the face of its pursuers. This is quite different to other well-known accounts of hares and saints, such as Saint Anselm, where a more specific and directed point is being made. In that legend, as recounted by Alexander (2008, p. 1), Anselm was out riding and a hare pursued by dogs ran under his horse for refuge. Anselm stopped and the hunters laughed as the dogs persisted in their attempts to get to the hare. The saint wept and “likened the peril of the hare to the peril of the soul after death, surrounded by demons, and desperately needing heavenly aid”. In this account, the position of the hare is analogous to that of a human being, and this appears to be the didactic point of the relationship between the saint and the hare. By contrast, the legend of Saint Melangell (with its focus so clearly on sanctuary and refuge, rather than a theological or moral detail) may perhaps have broader connections with contemporary visitors to Pennant Melangell.

‘Shaping place themes’ emerging from Saint Melangell and her legend might include the sense of the saint herself; sanctuary, refuge, or haven; place or sacred

place; pilgrimage; prayer; miracle; nature, land or environment; a creation-centredness; women.

### *A visitor survey*

In 2004 Keulemans and Burton (2006) conducted a three-month questionnaire survey of visitors to the church and shrine of Saint Melangell, publishing the results in an article for *Rural Theology* entitled, 'Sacred place and pilgrimage: Modern visitors to the shrine of St Melangell'. They reported that 107 usable questionnaires were completed during the study period and data analyses contributed to visitor profiles, including personal information, church attendance, details about their visit, their experiences from the visit, and the effect of their visit on their attitude towards the Christian faith and the institutional Church.

Although this is a small study, a number of findings are of broad contextual interest to the present study as well as offering further insights into the nature of place in Pennant Melangell. In terms of personal information, among respondents, there were more females (57%) than males (43%), and around half were in their 40s and 50s with another quarter in their 60s. Most were in occupations described as 'professional' (57%), followed by 'semi-professional' (26%) and 'skilled' or 'semi-skilled manual workers' (10%), with 41% being in full-time work, 31% retired, 14% in part-time work, and 7% homemakers or carers. The majority (72%) had travelled some distance to be there (over 30 miles). Most described themselves as weekly churchgoers (42%), followed by those attending a church service once a month (20%) and once a year (20%). The remaining 17% of respondents described themselves as non-churchgoers.

The majority (70%) had planned their journey to the shrine. Many had visited the shrine a number of times, with 41% of respondents being on their second to fifth visit and a further 19% of respondents being on their sixth or more visit. Therefore, the church and shrine appeared to be a place to which people made a deliberate effort to visit (they were seldom 'simply passing through'), as well as a place to which they chose to return. When asked their reasons for coming to the shrine, the most frequent reason cited was a spiritual motive (78%), followed by an historical interest (65%), an archeological interest (64%), and an architectural interest (30%). While at the shrine, the respondents reported their engagement with a variety of 'spiritual practices', including silent prayer (78%), lighting a candle (60%), and meditation (57%), while

smaller numbers prayed at the shrine, wrote a prayer request or bought a prayer card. Saint Melangell's story was explored by 54% of respondents. With reference to the perceived spiritual impact of the place, respondents experienced a sense of peace (76%), felt a desire to pray (72%), were moved to think about God (69%), reflected on the meaning of life (57%) and sensed Saint Melangell's presence (57%).

'Shaping place themes' emerging from this visitor survey might include the sense of the saint herself; pilgrimage or journey; a place of return; prayer; place or sacred place.

### *The shrine guardians*

Since the reconstruction of the shrine of Saint Melangell and the renovation of the church during the late 1980s to the early 1990s, the figure of 'shrine guardian' has come to the fore. At Pennant Melangell, a line of women have held that position and their ministries have played a role in shaping the place around them, beginning with Evelyn Davies, whose husband, Paul Davies was responsible for initiating and overseeing the renovation work at the church and creating a cancer counselling centre in the cottage next door. Both Evelyn and Paul's ministries were profoundly shaped by their experiences with cancer, and when Paul died from cancer in 1994, Evelyn spent the next six years 'developing the healing, counselling and pilgrimage ministry' with this focus. In 2003, the second shrine guardian, Linda Mary Edwards, brought her experiences as a psychotherapist and counsellor to her ministry at Pennant Melangell, while in 2011 the third shrine guardian, Lynette Norman, came with a background and interest in education.

This study draws on photographic records of Pennant Melangell and notes from three unstructured 'interview conversations' with the third shrine guardian, Lynette Norman, taken during six visits made to the church and shrine of Saint Melangell between May 2013 and August 2016. One of the primary aims was to elicit perceived relationships between ministry and place from the perspective of a shrine guardian and the kinds of ministry evident to visitors.

During the six visits, the significance of the shrine guardian became apparent both in terms of continuity in ministry (prayer, healing and pilgrimage, for example) and complementary distinctiveness in ministry (cancer, mental health, and education, for example). The provision made for prayer was particularly evident in the church,

including the opportunity to light votive candles, place a pebble in a 'pool', leave names in the book of remembrance, as well write a prayer in the prayer-request book available in the apse beside the grave of Saint Melangell or on one of the prayer-request cards to join the large number of other prayer-request cards placed within the shrine itself. This last practice was described as having been initiated 'spontaneously' by the visitors themselves and soon become very popular. The written prayer-requests (either left in person, or through email or telephone) formed an important part of the church's intercessory prayer ministry, and were also incorporated into the regular healing services that were open to all.

The figure of Saint Melangell, alongside retelling and reconnecting with her legend, featured prominently in conversations, extending beyond the church's walls to the surrounding land and nearby landmarks. There was an awareness of the isolation, peace and sacredness of that part of the valley, and an appreciation of the close presence of the natural world with its abundant wildlife, as well as the agricultural activity. Being on a shooting estate, however, visitors were warned when the tranquility of the valley would be broken as the shooting season began, and in the lead up to this, the single-track road leading to Pennant Melangell would become filled with the game birds being bred for that purpose. Although nothing was said explicitly, an uneasy tension was evident between a place of sanctuary and pilgrimage and a place of such sporting activity.

It was also clear that visitors related to the church and shrine of Saint Melangell in various ways, visiting in person but also connecting through telephone, email and letter. The wide range of visitors would come from many different locations, including the local, national and international. One development especially highlighted was the groups and individuals visiting (and worshipping in) the church and shrine from different Christian denominations, which made the shrine ecumenically interesting in a distinctive kind of way.

'Shaping place themes' emerging from the figures of the shrine guardians might include the sense of the shrine guardian herself; women; Saint Melangell and her legend; place or sacred place; pilgrimage; prayer; healing; nature or environment; ecumenical openness.

## ***Review***

There was much to indicate that the church and shrine of Saint Melangell had a distinctive and well-established relationship with ‘place’, as well as a connected understanding of place and ministry, with prayer forming an important part of this. It was anticipated, therefore, that the church and shrine of Saint Melangell would have much to offer research studies seeking to explore the relationship between place and intercessory prayer-requests left by visitors in more depth.

A ‘context of place’ for Pennant Melangell had now been established by drawing on four main sources, including: the location itself; the originating legend of Saint Melangell; a visitor survey conducted in the church in 2004; and, visits to Pennant Melangell and meetings with the third shrine guardian, in order to create a variety of ‘shaping place themes’, through which a sample of prayer-requests left in the church and shrine of Saint Melangell may be read.

### **Engaging with the prayer-requests**

After establishing a context of place for Pennant Melangell, the second step in the study was to identify the sample of intercessory prayer-requests and the approach for the analysis of prayer content.

### ***Selecting the prayers***

Selecting the intercessory prayer-request sample was determined by a number of factors, including the location of the prayers within the church, the opportunity to write extended prayer text, the knowledge gained from previous prayer-request studies, and the relationship with the sources used to establish a context of place.

It was observed that the small apse located behind the altar and the reconstructed shrine offered a secluded space for personal prayer and reflection set apart from the rest of the church. In this room, a grave ‘slab’ of stone set into the floor marks what is believed to be the burial place of Saint Melangell. At the head of the slab stands a banner depicting Saint Melangell, and the grave is covered with a large assortment of objects that visitors have brought and left there. The only other main feature in this bright and simple white room is a solitary prayer desk on which a Bible and a book for the writing of intercessory prayer-requests are placed, alongside a few other objects. The space gives the impression of having been carefully shaped for personal prayer and reflection, and there is a complete absence of any kind of congregational focus or activity. Here, it would be possible to write prayer-requests

quietly and comfortably, and also to write at greater length than afforded by the small prayer-cards inserted into the shrine. The prayer-requests from this location, therefore, were considered best suited for this study.

Given that Keulemans and Burton's (2006) visitor survey at the church and shrine had been used as one of the sources to establish a context of place for this study, it was considered that the portrayal of place would be enriched further by including within the prayer-request sample those prayers left during the survey period (January to April 2004). In addition, previous prayer-request analyses (ap Siôn, 2017) have shown that prayer-requests written in a bound prayer book (as opposed to those posted on prayer boards) may influence the prayers left in a number of ways. Therefore, the decision was made to include in the sample all the prayer-requests within the relevant prayer book for the relevant period (1 March 2003 to c. 17 September 2004). This had the added advantage of bringing the total sample size to 939 prayers, which was broadly similar to previous prayer-request studies conducted in this series by ap Siôn.

### *Approaching the analysis*

As previous prayer-request research has indicated, a relationship exists between place and personal intercessory prayer content, and the nature of the relationship is likely to be complex and nuanced. The aim of this study was to investigate in greater detail the relationships between visitors' prayers, place and space through developing and applying a new analytic approach to prayer content devised specifically for that purpose.

For this study the 'shaping place themes' provided an exploratory analytic framework for the analysis of the 939 prayers. The ten 'shaping place themes' were: Saint Melangell; place / sacred place; sanctuary / haven / refuge; pilgrimage / journey; a place to return; miracles / answered prayer; nature / environment; ecumenical openness; women; and shrine guardian. In terms of process, initially, the prayers were read a couple of times in order to gain familiarity with the overall content. The prayers were then numbered and transcribed, taking care to remove any personal identifying details. The prayers were then read again alongside the ten 'shaping place themes', while simultaneously being open to possible place-related content that lay outside these themes. Finally, once the presence of the 'shaping place themes' had been established in the prayers and considered within the overall prayer content, a

basic analysis was conducted which recorded theme frequency in the prayers and a broad content descriptor for each theme. On occasion, where simple direct comparisons could be made, the prayers of a previous shrine prayer-request study at Lichfield Cathedral (ap Siôn, 2015) were revisited and set alongside the findings from this study, although recognising that the Lichfield prayers were written on small cards rather than in a larger intercessory prayer book.

### **Shaping place themes and prayers**

Instances of all ten ‘shaping place themes’ were identified in the sample of 939 prayers, and no other comparable thematic categories pertinent to ‘place’ were found. A description and discussion of each ‘shaping place theme is presented.

#### ***Saint Melangell***

In the 939 written prayers, the saint was referred to by name 13 times within twelve prayers. To gain a sense of perspective, when this figure is compared with a previous prayer-request study examining prayers from Saint Chad’s Shrine at Lichfield Cathedral, Saint Chad’s name was mentioned only once within 1,624 prayers (ap Siôn, 2015).

Many of these prayers were among the longest prayers in the sample, and also included poetry. Some of the prayers addressed Saint Melangell directly, and sometimes she was addressed alongside God. On these latter occasions, different qualities were connected with the saint and God, respectively. Saint Melangell was associated with courage, strength, protection, blessing, healing, love and care for people and animals, and living in a way that was connected with the earth. Reference was made to Melangell’s hare in two prayers: in one case, the hare spoke in a voice to dispel all fear, and in the other case, the hare was included in concern for all God’s hunted creatures, which may have had either a literal or metaphorical meaning. In one prayer, the “energy” and intercession of the saint was requested for a dog, whose progress was then followed through the prayer-request book.

#### ***Place / sacred place***

In the 939 written prayers, the ‘place’ was described (or treated) explicitly as somewhere special, sacred, or set apart in some way in 20 prayers. These included: giving thanks for “this place”; referring to this “sacred/holy place”, “wonderful

place”, “special place”; and noting the “sacred” location of *cell y bedd* (the apse) in particular. In some instances, ‘place’ was referred to simply as “here”. A number of qualities or experiences of this place were identified in the prayers, including: “vitality and encouragement”, “peace”, “calm”, “tranquility”, “love”, “inspiration”, as well as recognising this as a place of “witness and blessing”, one that enables reconnection with “our spirituality”, a place “where nature and grace dwells”, and “a longstanding place of worship and prayer, full of beauty and that which is good”.

To gain a sense of perspective, when the prayer-requests from Saint Chad’s Shrine at Lichfield Cathedral were revisited (ap Siôn, 2015), the words “place”, “church”, “shrine”, “here” and words relating to them such as “sacred / holy”, “special” did not appear at all, apart from one reference to feeling “blessed by this lovely shrine” and a few observations that the cathedral was important to family members or friends.

### *Sanctuary / haven / refuge*

In the 939 written prayers, the word “sanctuary” was used explicitly in three prayers. It was associated with a feeling of blessing by being in a “true sanctuary” and thankfulness that “this sanctuary exists”. This sanctuary was connected with “love” and “peace” in all the prayers, and two prayers asked that this sanctuary be internalised, either by becoming part of the pray-er as they leave that place, or by finding “this kind of sanctuary within”.

“Haven” was used only once in the prayers, where the ‘place’ was described as a “haven of silence and simple purity”. The term “refuge” was not found in any of the prayers. It is possible, however, that the qualities or experiences of a ‘sanctuary’, a ‘haven’ or a ‘refuge’ may be found implicitly in a larger number of prayers without any explicit reference to the terms themselves. For example, a closer study of how other associated words were being used by the prayer authors could be revealing, such as “safe” (17 prayers), “protection” or “protect” (11 prayers) or “shelter” (one prayer). Inclusion of such words may broaden the natural scope of this ‘shaping place theme’, while still recognising that the words ‘sanctuary’ and ‘haven’ had other associations for those prayer authors who wrote them.

To gain a sense of perspective, the words “sanctuary”, “haven” and “refuge” do not appear in any of the 1,624 prayers left at the Saint Chad’s Shrine at Lichfield Cathedral (ap Siôn, 2015).



### ***Pilgrimage / journey***

In the 939 written prayers, “pilgrimage” was used as an explicit term in two prayers, while “journey” appeared in nine prayers. In the case of “pilgrimage” only one prayer described the journey to Pennant Melangell as a pilgrimage, while the other prayer spoke more generally about the pilgrimage of life. “Journey” was understood in various ways with only a few examples concerned with the physical journey to Pennant Melangell relating to some kind of spiritual purpose or experience. For example, one prayer gave thanks for a “sign” given on the journey to Pennant Melangell that morning and another prayer carried the wish that someone would heal as a result of the journey to this place “with the touch of such grace as here”.

The sense of ‘journey’, however, was present in other forms as well, such as one prayer stating the deliberate intention to come to “this church” and another prayer making reference to “those who travel here for comfort and guidance”.

### ***A place to return***

Appearing fairly frequently in the 939 prayers was the depiction of the church and shrine of Saint Melangell as a place ‘to come back to’, and this was expressed in different ways. First, some prayer authors articulated a desire or intention to come back to this place. Second, the reality of returning to this place was implicitly present in the overall content of many prayers; for example, prayers being left by the same people and updates being given for certain people and situations, sometimes followed through to a person’s death. Third, some prayers indicated that regular visits were made to the graveyard to visit family members buried there, and in one prayer there was reference to the ashes of a relative that the prayer author had brought with them.

### ***Miracles /answered prayer***

In the 939 written prayers, the word “miracle” appeared four times. However, only one of these examples was concerned with miracles believed to have happened in the prayer author’s life, and for these thanks were offered. The other examples were about requesting ‘miracles’ as part of the prayer petition.

There were references to ‘answered prayer’ in six prayers. These included thanks for non-specified answered prayer, thanks for “many prayers answered for so many people brought here, both in body and spirit”, and thanks for a specified

answered prayer, such as the prayer author's healing from cancer. In one case, the belief was articulated that prayers were always answered in one way or another.

Falling within the same broad theme of answered prayer / miracle were four prayers relating to "help". These prayers either identified where "help" had been received or asked for continuing "help" in a situation. The implication behind these prayers was that prayers were being answered. Also, relevant to the theme is one prayer that thanked the "church" for recovery.

### ***Nature / environment***

In the 939 written prayers, direct reference was made to 'nature' or the 'environment' in 13 prayers. These prayers included references to: being connected with the earth; being connected with one another; oneness with the universe and also with God; the human role of custodian and the practice of stewardship; concern for human disruption and destruction of nature; prayers for specific environmental work; and animal prayers, including reference to the hare or companion animals.

### ***Ecumenical openness***

In the 939 written prayers, signs of the attraction of the church and shrine of Saint Melangell to individuals and groups from a range of Christian denominations were present in eight prayers, indicating its accessibility from this perspective. For example, prayers were left by nuns of a Franciscan religious order, there were references to a new religious community, a Baptist church, and a Methodist Circuit, there was a prayer for the head of the Russian Orthodox Church in Britain, and some prayers were written by someone participating in missionary activity in the UK. These prayers showed that there was something about the church and the shrine, which could engage with people from different Christian traditions as well as others more broadly.

### ***Women***

In the 939 written prayers, eight prayers were related to a 'female' theme, which was interpreted in a restrictive sense. Therefore, women who had left prayers and prayers for individual women were not included. Examples of prayers within this theme related to 'ministry' with one prayer for women's ministry in the church and another prayer for a woman hoping for a call to ministry. Other examples related to the

feminine aspect of the divine with one request that “the feminine energy get strong and the world fully balanced” and another request that “the God or Goddess make you better”. In addition, some prayers alluded to a sense of ‘sisterhood’ with the term “sister” being used on some occasions in relation to Saint Melangell and also in relation to other females (not including relatives or sisters within a religious order).

### ***Shrine Guardian***

This theme acknowledges the prayers that appeared to be shaped by the ministries of the shrine guardians. One clear example of this phenomenon is presented here. As previously established, the first shrine Guardian, Evelyn Davies, developed a cancer counselling centre at Pennant Melangell, and although Evelyn left Pennant Melangell a few years prior to the writing of these prayer-requests, the frequency of references to cancer found within them was very high. Prayers for sickness using the word “cancer” occurred in 89 prayers, other prayers used the words “tumour” (13 prayers), “leukaemia” (eight prayers), “radiotherapy” (one prayer) and “chemotherapy” (5 prayers), and another group of prayers related to death and cancer. Therefore, of the 939 written prayers, at least 121 prayers (13%) were concerned with cancer explicitly, and it is likely that other prayers made oblique references to cancer as well. To gain a sense of perspective, when the prayer-requests from Saint Chad’s shrine at Lichfield Cathedral were re-visited (ap Siôn, 2015), the same cancer-related words were found in only 100 of the 1,624 prayers (6%).

In addition, included in this theme are the prayers that showed awareness of the ministry being offered at the church and shrine, such as those giving thanks for the ministry of those who work in this place and those who support the centre.

### **Some concluding reflections**

The purpose of this study was to build on and to develop in new ways empirical research concerned with exploring the relationships between visitors’ intercessory prayer-requests, place and space. This was achieved in two main ways. First, although previous empirical studies have shown that relationships between prayer, place and space exist and pointed to some broad indicators of this, the present study has enabled the content of prayers to be examined in greater detail by positioning the prayer analysis more fully within an established context of place. Second, the present study has developed and tested on prayer-requests left at the church and shrine of Saint

Melangell a new methodological approach for exploring the relationship between prayer, place and space. This new methodological approach is centred on establishing 'shaping place themes' for a specific 'place' through which the visitors' prayer-requests are then read and analysed. The results of the study show that this approach was successful in illuminating further relationships between prayer, place and space, which are likely to have been less conspicuous in a more general content study. Therefore, this new methodological approach is commended for replication in other studies interested in developing 'contexts for place' through which prayers, visitors' books or other content may be read.

The church and shrine of Saint Melangell has been shown to have a very connected sense of 'place' and 'ministry', with strong links to local traditions, history and geography that are reflected in the prayer-requests left beside Saint Melangell's grave in the apse of the church. Drawing on the prayer-request results in relation to the 'shaping place themes', three hypothetical examples of themes are given that might be usefully developed in response to the study. First, considering that the notions of 'sanctuary' and 'refuge' are so dominant in the Saint Melangell legend, there is scope for discerning what this means for ministry at Pennant Melangell and whether it should be brought more to the fore. Second, given the prominence of nature and the environment at Pennant Melangell, a similar question may be asked. Third, the shrine guardian is a distinctive and potentially dynamic figure, responsible for maintaining continuity and introducing change at the church and shrine. However, there may be additional or different ways in which this female line of shrine guardians could be presented that would focus and develop further this 'shaping place theme'.

This study may be helpful to other churches and cathedrals in a number of ways. At a time when the concepts and practices of 'spiritual tourism' and 'pilgrimage' are widely recognised, the importance of 'place' is brought to the foreground as a matter of interest and concern. This study has provided a coherent and systematic approach for churches and cathedrals to explore their own 'places' and their own ministries within them. From an informed basis, questions may be raised that could include, for example: how your 'shaping place themes' are visible to the ordinary visitor engaging in prayer or reflection; where your 'shaping place themes' are coming from and the rationale behind this; whether there are any additional 'shaping place themes' uncovered by the prayers that are not being recognised explicitly by your church or cathedral; how visitors are understanding and engaging

with particular ‘shaping place themes’; and which ‘shaping place themes’ are worth developing or strengthening in your church or cathedral. In addition, follow-up studies would make it possible to see the potential effects of any changes introduced as a result of the reflective process.

In conclusion, this study has sought to demonstrate the power of place and the value of making an important starting point for ministry the place itself. This stands in contrast to ministry projects that take a ‘universal’ approach by either identifying and applying generic initiatives developed outside place or by recognising a successful project in one place and transplanting it to other places. This study offers support for the position that ‘place’ should be taken seriously and appropriate rigour may be applied to observing and reflecting on the various relationships between prayer, place and space.

**Note:**

This study is part of the Prayer and Sacred Place Project based at the St Mary’s Centre, Wales, and jointly led by the Revd Dr Tania ap Siôn and the Revd Canon Dr Randolph J. K. Ellis. The prayer-requests used in this study came from the National Prayer Archive, which is being developed as part of the Prayer and Sacred Place Project.

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