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Insights from Adolescents' Prayer Requests within a Christian Ethos School: A  
Qualitative Perspective

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## **Abstract**

State-maintained Christian ethos schools are a prominent part of the educational landscape of England and Wales, and a growing body of empirical research has sought to access, study and interpret the voices of their students in order to contribute to a fuller understanding of life within these schools and their place in contemporary Britain. As part of this endeavour, this study focuses on what may be learnt from students' prayer in a joint Anglican and Catholic Christian ethos secondary school. Following the identification of the school prayer board and intercessory prayers within school Eucharists as offering a significant contribution to the Christian ethos school, this study set out to explore and evaluate these prayer requests composed by students. Taking a sample of 212 prayers, an established analytic framework for the analysis and classification of intercessory prayer (the *apSAFIP*) was employed and other notable characteristics identified (including prayer type, 'proclamations', drawings, liturgical language and style). The findings draw attention to the distinctive profile of the prayer requests offered within the school in terms of the issues for which prayers are offered, and the religious language, expressions, and themes that shape these prayers. The study concludes by appraising the performance of the *apSAFIP* in this new context and by considering what may be learnt from these themes and linguistic forms about the spiritual and religious lives of the students.

## **Keywords**

intercessory prayer; adolescent prayer; *apSAFIP*; prayer board; school Eucharist; Christian ethos schools; schools with a religious character; church schools.

## **Introduction**

Although the historical roots of relations between the churches and the state with regard to school provision began forming in the first part of the nineteenth century, state-maintained Christian ethos schools in England and Wales (also known as ‘schools with a religious character’ or ‘church schools’) were established through the 1944 Education Act, which created the legislative context for Catholic schools and Anglican schools that still exists today (Dent, 1947). As part of this agreement between the churches and the state, the 1944 Education Act created two distinct kinds of Christian ethos school; namely, voluntary controlled schools and voluntary aided schools. In voluntary controlled schools the state took over responsibility for the schools’ running costs while the church retained ownership of their school buildings. In return the church retained the right to appoint a minority of school governors, to maintain denominational worship, and to provide denominational religious teaching only for children of parents who requested it. In voluntary aided schools the church retained responsibility for a proportion of building and maintenance costs. In return the church retained the right to appoint a majority of school governors, to maintain denominational worship, and to provide denominational religious teaching throughout the school. Subsequent education acts, such as the Education Reform Act 1988, left the religious provisions of the Education Act 1944 largely unchanged.

In the years that followed, both the Anglican sector and the Catholic sector sought to reflect on their churches’ continuing presence in state-maintained education, their Christian ethos, and the nature of their contributions in a changing society. For example, in the Anglican sector there were the *Durham report* (1970), *The way ahead* (Archbishops’ Council, 2001), the Church in Wales’ *Education review* (Lankshear, 2009), and the *Church of England vision for education* (Church of England Education Office, 2016); while in the Catholic sector there were *Signposts and homecomings* (Bishops of England and Wales, 1981), *Principles, practices and concerns* (Bishops of England and Wales, 1996), *Catholic schools, children of other faiths and community cohesion: Cherishing education for human growth* (Catholic Education Service of England and Wales, 2008), and *Christ at the centre* (Stock, 2013).

### ***Researching Christian ethos schools***

A growing body of research has sought to explore and to test empirically a variety of research questions relevant to Christian ethos schools and their Christian

‘distinctiveness’, broadly conceived. For example, a series of papers drawing on data collected in England and Wales during the 1990s focussed on the religious, personal and social values of 13- to 15-year-old students attending state-maintained Catholic schools (Village & Francis, 2016), state-maintained Anglican schools (Francis, Lankshear, Robbins, Village & ap Siôn, 2014), and independent Christian schools (Francis, ap Siôn & Village, 2014). Using multilevel regression models that took into account personal, psychological, contextual and religiosity differences of the students, the studies were able to identify any contributions made by the respective schools themselves within the areas under scrutiny. For example, in the independent Christian schools it appeared that student attendance was associated with higher self-esteem, greater rejection of drug use, lower endorsing of illegal behaviours, lower racism, higher levels of conservative Christian belief and more conservative views on sexual morality; in the Catholic schools there appeared to be a Catholic school effect on opposition to abortion among students who believed in God as well as other differences between religious and non-religious students; in the Anglican schools students recorded a significantly lower level of self-esteem. The importance of these studies is found primarily in their endeavour to produce a rigorous way of testing for school effect on students.

A series of studies has also been published as part of the Student Voice Project within Anglican state-maintained primary schools in Wales among 9- to 11-year-old students. Recognising the difficulties inherent in the term ‘ethos’, the Student Voice Project argues that:

school ethos is generated by the implicit collective values, beliefs and behaviours of the students, that may or may not be effectively shaped by the explicit ethos statements issued by the school. The Student Voice Project was therefore designed to give explicit voice to the students in response to six specific areas of school life identified by the Anglican school inspection criteria as relevant to school ethos.

(Francis, Lankshear & Eccles, under review)

The emphasis on the importance of the collective ‘worldview’ of students attending these schools is also well documented in secondary Christian ethos school studies, such as Francis and Penny (2013) and Francis, Casson, and McKenna (2018). The six areas of school life assessed by the School Ethos Project in Wales through annual surveys spanning three years between 2014-17 were: attitude toward school

character, school experience, school teachers, relationships in school, school environment, and school worship. Reviewing the project's significant findings over the three-year period, Francis, Lankshear and Eccles (under review) found that female students were more likely to report a positive attitude toward the ethos of their Anglican primary schools than male students, with particular reference to the religious aspects of school such as collective worship; year six students were more likely to hold a less positive attitude to certain aspects of the religious aspects of the school than the younger year five students; and certain 'aspirations' relating to school ethos were reflected in the student responses while others were recognised by students to a lesser extent.

Another way of listening to students in Christian ethos schools is by looking at the practice of personal prayer. Research has consistently demonstrated that personal prayer frequency during childhood and adolescence is a significant predictor of higher levels of personal wellbeing (as assessed by a sense of purpose in life and personal happiness) and of pro-social attitudes (as assessed by attitude toward school, attitude toward law and order, and attitude toward substances). For examples, see Francis and Fisher (2014) and Francis and Penny (2016).

Francis, ap Siôn, Lankshear, and Eccles (2019) investigated factors shaping personal prayer frequency among the students participating in the Student Voice Project. Using multiple regression models, they found that what happens in the home was of particular significance, especially family discussions about prayer with the mother which were enhanced by discussions with grandparents, suggesting that the practice of personal prayer is transmitted inter-generationally. In addition, the influence of church attendance on prayer frequency was strongest when both parents attended church services with their child. This research may indicate that the value of providing opportunities and support for personal prayer in Christian ethos schools goes beyond transmitting and maintaining a core Christian practice. It may also indicate the value in recognising and developing relationships between Christian ethos schools and their students' families and churches.

Few studies, however, have analysed the written content of young people's prayers, which has the potential to contribute to a deeper and more complex understanding of the place of prayer within Christian ethos schools. One of the most accessible and unaffected sources of personal prayer content is found in written intercessory prayer requests.

### ***Studying Intercessory Prayer***

Over the past two decades, there has been a growing body of research interested in the intercessory prayer content of prayers left in church-related contexts, including hospital chapels, churches, shrines, cathedrals and websites, as well as prayers gathered on the street (for example, Grossoehme, 1996; Schmied, 2002; ap Siôn, 2007, 2009, 2011, 2013). These studies focus on intercessory prayer requests posted by individuals on prayer boards, in prayer books or online outside the contexts of congregational activities or events.

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). In 2008 and 2011 ap Siôn developed two variant versions of the basic apSAFIP, which enabled more nuanced studies of particular aspects of prayer content: ‘health and wellbeing’ and the ‘activity of God’ respectively. For the first time, the apSAFIP and the variant versions allowed basic similarities and differences to be empirically identified among prayer-request samples. Applying this analytic framework and the ‘activity of God’ variant to the content of intercessory prayers within a Christian ethos secondary school would provide a relevant and broader context within which to read student prayers.

There has been little comparable research relating to intercessory prayer requests left by young people in church-related or school-related contexts with the exception of Langford (2015), who examined the content of 346 children’s prayers left in prayer books from a children’s hospital chapel in the UK over a four-year period between 1998 and 2002, exploring what prayer content revealed about the children’s perceptions of God. Of interest to the present study, the results indicated that children were using the prayer book primarily to ask God to intervene (21%) and to help (19%). In addition 14% requested God’s protection, and the same proportion expressed their feelings to God. Langford (2015, p. 187) writes: ‘There is an expectation that God can, and is willing to, meet their needs’.

### ***Research Questions***

Although personal intercessory prayer requests gathered from a range of locations have been researched and analysed, there has been no published study of personal intercessory prayer requests left within a school context. The aim of this study is to examine the content of adolescents' prayers left in a Christian ethos secondary school in the UK focusing on three main research questions. First, how does the ap Siôn Analytic Framework for Intercessory Prayer (apSAFIP) perform in the context of adolescent intercessory prayer? Second, do intercessory prayers written in the liturgically formal and educational supportive environment for the school Eucharist differ from those written (without prompt) in the more personal and informal environment of the school chapel prayer board? Third, what do we learn about the religious and spiritual lives of the students writing the prayer requests? In order to respond to these questions in an empirically rigorous manner, comparisons with previous church-related studies employing the same analytic frameworks and methods are required as the relevant external objective reference points in this study.

### ***Location***

To explore these research questions, the study draws on the prayer requests composed for the intercessory prayer contexts offered to 11- to 16-year-old students attending one of a number of Christian ethos secondary schools in England and Wales. The school was a joint Anglican and Catholic school, and the prayer requests come from two different and distinctive intercessory prayer contexts.

One context was the prayer requests written by each student for the form or class Eucharist, which happened once a year for each class in the school. Younger students (11- to 13-year-olds) were given an hour preparation time in their Religious Education lesson for the Eucharist where they would learn about the Eucharist and which tradition was being celebrated (Catholic or Anglican), as well as how they may contribute to it. In addition, the biblical reading for the service would be explored, and there would be some discussion concerning what they may wish to pray about, although the students knew that they had complete freedom in the subject of their prayer requests. For older students (14- to 16-year-olds), preparation would normally be done within the ten to twenty minutes of form registration time and sometimes prayer requests would be written at home. In the Eucharist service, students would either read their prayer request aloud publically (if they wished to do so) or place it under the altar. All the prayer requests would then be read by the school chaplains in



order to identify any need for pastoral responses. In total, a sample of 100 such prayers was taken from this source.

The second context was the intercessory prayers posted in the open and unrestricted space of the school prayer board, which was located in the school chapel. The prayer board was divided into three sections denoting areas for prayers of thanksgiving, general prayers and prayers for the departed; however, usually only around one third of prayers would be placed into these categories. Very few prayer requests would be removed from the board because of inappropriate content, and they would be monitored by the school chaplains for any signs of issues of pastoral concern. In total, a sample of 112 such prayers was taken from this source.

## **Method**

### ***Sample***

The prayer requests for this study were composed by 11- to 16-year-old students attending one of the Christian ethos secondary schools in England and Wales, and comprised 100 prayers (in which there were 183 discrete prayer requests) for the form or class Eucharist services and 112 prayers (in which there were 124 discrete written prayer requests and three drawing-only prayer requests) posted on the school's chapel prayer board during a six-month period in 2015-16.

### ***Analysis***

The analysis of the prayer request content included applying the ap Siôn Analytic Framework for Intercessory Prayer (apSAFIP), as well as identifying and recording other notable characteristics occurring in the prayers.

All the discrete 'petitionary' prayer requests from both the form or class Eucharist services and the school chapel prayer board were analysed using the ap Siôn Analytic Framework for Intercessory Prayer (apSAFIP). According to ap Siôn (2007), the framework identifies three elements defined as: prayer intention, prayer reference, and prayer objective. These three elements are defined in the following ways.

*Prayer intention* distinguished among eleven key areas with which the individual authors were concerned: illness/health, death, growth, work, relationships, conflict/disaster, sport/recreation, travel, housing, open intention, and general. The specific content of these broad categories has been shown to differ according to study context, and in the current study the content analysis grouped the prayer requests in

the following way. *Illness/health*: prayers about physical illness and requests for good health. *Death*: prayers for the dead and their families and friends, as well as prayers for life. *Growth*: prayers concerned with the spiritual, religious, moral (non-material). *Work*: prayers about education (school and university), exams and jobs. *Relationships*: prayers for relationships in school or form contexts, family contexts, and broader contexts, as well as lack of relationships (for example, loneliness). *Conflict/disaster*: prayers concerned with war, natural disasters, terrorism, refugees, famine or drought, poverty, accidents, prison (justice for the innocent), and the environment). *Sport/recreation*: prayers about bands and celebrities. *Travel*: prayers concerned with holidays. *Housing*: prayers about moving home and lack of home (homelessness). *Open intention*: prayers which name the prayer recipient only without any contextualising information. *General*: prayers with an affective element only, for example, peace, happiness.

*Prayer reference* distinguished among four key foci with which the individual authors were concerned: self (the prayer author), other people (friends, family and others known to the prayer author), animals (companion animals known to the prayer author), and the world or global context (people, animals, the natural world, events, for example, which have a wider global reference point beyond the personal and local community).

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

In addition, a later variant version of the apSAFIP was separately applied to the prayer-request content. In this variant version, which was first developed and applied to prayer requests left in a church context and a later a cathedral context (ap Siôn, 2011, 2013), the *prayer intention* category is re-focussed to identify how prayer authors may understand the ‘activity of God’ through the language they use. The ‘activity of God’ included the groupings identified in the 2013 study, presenting God as intervener, comforter, protector, strength-giver, intermediary, confidante, revealer,

helper (general), and gift-bestower, as well as two new groupings emerging from the current study, presenting God as judge and God as provider. Unlike the original apSAFIP prayer intention category in which the areas of concern are of concrete nature, more than one ‘activity of God’ may be recorded in a single prayer request. For example, the language used in a single prayer request may show the pray-ers’ portrayal of God in the role of both ‘protector’ and ‘confidante’.

As part of the analysis of prayer-request content other notable characteristics found in the prayer requests were also identified and recorded (cf. ap Siôn, 2015, p. 143). These included: reference to name and school year; sex; denomination or religion; prayer type; ‘proclamations’; drawings; use of liturgical language; and style.

After these analyses of the content of the school prayer requests, a comparison was made with the results of previous church-related prayer studies employing the same analytic frameworks to provide external objective reference points for contextualising the school prayers.

## **Results and Discussion**

The ap Siôn Analytic Framework for Intercessory Prayer (apSAFIP) was designed to analyse ‘petitionary’ intercessory prayer-request content only. Therefore, the first stage in the prayer request content analysis identified the ‘petitionary’ prayers. Among the 100 prayers for the form or class Eucharist services, there were 183 prayer requests. Of these requests, 156 (85%) were petition only, 22 (12%) combined petition and thanksgiving, and one (1%) combined praise and petition. The remainder were two (1%) thanksgiving-only requests and two (1%) confession and thanksgiving requests. Among the 112 prayers posted on the chapel prayer board, there were 124 written prayer requests and three drawing-only prayer requests. Of the written requests, 115 (93%) were petition only and five (4%) combined petition and thanksgiving. The remainder were three (2%) thanksgiving-only requests and one (1%) praise-only request.

As a result, all the analyses involving the apSAFIP were based on the prayer requests including an element of petition (179 prayer requests for the form or class Eucharists and 120 prayer requests for the chapel prayer board), while the remaining analyses employed the total number of written prayer requests (183 prayer requests for the form or class Eucharists and 124 prayer requests for the chapel prayer board)

unless otherwise stated, with the exception of ‘drawings’ which included the full 127 prayer requests from the chapel prayer board.

The results for the apSAFIP are presented first and related to previous studies employing the apSAFIP, where relevant. These are followed by the results for the ‘other notable characteristics’, namely, denomination or religion, ‘proclamations’, drawings, use of liturgical language, and style. The remaining notable characteristics of name, school year and sex (determined by name) were not considered to contribute to the research agenda of the current study in ways that warranted independent focus because this information was not included systematically in the prayer requests.

### ***The apSAFIP***

The quantitative results of the apSAFIP analyses for the two sources of prayer request (form or class Eucharist service and chapel prayer board) are presented in Tables 1, 2, 3 and 4.

In terms of the apSAFIP *prayer intention* (original version), of the 179 prayer requests for the form or class Eucharist petitions, 47 (26%) were concerned with conflict/disaster, followed by 32 (18%) for work, 23 (13%) for general, 20 (11%) for relationships, 20 (11%) for growth, 13 (7%) for illness/health, 11 (6%) for death, 7 (4%) for housing, 5 (3%) for open intention, 1 (1%) for recreation/sport, and 0 (0%) for travel.

By comparison, of the 120 prayer requests on the chapel prayer board, 39 (33%) were concerned with death, followed by 19 (16%) for growth, 15 (13%) for conflict/disaster, 11 (9%) for general, 11 (9%) for relationships, 9 (8%) for illness/health, 5 (4%) for work, 5 (4%) for housing, 3 (3%) for open intention, 3 (3%) for recreation/sport, and 0 (0%) for travel.

INSERT TABLE 1 AROUND HERE

There are five areas of prayer intention that are of particular interest for further discussion: conflict/disaster, work, relationships, death, and illness/health, and these will be explored in turn.

Conflict/disaster: Prayer requests concerned with conflict/disaster featured prominently in both the prayers for the form or class Eucharist services (27%; 49 requests) and the prayers on the chapel prayer board (13%; 15 requests). In previous

prayer studies using the apSAFIP the highest incidence of prayer requests for conflict/disaster was 14% (ap Siôn, 2007, p. 205), and these were prayers gathered from a church in the 1980s around the time of the Ethiopian famine and the celebrity response in 'Band Aid' and 'Live Aid' initiated by Bob Geldof and Midge Ure (1984-1985). The same prevalence of prayer requests for conflict/disaster was not found in subsequent prayer request studies employing the apSAFIP, where figures for this area were as low as 3% (for example, see online requests, ap Siôn, 2016, p. 86). The content of these prayer requests indicated that the students were well-informed about local, national and international issues, as well as being socially concerned. Multiple references made to the same incidents and situations may show that school foci and influences were being reflected through the prayer requests.

**Work and Relationships:** Strong connections were apparent between the two prayer intention areas of 'work' and 'relationships' in the prayer requests for the form or class Eucharist services. In these requests, there was an emphasis on the 'form' or 'class' as a community. Perhaps this is not particularly surprising because of the class Eucharist context, but it is important to recognise that the 'community' dimension of this context was being explicitly identified and articulated in these prayer intentions. So, for example, in prayer requests relating to 'work', there were requests relating to the success of the whole 'form' in their exams, in their future careers, and in reaching their potential. Then, in prayer requests relating to 'relationships' there were requests for whole 'form' relationships, asking that they would 'get on well together', they would 'not fall out with one another', and they would resolve any issues arising from arguments, for example.

**Death:** One third (33%) of the prayer requests posted on the chapel prayer board were concerned with the prayer intention area of 'death'. When this figure is compared with the form or class Eucharist prayer requests (6%) and the prayer requests from previous studies using the apSAFIP (which range from 3% to 18%, with the exception of the Lichfield Cathedral study of 27%, see ap Siôn, 2009, p.19; 2016, p. 87), the frequency of this kind of petition on the chapel prayer board is very high.

These elevated figures were related to an 'event' at the school during the period when the chapel prayer board prayers were collected. The 'event' was the death of a student's parent, which generated intense prayer board activity and became a primary focus. In previous prayer-request studies, the term 'the community of the

prayer board / book' was used to describe the various relationships and interactions existing among individuals through their written prayer requests left in a common space (ap Siôn, 2017, p. 230). This is an apt term to use also in the current context. For example, prayer content for this group of prayer requests constellated around three questions. First, who were coming together at the prayer board / who were the participants? Explicit participants were those leaving the prayer requests, who were identified as the bereaved student and the friends of the bereaved student. However, implicit participants were the school chaplains and ministry team monitoring the prayer board, as well as those who simply entered the chapel and read the prayer board. Secondly, who were being addressed in these prayers? Some prayers addressed the deceased directly, others addressed the bereaved student or the student's whole family, and others addressed God. Thirdly, what were the pray-ers communicating? They shared memories, made offers of support, expressed their own emotional responses, offered prayer requests for protection and strength at that time, and stated unquestioning belief in the existence of an afterlife and heaven. What was noticeably absent among the prayer requests, however, was the posing of the existential question 'why?'.

Illness/health: Prayer requests for illness/health in the form or class Eucharist prayers (7%) and the school chapel prayer board prayers (8%) were relatively infrequent in comparison with previous prayer request studies using the apSAFIP, where illness/health was usually the most prevalent prayer intention (for example, ap Siôn, 2016, p. 87).

In terms of the apSAFIP *prayer reference*, of the 179 prayer requests for the form or class Eucharist petitions, 80 (45%) were concerned with other people, followed by 69 (39%) for world/global contexts, 26 (15%) for self, and 4 (2%) for animals.

By comparison (following a similar pattern), of the 120 prayer requests on the chapel prayer board, 62 (52%) were for other people, followed by 37 (31%) for world/global contexts, 19 (16%) for self, and 2 (2%) for animals.

INSERT TABLE 2 AROUND HERE

If we compare these results with previous studies employing the apSAFIP, two observations may be made. First, it is usual for 'other people' (family and friends,

people known to the prayer author) to be the most frequent prayer reference category in prayer requests left in Christian contexts and this was also supported by the findings of this study. The only exception to this within the apSAFIP studies was found in a sample of online prayer requests, where requests for ‘self’ were dominant, comprising 45% of all requests (ap Siôn, 2016, p. 86). Secondly, despite this point of similarity, the number of prayer requests with a world/global reference was considerably higher than in previous apSAFIP studies, which usually ranged from around 7% (ap Siôn, 2015, p. 104) to 16% (ap Siôn, 2009, p. 27), with the exception of the study drawing on prayer requests from the 1980s (ap Siôn, 2007, p. 205) with a world/global reference of 27%. As already mentioned, the influence of the much publicised 1980s Ethiopian famine crisis was visible in the prayer-request sample (see ‘conflict/disaster’), and it is likely that this would have been intensified by the relatively few media sources available when compared with the rapid acceleration in technological developments so distinctive of the twenty-first century’s contribution to the ‘Information Age’. Considering these results (and observing that no discernable equivalent ‘Ethopia effect’ was present in the students’ prayer requests), it is reasonable to argue that a school influence may be an important contributory factor.

In terms of the apSAFIP *prayer objective*, of the 179 prayer requests for the form or class Eucharist petitions, primary control was preferred over secondary control with 149 (83%) cases of primary control and 30 (17%) cases of secondary control. All the primary control cases were primary control 2, where affective changes were being requested.

By comparison (following a similar pattern), of the 120 prayer requests on the chapel prayer board, primary control was preferred over secondary control with 99 (83%) cases of primary control and 21 (18%) cases of secondary control. However, although the majority of primary control cases were primary control 2, there were 3 (3%) primary control 1 cases, where material changes to the physical world were being requested. These primary control 1 prayers were for a band ‘to get back together’ again, which made them uncommon when compared with the kind of primary control 1 requests usually recorded in previous prayer-request studies using the apSAFIP.

INSERT TABLE 3 AROUND HERE

The majority of prayer requests were concerned with primary control 2 expectations; that is, they were looking for responses to prayer that were of an affective nature. For example, prayer requests asked either for God’s protection, strength, help, revelation (guidance and presence), as well as God’s intermediary activity in relationships, or for God’s help more generally to enable something to happen or for people to do something in particular. Therefore, no written evidence indicated that students were requesting or expecting ‘miraculous’ material changes to the physical world as a result of their prayers.

The difference in number between the primary control and the secondary control objectives in the school prayer requests is much closer to the online prayer request studies using the apSAFIP rather than the church or cathedral studies; that is, most prayer requests were definitely asking explicitly for some kind of outcome. In the church and cathedral prayers, secondary control preferences were often considerably higher (and were occasionally preferred over primary control), while the two online studies consistently preferred primary control at levels almost identical to the current study (ap Siôn, 2016, pp. 86 and 88).

Finally, in terms of the variant version of the apSAFIP *prayer intention* (‘activity of God’), within the 179 prayer requests for the form or class Eucharist petitions, there were 206 instances of language suggesting how God is perceived to act in the world. God was seen acting as helper (general) in 17% of these cases, followed by God as intermediary (16%), protector (16%), revealer (13%), confidante (12%), strength-giver (10%), gift-bestower (8%), provider (5%), judge (2%), comforter (<1%), and there were no occasions of God as intervener.

By comparison, within the 120 prayer requests on the chapel prayer board, there were 146 instances of language suggesting how God is perceived to act in the world. God was seen as acting as protector in 25% of these cases, followed by God as helper (general) (19%), intermediary (18%), revealer (12%), confidante (12%), gift-bestower (5%), judge (4%), intervener (3%), strength-giver (1%), and there were no occasions of God as provider or comforter.

INSERT TABLE 4 AROUND HERE.

When these results are compared with two previous apSAFIP prayer-request studies using the variant version of the prayer intention category (ap Siôn, 2011, 2013), there



are three observations. First, it is seen that two new ‘activities of God’ had to be generated in response to student’s language in relation to God which could not be accommodated within the existing intentions. The two new categories were God as judge and God as provider. Secondly, although there was a difference in the order of frequency, the same five ‘activities’ of God were found most often among both the form or class Eucharist prayers and the chapel prayer board prayers (helper, intermediary, protector, revealer, and confidante), with only ‘protector’ for the chapel prayer board prayers drawing particular attention because it accounted for a quarter of all cases within that context. The two previous apSAFIP studies, however, did not demonstrate the same level of consistency in relation to one another, but both these studies cited ‘God as gift-bestower’ above the other activities with 24% (ap Siôn, 2011, pp. 321-322) and 18% (ap Siôn, 2013, pp. 149-150). In the prayer requests from the form or class Eucharist and the chapel prayer board, ‘God as gift-bestower’ occurred far less often (8% and 5%, respectively). In a similar way, ‘God as helper (general)’, one of the most frequent activities of God cited by students in the present study occurred far less often in the two previous apSAFIP studies at 4% (ap Siôn, 2011, p. 321) and 10% ap Siôn, 2013, p.150). Thirdly, in all the studies using the variant apSAFIP prayer intention category, ‘God as comforter’ only very rarely appeared at 1% or below in all cases.

### ***Other notable characteristics***

Although the apSAFIP analyses were able to provide a detailed picture of the interests and concerns that students brought to their intercessory prayer requests through the opportunities developed and supported by the school present in the form or class Eucharist service and the chapel prayer board, other notable characteristics were also evident in the prayer requests, which merited separate scrutiny. These notable characteristics included denomination or religion, ‘proclamations’, drawings, use of liturgical language, and style.

Students included mention of their *denomination or religion* only in the prayer requests for the form or class Eucharist, and this was done infrequently (occurring in 16 of the 100 prayers). Where such references occurred, the information was always presented formally and in the same manner as recording name and class, for example. Fourteen of these were designated ‘Catholic’ and, with the exception of one case, students also named their priest and church. One of these was designated ‘Anglican’

alongside the name of the student's church, and another was designated 'Muslim' alongside the name of the student's mosque. Of interest is why Catholic students were more likely than Anglican students to record this information. Was this a reflection of a more conscious, explicit identity on the part of these students or the school, or were there simply pragmatic reasons for such differentiation?

The use of *proclamations* as prayer request was found only in the requests left on the chapel prayer board, and these appeared fairly frequently, occurring in 14 (13%) of the 112 prayers. This genre of prayer request was first positively identified in a study of prayer requests from the prayer board of a Welsh cathedral (ap Siôn, 2015b, pp. 144-145), and it is considered important because it shows that the prayer board offers a space to share wisdom, directives, or assurances for benefit of others. 'Proclamation' is also another illustration of the characteristics of the 'community of the prayer board / prayer book' introduced in the earlier discussion of the apSAFIP 'death' prayer intention category. Examples of 'proclamations' from the present study include:

The stars can't shine without the darkness.

When you are born in a world you don't fit in its because you are born to create a better one.

When times are tough, don't hide in the dark, let God's light shine upon you.  
God will forgive if you let him.

The inclusion of *drawings* in written prayer requests was a frequent feature of both the form or class Eucharist prayer requests as well as those posted on the chapel prayer board, among which three requests were drawings alone. Of the 183 Eucharist prayer requests, 53 (29%) were accompanied by drawings, and of the 127 chapel prayer board requests 46 (36%) contained drawings. This was an interesting finding because previous prayer-request studies seldom found drawings, although they were present in some of the prayer requests from the prayer board of a Welsh cathedral (ap Siôn, 2015b, p. 144). An analysis of the drawings in the present study identified five foci, which included drawings related to 'nature' (flowers, branches, leaves, stars and rainbow); 'animal' (dove, fish, sheep); 'human' (single eye, faces, people figures); 'artefact' (candles, chalice); and 'symbol' (hearts, CND sign). In addition, on the chapel prayer board, there were origami prayer requests and prayer requests on shaped pieces of paper.

The use of *liturgical language* (formal religious language often associated with public worship) was found only in the form or class Eucharist service prayer requests, where nine of the 100 prayers incorporated such language. Some of these instances were brief inclusions within prayer requests, while others were extended and liturgically competent compositions, reflecting the presentation and form of intercessory prayer within communal worship.

Lastly, the *style* of the form or class Eucharist service prayer requests often differed considerably from the style of the prayer requests posted on the school chapel's prayer board. In addition to the use of liturgical language, three observations were recorded for the Eucharist prayer sample. First, the presentation was much neater and more organised. The prayer material was often presented (and sometimes even labelled) as classwork, reflecting the integration of the preparation for the Eucharist within the other academic activities of the school (in this case, the Religious Education lessons). Secondly, there were multiple prayer requests per student. Thirdly, although the prayers for the Eucharist service were more formal, they still retained many personal prayer requests expressed naturally in everyday language.

## **Conclusion**

This study of intercessory prayer in a joint Catholic and Anglican Christian ethos secondary school in the UK has examined the content of adolescents' prayer requests drawn from two distinct intercessory prayer contexts offered by the school: prayers composed by students for the form or class Eucharist service (100 prayers) and prayers posted by students on the school chapel prayer board (112 prayers). The study aimed to test the performance of the ap Siôn Analytic Framework for Intercessory Prayer (apSAFIP) in a new intercessory prayer context of a Christian ethos secondary school, to compare prayer requests written in two very different educationally supportive environments within a Christian ethos secondary school, and to learn about the religious and spiritual lives of students writing prayer requests within the institutional setting of a Christian ethos secondary school. In order to achieve this, content analyses of the prayers employed both the original version of the apSAFIP and a variant 'activity of God' prayer intention version, as well as identifying any 'other notable characteristics'. Where relevant, as part of the discussion of the results, comparisons were also made with previous apSAFIP prayer-request studies, placing

the prayer requests within a broader context. Four main conclusions were drawn from the results of the study.

First, the apSAFIP was shown to perform well when applied to the new context of adolescent prayer within the Christian ethos secondary school. In both the prayer requests written for the form or class Eucharist service and the prayer requests posted on the school prayer board, the apSAFIP was able to accommodate student prayer content within the existing categories. It was only in the variant version of prayer intention ('activity of God') that two new groups of prayers emerged, namely, 'God as judge' and 'God as provider'. Although these two new groups reflected the presence of additional perceptions of God's activity in the world and contributed to a revised variant prayer intention category, they accounted for relatively few student prayer requests; however, these were still more frequent than 'God as intervener' and 'God as comforter'.

Using an established analytic framework also allowed comparisons to be made between the school prayer sample and prayer samples from other intercessory Christian contexts, such as cathedral, church, hospital chapel, and online, where interesting differences as well as similarities were found in all three parts of the apSAFIP – prayer intention, prayer reference and prayer objective. Of particular note, was the emphasis that students placed on prayers for 'world/global contexts' and for conflict/disaster, as well as a consistent preference to articulate the desired prayer outcomes ('primary control') that were usually presented as affective in nature ('primary control 2') rather than miraculous physical interventions ('primary control 1'). The findings support the argument that using an analytic framework for prayers written in a variety of contexts (relating to both place and time) is able to deepen understanding of observations made in individual contexts and provide broader mappings of spiritual and religious import. As such, the apSAFIP is able to offer Christian ethos schools an approach to reading and responding to students' prayer requests.

Secondly, when the prayer requests written for the form or class Eucharist and the prayer requests posted on the school chapel prayer board were compared, although a number of striking similarities existed, it was found that the students were using the intercessory prayer opportunities in different ways according to both context and need. Of particular interest, for example, was the way in which relationships and community were reflected in the respective prayer contexts; the school chapel prayer

board became an important focus at a time of personal and shared tragedy, while prayer for the Eucharist service recognised other dimensions of ‘community’ with a focus on the educational success of everyone in the form/class as well as healthy form/class relationships. Other clear differences between the two prayer contexts were found in presentation, style, and the use of liturgical language. This may have reflected a perception of the innate differences between the two intercessory prayer contexts, with the chapel prayer board being more personal and responsive to immediate needs and the Eucharist service being a more formal educative worship exercise, which is part of the school curriculum. However, despite these differences, it was interesting to find that student concerns were broadly similar in terms of prayer reference and prayer objective, perhaps showing a common understanding of the place of intercessory prayer more broadly in the lives of these adolescents.

Thirdly, what may be learnt about the religious and spiritual lives of the students writing the prayer requests? God was viewed by many students as a God who could be approached in prayer for help (general), a God who could act as an intermediary in their relationships, a protector, a revealer of knowledge and guidance, a confidante with whom they could share their thoughts, feelings and insights, and to a lesser extent they viewed God as strength-giver, provider and judge. Rarely, though was God portrayed as comforter or intervener in the world in miraculous ways. Students’ prayers reflected an expectation that God would act in their lives and in the lives of others, and they articulated the ways in which their prayers might be answered, and these were almost always affective in nature. Most of their prayers were concerned for other people known to them as well as world or global issues (in terms of the latter, conflict and disasters locally, nationally and globally were a particular focus). Prayer was used as a way of building and sustaining relationships in their school community and connecting with the wider concerns of world around them. Some of these findings were similar to Langford’s (2015) study of children’s prayers left in a hospital chapel, where God was also frequently asked to ‘help’ and ‘protect’; however, the emphasis on asking God to ‘intervene’ was not present in the current study. This may be the result of differences between how the respective studies understood ‘intervention’ (and perhaps possible age differences among the young people writing the prayer requests), although both reflect young people’s perception that God is active in the world and responsive to prayer.

Fourthly, research supporting the significance of ‘school ethos’ (relating to the implicit collective values, beliefs and behaviours of students) and the practice of ‘personal prayer’ (consistently shown to be a predictor of higher levels of personal wellbeing and of pro-social attitudes) has been presented. Evaluating school ethos is more than just a concern for the inspectors of Christian ethos schools, it is also a means through which Christian ethos schools may make claim to a distinctiveness or contribution (both personal and social) that sets them apart from other state-maintained schools in England and Wales. As a core Christian practice, opportunities for prayer should be of particular interest to Christian ethos schools, and many of these schools make institutional provision for it in ways that are different from schools without this religious character. In the current study, through devising and implementing an in-depth and rigorous approach to reading adolescent prayer requests in one such Christian ethos school, important new insights have been gained concerning the religious and spiritual lives of the students. These contribute to a greater understanding of certain aspects of life in these schools, as well as valuing and informing the creation and development of a variety of prayer opportunities in both formal and informal contexts.

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TABLE 1 *apSAFIP* prayer intention (form or class Eucharist service  $N = 179$ );  
 chapel prayer board  $N = 120$ )

prayer intention	form/class Eucharist service		chapel prayer board	
	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%
conflict/disaster	47	26	15	13
work	32	18	5	4
general	23	13	11	9
relationships	20	11	11	9
growth	20	11	19	16
Illness/health	13	7	9	8
death	11	6	39	33
housing	7	4	5	4
open intention	5	3	3	3
recreation/sport	1	1	3	3
travel	0	0	0	0

TABLE 2 *apSAFIP* prayer reference (form or class Eucharist service  $N = 179$ ); chapel prayer board  $N = 120$ )

prayer reference	form/class Eucharist service		chapel prayer board	
	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%
other people	80	45	62	52
world/global	69	39	37	31
self	26	15	19	16
animals	4	2	2	2

TABLE 3 *apSAFIP* prayer objective (form or class Eucharist service  $N = 179$ );  
 chapel prayer board  $N = 120$ )

prayer objective	form/class Eucharist service		chapel prayer board	
	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%
primary control	149	83	99	83
primary control 1	0	0	3	3
primary control 2	149	100	96	97
secondary control	30	17	21	18

TABLE 4 variant *apSAFIP* prayer intention ‘activity of God’ (form or class Eucharist service  $N = 179$ ); chapel prayer board  $N = 120$ )\*

prayer intention ‘activity of God’	form/class eucharist service		chapel prayer board	
	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%
helper	35	17	28	19
intermediary	33	16	26	18
protector	32	16	36	25
revealer	27	13	18	12
confidante	24	12	18	12
strength-giver	21	10	2	1
gift-bestower	17	8	8	5
provider	11	5	0	0
judge	5	2	6	4
comforter	1	<1	0	0
intervener	0	0	4	3

\* There may be more than one ‘activity of God’ recorded in a prayer request. Percentages are calculated from the total *N* values for ‘activity of God’ within each physical prayer context.