Listening to Gay Prayers

An Analysis of Prayers from an LGBTQ Church

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Abstract

Some researchers suggest that conflict is inherent in identity integration within LGBTQ individuals who are also religious. If so, this likely would be evident in the private religious activity of such individuals, such as prayer. The content of prayers submitted in a church with a predominately LGBTQ congregation are compared to prayers from a different church previously studied by ap Siôn (2007). Few significant differences were evident between the two samples and most of them could be explained by factors unrelated to sexuality. Also considered are specifically "gay issues" prevalent in the corpus of prayers. The results suggest that the notion that conflict infects the lives and psyches of LGBTQ people of faith may be overblown.

Keywords: prayer research, identity integration, religious expression, gay studies

Introduction

A growing scientific literature (Hart, Brew, and Pope; McGlasson and Rubel; Pietkiewicz and Kolodziejczyk-Skrzypek; Rodriguez) explores the process of identity integration in individuals who consider themselves both gay and religious, a process often fraught with anxiety. Though societal attitudes toward homosexuality are rapidly evolving, many gay men and lesbians have grown up in Christian churches that view homosexuality negatively. Particularly in more conservative Christian denominations, gays and lesbians are still routinely labeled as "unnatural," "sinners," and "perverts" (Barton). It is hardly surprising then that many sexual minority individuals report being negatively impacted by such religious experiences during their formative years, or that these influences have informed the tenor of

research into identity integration in LGBTQ individuals. For example, one study found that "much of the research on gay and lesbian people of faith assumes that any reconciliation of religious and homosexual identities is preceded by a history of conflict" (Rodriguez and Ouellette: 333).

Nevertheless, several studies (e.g., (Mahaffey; Rodriguez and Ouellette) suggest that many gay individuals weather this storm of religious negativity and abuse with aplomb and develop resilient and healthy self-identities. Some cope by developing "strong anti-religion sentiments that exhibit themselves in a healthy disdain for anything and anyone having to do with organized Christian religion viewed as being homophobic, heterosexist, and patriarchical" (Rodriguez: 11). Others, however, manage successfully to integrate faith and sexuality by carving out for themselves "safe spaces where they can practice a version of Christianity that neither condemns nor simply tolerates homosexuality, but instead embraces homosexuals as having been created in God's image" (Rodriguez: 26).

Most studies of identity integration use some sort of self-assessment by the study participants as data. Perhaps a more objective metric is available for assessing the identity integrity of individuals who are both religious and gay. One such indicator might be observed behaviors of such individuals in unguarded contexts, such as in private religious activity.

This study looks at the prayer requests submitted over the course of a year in a church with a predominately LGBTQ congregation. These were compared with prayer requests collected in another church with a (presumably) largely heterosexual clientele, as reported in a study by ap Siôn (2007). The goal was to determine whether there were significant differences in the praying behaviors of these two populations. Prayer requests reflect private and unguarded religious activity not intended for public observation or analysis, and often express the most intimate and immediate concerns of the prayers' authors. Might significant differences in the identity integration of the two populations be reflected in divergences in the characteristics of prayers produced by these two populations? Evaluation of this question constitutes the first part of this study.

Also examined was the content of the prayer requests from the predominately LGBTQ church to see if any gay-specific themes were apparent. That is, are there concerns prevalent within the sexual minority population that are not manifest in the more mainstream population, at least as evident in prayer requests? Since access to ap Siôn's raw data was not available, it seems likely that any such specific gay-relevant concerns were not reflected in those data, though that is only a supposition. Surprisingly few prayer requests from the predominately LGBTQ church population displayed concerns that were identifiably "gay-specific." Some conclusions from this observation are drawn in the final section of this paper.

Related Work

Empirical investigation of prayer dates at least from the pioneering work of Francis Galton in the nineteenth century. Research includes a wide array of propositions: philological, theological, psychological, social, political, cultural, and historical as well as effects on health, relationships, and mental stability. Tania ap Siôn's dissertation (2010) provides an exemplary bibliography on research on prayer. Other reviews of the literature on prayer studies are those by Finney and Maloney and by Francis and Evans. As an example of the foci of these studies,

Francis and Evans identified four types of research questions that predominate in the literature to 1995:

1. How does prayer work in peoples' lives?

2. How does prayer behavior change during childhood and adolescence?

3. What are the subjective effects of prayer on the person praying?

4. What are the objective effects of prayer on the person prayed for?

Those themes remain key foci of prayer research to the present. Lauricella, for example, reviews literature relating to how and why prayer is practiced at various stages of the life cycle. Hodge (2007) surveys the literature relating to efficacy of prayer, while Simão et al. survey the subjective effects of prayer on the health of patients. However, as ap Siôn (2007) notes, there have been relatively few empirical examinations of the content of prayers. Some notable exceptions include work by Janssen, de Hart, and den Draak (1989, 1990), by Janssen et al. (2000), and by McKinney and McKinney.

Most directly relevant to the current research is the work of ap Siôn herself. She and colleagues examined the content of prayer requests in a variety of contexts (ap Siôn 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010, 2011, 2013; ap Siôn and Edwards) and developed a taxonomy of prayers according to the dimensions of intention, reference, and objective. It was her study and categorization of prayer requests left in a country church in rural England (2007) that forms the basis of the comparison we make in this paper. That work and similar studies of the content of prayer petitions were also described in her Ph.D. thesis (2010). Other studies specifically analyzing the content of prayers written and left in churches include work by Schmied and by Brown and Burton.

In addition to research on prayer, a large research literature explores the spirituality of LGBTQ individuals. An excellent literature review can be found in David W. Hart's dissertation. There is also a small but growing scientific literature exploring identity integration in individuals who consider themselves both gay and religious (Barton; Greenberg, Pievsky, and McGrath; Hart, Brew, and Pope; Hodge 2005; Mahaffey; McGlasson and Rubel; Pietkiewicz and Kolodziejczyk-Skrzypek; Rodriguez; Rodriguez and Ouellette). But none of these authors directly address the contents of prayer in a gay context, with the exception of Lukenbill and Young (2019).

The prayer requests studied were collected in Metropolitan Community Church (MCC) of Austin (Texas). Various aspects of the corporate and worship life of this specific church have previously been studied by Lukenbill (1998) and by Lukenbill and Young (2017a, 2017b). A related study (Rodriguez and Ouellette) looked at the religious practices and levels of identity integration of participants in a different MCC church, MCC New York.

ap Siôn: Listening to Prayers

In 2007, Tania ap Siôn published a study of the content of intercessory and supplicatory prayers left in a country church in rural England over a sixteen-month period. Intercessory and supplicatory prayers are pleas for divine intervention on behalf of oneself or another, and

are also referred to as *petitionary* prayers (Janssen et al. 2000). ap Siôn describes the church setting as follows:

> St. Mary's church is situated in a rural location, somewhat away from the village centre, in an area of middle England highly attractive to tourists. The church itself is medieval, with a highly distinctive nineteenth century memorial chapel. As visitors enter the highly atmospheric space of the memorial chapel they are greeted by a notice inviting them to pause, to reflect, and to pray. They are also invited to commit their prayers to a postcard-sized prayer-card and to leave these cards to be prayed by the local priest and congregation (2007: 204).

A total of 917 prayer cards left at St. Mary's over the sixteen-month period were collected and analyzed. Some were omitted from the study as not concerned with intercessory or supplicatory prayer, and many contained more than one prayer petition. Ultimately, 1,330 total prayer petitions were identified and became the basis of ap Siôn's study.

A major contribution of that work was a new conceptual framework for analyzing the content of intercessory and supplicatory prayers along the dimensions of intention, reference, and objective. The dimension of prayer *intention* denotes the desired area of effect of the prayer; ap Siôn identified ten categories: illness, death, growth, work, relationships, conflict or disaster, sport or recreation, travel, open intention, and general. *Open intention* denotes requests naming a specific individual as object but without a designated intention. Examples include:

> [Please pray for] Me and my family.

> [Please pray for] Joe Jones.

General denotes petitions not specific enough to be accommodated within other categories, such as requests for "happiness" or "safekeeping."

Her second dimension, prayer *reference*, denotes the intended beneficiary of the petition. Here ap Siôn distinguishes four categories: the author of the petition, other people known personally to the author, animals known personally to the author, and the world or global context.

Finally, the dimension of prayer *objective* distinguishes between two types of effects envisioned as a consequence of the petition. Primary control means that the author explicitly suggests a desired effect. Secondary control means that the effect is left in the hands of the recipient of the prayer. An example of primary control might be:

> [Please pray for] Aunt Susie that she recover completely from her recent surgery.

An example of secondary control might be:

> [Please pray for] Aunt Susie following her recent surgery.

ap Siôn also distinguished between explicit and implicit secondary control, but does not seem to have done much with this further elaboration.

Table 1 shows ap Siôn's coding of the 1,330 prayer requests according to her ten intention categories, six reference categories, and two objective categories. In subsequent sections, her

data are compared against prayer petitions collected in a different church with a predominately LGBTQ clientele, data described in the following section.

Table 1. Categories of Intercessory and Supplicatory Prayer Requests (ap Siôn 2007)

Intention	People		Global		Animals		Self		Total	
	PC	SC	PC	SC	PC	SC	PC	SC	PC	SC
Illness	133	99	14	30	2	1	2	3	151	133
Death	70	110	4	10	6	13	0	0	80	133
Growth	30	6	16	8	0	0	6	0	52	14
Work	18	11	5	4	0	0	5	1	28	16
Relationships	23	11	6	7	0	3	20	3	49	24
Conflict/disaster	4	4	87	95	0	0	0	0	91	99
Sport/recreation	1	2	2	9	0	0	1	0	4	11
Travel	7	8	1	1	0	0	1	0	9	9
Open intention	0	216	0	48	0	41	0	9	0	314
General	88	0	14	0	5	0	6	0	113	0
Total	374	467	149	212	13	58	41	16	577	753

The Prayer Data from MCC Austin

Metropolitan Community Church of Austin (MCC Austin) is a member church of the Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches (UFMCC), a small Christian denomination founded in 1968 in California by Rev. Troy D. Perry (Perry and Swicegood 1990). Although founded with a primary outreach to the LGBTQ community, UFMCC "was never meant to be a church just for homosexuals, but rather it strived to become an inclusive church available to all regardless of their sexuality" (Lukenbill: 443). There currently are UFMCC churches in 33 countries, but the majority are in larger cities within the U.S.

MCC Austin was established in 1976 and has a current membership of around 300 members. The membership is quite diverse and includes former (and sometimes current) members of many faith traditions, including Roman Catholic, mainline Protestant, evangelical Protestant, Pentecostal, Latter Day Saints, and others. The church preaches a liberal, trinitarian Protestant theology, with an emphasis on the inclusive nature of God's love and an insistence that LGBTQ individuals are full participants in the grace of God. Like most MCC churches, MCC Austin has an overwhelmingly LGBTQ clientele. A recent survey of membership indicated that fewer than 10% of members identify as heterosexual.

The prayer requests studied were collected over the course of 2017 at MCC Austin. They constitute a subset of a database of some 8,059 prayer requests collected during the period 2014–2018. These were submitted in either of two ways: on "connection cards" dropped into the offering plate during services, or from a "prayer book" notebook available in the foyer of the church into which anyone may write petitions. Each Sunday, these petitions are collected and entered into an online database by volunteers.

In the interest of working with a collection of manageable size, the first 1,000 intercessory and supplicatory prayer petitions from 2017 were studied, after dividing compound prayer requests into individual prayer petitions. These were coded by the author, following the model pioneered by ap Siôn (2007) along the dimensions of intention, reference, and objective. The first 1,000 prayer requests were chosen rather than a random sample to more accurately mirror ap Siôn's methodology; she apparently used all available prayer requests from her study period. The results are summarized in Table 2.

The author of this study functioned as a participant observer (Jorgensen) and was able to draw on experience as a longtime member of the church. This was useful in facilitating access to the prayer request data, in interpreting some of the results, and in making observations about the environment in which the data were produced.

Table 2. Categories of intercessory and supplicatory prayer requests from the target church.

Intention	People		Global		Animals		Self		Total	
	PC	SC	PC	SC	PC	SC	PC	SC	PC	SC
Illness	111	192	2	20	0	1	28	22	141	235
Death	8	40	1	1	0	1	1	3	10	45
Growth	16	26	0	7	0	0	35	14	51	47
Work	15	7	0	0	0	0	22	15	37	22
Relationships	28	22	1	10	1	0	16	5	46	37
Conflict/disaster	1	4	1	20	1	0	0	0	3	24
Sport/recreation	0	0	0	3	0	0	0	0	0	3
Travel	9	11	2	6	0	0	5	7	16	24
Open intention	0	164	0	57	0	3	0	7	0	231
General	4	0	20	0	1	0	3	0	28	0
Total	192	466	27	124	3	5	110	73	332	668

Method and Results

The analysis method was straightforward: Compare the distribution of coded prayer petitions in the two samples – those from ap Siôn's study and those from MCC Austin – with the goal of detecting significant differences. The two samples were compared along ap Siôn's three dimensions of intension, reference, and objective. Because ap Siôn studied 1,330 petitions, compared to 1,000 petitions from MCC Austin, the comparisons are based on percentages of petitions in each category. Because the percentages were rounded to the nearest whole number, they may not add up to 100 percent in all cases.

Figure 1 displays the relative frequencies within the two sampled populations of ap Siôn's ten prayer intentions: illness, death, growth, work, relationships, conflict or disaster, sport or recreation, travel, open intention, and general. Figure 2 shows the relative percentages of prayer references: other people, global, animals, or self. Finally, Figure 3 shows the differences in the prayer samples along the dimension of objective, i.e., did the prayer's author specify an explicit desired effect (primary concern) or not (secondary concern).
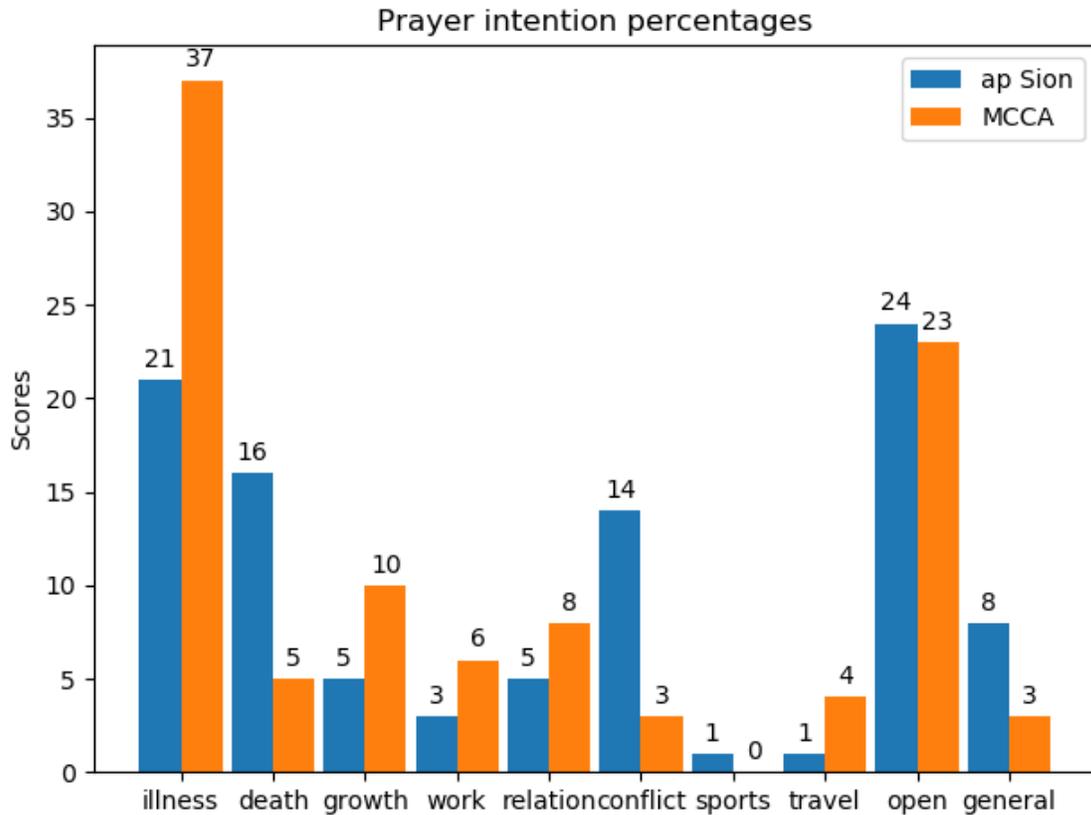
Figure 1. Comparison of prayer intentions for the two churches.

With reference to Figure 1, there are several notable differences in the two populations. For brevity, we'll denote ap Siôn's percentages as SM (for St. Mary's) and ours as MA (for MCC Austin). One of the most striking differences is in the category of illness (SM: 21% vs. MA: 37%). It might appear that the LGBTQ population is much more preoccupied with illness than the mainstream population. Naïvely, one might infer that individuals in the gay population are sicker or have sicker circles of acquaintances, perhaps because of AIDS or STDs.[1]

After examining the data, however, an alternative plausible explanation seems more likely. ap Siôn's samples were collected in a memorial chapel within a medieval church building in an area "highly attractive to tourists." She does not mention whether this church has a regular congregation, but it is likely that a large proportion of the SM prayer requests were left by tourists. MCC Austin, in contrast, has a settled congregation of around 300 members; it is likely that the majority of MA petitions were from the congregants. Digging deeper, a sizable

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[1] Such an interpretation unfortunately perpetuates a myth promoted by some anti-LGBTQ organizations that gays and lesbians have shorter life spans and poorer physical and mental health than straights. As support they invariably cite the egregiously flawed research of Paul Cameron et al., work that has been thoroughly debunked. Cameron's membership in the American Psychological Association was formally terminated following complaints about his research methods.

percentage of the illness-related MA petitions are clearly repeats. For example, the sample includes 26 nearly identical petitions for the health of the petitioner's brother and sister-in-law. Another 34 petitions plead for the recovery of a named church member recently diagnosed with cancer. It was not possible to determine from the data how many of the illness-related concerns may have referenced the same individuals or circumstances, but recurring petitions clearly spiked the percentage of illness-related prayer intentions in the MA sample relative to the SM sample.

Another divergence in the two samples bolsters the analysis above: the intention category of death (SM: 16% vs. MA: 5%). The naïve interpretation would have it that gays are sicker than straights, but do not die as often. A more nuanced interpretation notes that petitions relating to illness are likely to be repeated over and over; the same is less likely for petitions relating to death. It is not clear why death-related petitions should be over three times as common in the SM data as in the MA data; very likely it is some function of differences in the two populations unrelated to sexuality. Perhaps European tourists inclined and able to visit a medieval church are older than average.

Other differences in the prayer intention data include the categories of growth (SM: 5% vs. MA: 10%), work (SM: 3% vs. MA: 6%), conflict or disaster (SM: 14% vs. MA: 3%), travel (SM: 1% vs. MA: 4%), general (SM: 8% vs. MA: 3%), relationships (SM: 5% vs. MA: 8%), sports or recreation (SM: 1% vs. MA: 0%), and open (SM: 24% vs. MA: 23%). One might infer that, compared to straights, gays are twice as concerned with personal growth, twice as concerned with their work, much less concerned with conflict or disaster, four times as likely to be concerned with travel, and much more likely to be specific (rather than general) in their prayer requests.

However, that would be an over-interpretation of the data. The number of samples in some of the categories are quite small; e.g. MA sports and recreation (n=3) vs. SM (n=15). Also, some of the apparent differences were very likely due to discrepancies in coding. For example, it was not entirely clear what ap Siôn considered a "conflict/disaster." Is it referring to a hurricane (global disaster), a home fire (personal disaster), or to both? Also, the presumptive sexual orientation of the large majority of petitioners within each group obviously is not the only independent variable between the two groups. The two groups have other differences: U.K. vs. U.S., rural vs. urban, tourists vs. settled congregation. Moreover, the two samples were collected 10 years apart (2007 vs. 2017). These factors and the needs and desires of the individual authors of the petitions in each sample doubtlessly influenced the distribution.

Differences in ap Siôn's dimension of reference are shown in Figure 2. The percentage of petitions referencing people known personally to the author is similar in the two samples (SM: 63% vs. MA: 66%) and represents a sizable majority of all petitions. There were some differences in the other categories: the world and global context (SM: 27% vs. 15%), animals known personally to the author (SM: 5% vs. MA: 1%), and the author of the petition (SM: 4% vs. MA: 18%).

The discrepancy in percentage of petitions relating to world or global context (SM: 27% vs. 15%) may be tracking the divergence in the conflict/disaster intention category (SM: 14% vs. MA: 3%). The fact that the SM group was more than four times more concerned than the

MA group with conflicts and disasters may suggest a more global perspective. Notable is the fact that the MA group is overwhelmingly American, whereas the SM group is probably largely European. This may account for a more global perspective among these petitioners. Again, the raw numbers are small.
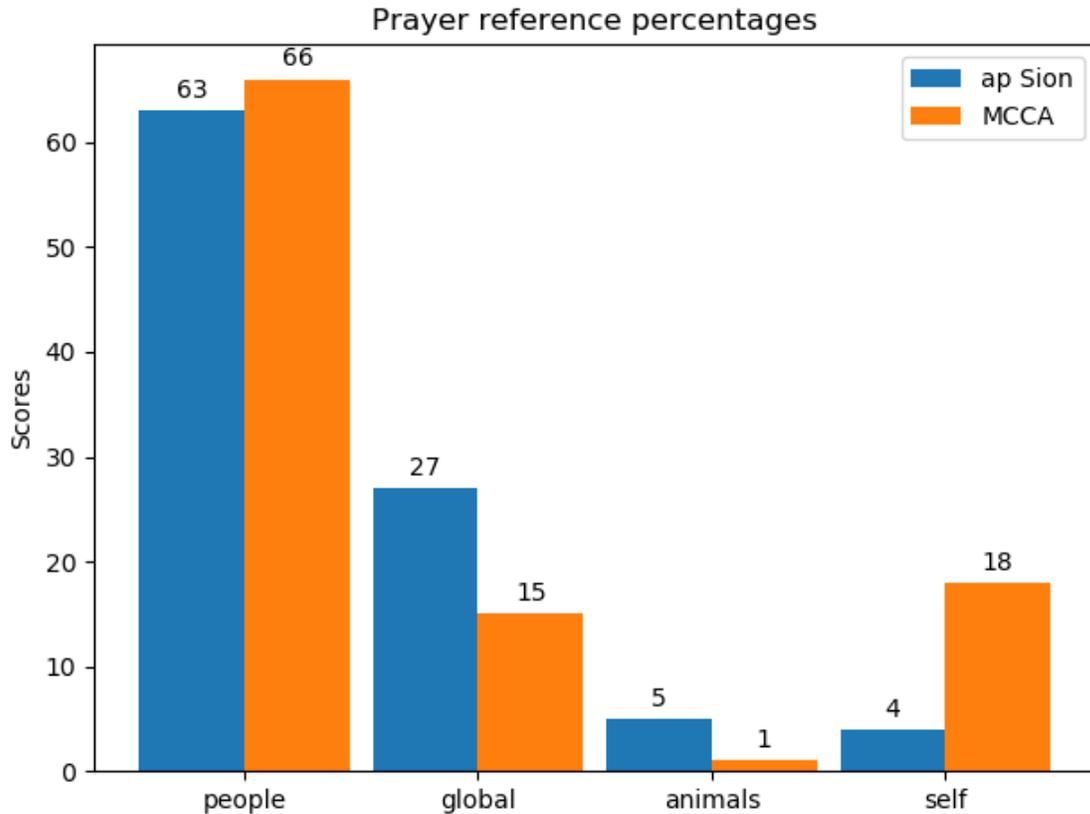

Figure 2. Comparison of prayer references for the two churches.

The most glaring discrepancy is in how often prayers reference the petition's author (SM: 4% vs. MA: 18%), i.e., the petitioner is praying for him or herself. For her data, ap Siôn reports that those which did "were concerned mainly with relationships, followed by open intention, growth, work, general, illness, sport or recreation, and travel" (2007: 209). In the MA data, growth predominated (n=49), followed by illness (n=40), work (n=37), relationships (n=21), sport or recreation (n=12), open (n=7), death (n=4), and general (n=3). One might infer from this discrepancy that gays are more self-centered than straights, but there are multiple other factors that might account for the disparity. For example, ap Siôn, noting the small size of this category in her data, asks why so many of her petitioners "choose not to write prayers which relate directly to themselves." She suggests that "perhaps a prayer request relating directly to oneself was viewed by many as inappropriate, unnecessary, or not considered an option" (2007: 222). This may reflect a cultural difference; perhaps Americans simply are more prone to pray for themselves than Europeans.

Last are differences in the two samples relating to ap Siôn's dimension of *objective*: did the petitioner specify a desired outcome (primary control) or leave the outcome to the discretion of the recipient (secondary control). These data are summarized in Figure 3. In both groups, there were more instances of secondary control (SM: 56.6% vs. MA: 66.8%) than primary control (SM: 43.4% vs. MA: 33.2%). ap Siôn suggests that perhaps religiously or spiritually mature individuals do not attempt to be prime initiators or creators, who attempt to fashion a world in accordance with their own inclinations or desires. Rather, the religiously or spiritually mature relinquish personal control in order that they may change and adapt themselves appropriately to an external world. She suggests that a preponderance of secondary control, therefore, may indicate religious maturity in the group, or alternatively that "some prayer authors find it difficult, or are unable, to articulate their requests" (2007: 223).
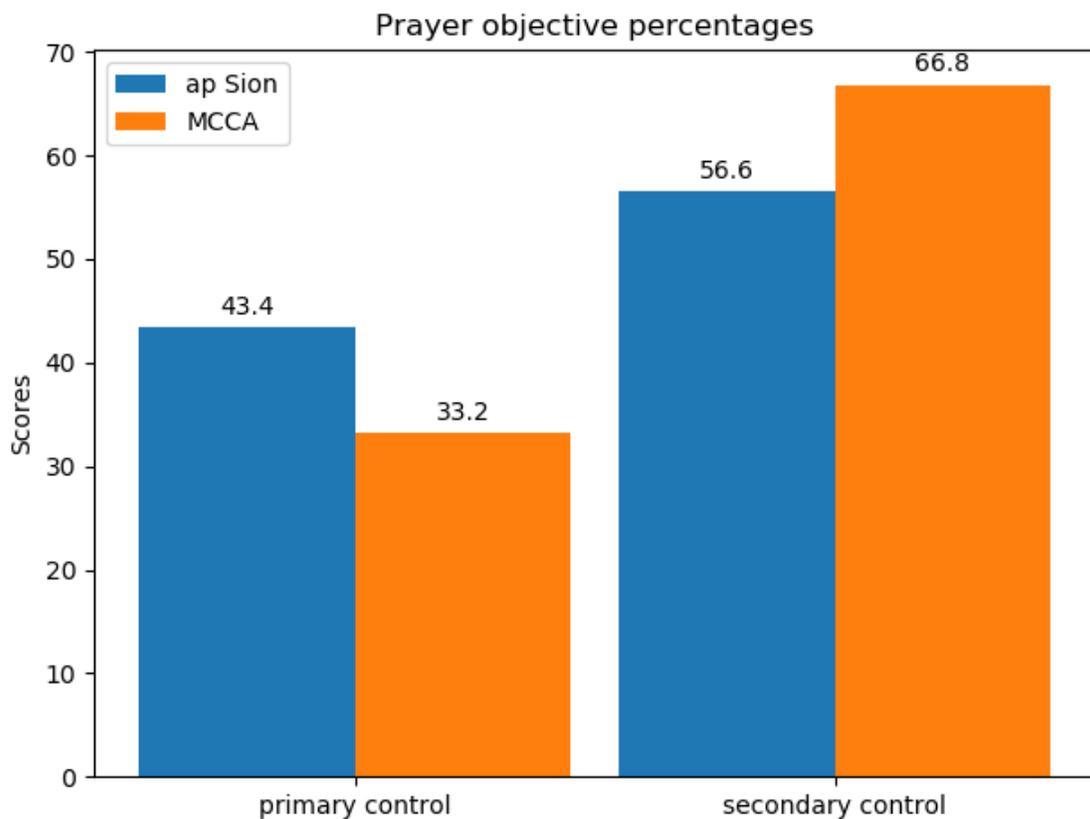

Figure 3. Comparison of prayer objectives for the two churches.

The data suggest that the LGBTQ petitioners were around 10% less likely to suggest a specific outcome and more likely to trust the divine to understand and respond appropriately to the circumstance referenced in the prayer request. Whether this indicates greater religious and spiritual maturity, an inability to articulate a specific outcome, or yet another cultural difference is difficult to say.

In comparing the two samples of prayer requests across all three of ap Siôn's dimensions – intention, reference, and objective – the most notable take-away was that the similarities are

more striking than the differences. Some reasons why this might be are provided in the concluding section.

Gay-Specific Concerns

As a second aspect of this study, the actual content of the prayer requests collected in the predominately LGBTQ church was considered, with the goal of seeing whether or not specific sexuality-relevant concerns are manifest. For this part of the study, a larger sample of prayer requests was studied, all 8,059 prayer requests collected during the period 2014–2018. This list was not restricted solely to intercessory or supplicatory prayers, as in the first portion of the study.

Initially, several hundred of these prayer requests were read and any that might be considered "gay-specific" were identified. From this initial corpus key-strings[2] were identified likely to distinguish gay-specific requests from others. Examples of such key-strings include:

> GLB, LGB, MCC, accept, differ, disapprov, equal, gay, gender, homophob, homosex, lesbian, oppress, partner, queen, queer, relationship, sex, straight, trans

This list of strings was then fed into a program written in the Python programming language to extract from the entire database of 8,059 requests all requests containing any of these as substrings. Finally, the resulting list was read and purged of any that were not gay-specific. The final set of prayer requests was surprisingly sparse; only 81 clearly gay-specific requests were identified, around 1 percent of the total. Some common themes emerged.

Justice from Governmental Entities

Several requests asked for justice and equal treatment under the law, often referencing current events relevant to the LGBTQ community. The period in which these requests were collected (2014–2018) contained the U.S. Supreme Court decision legalizing same-sex marriage and attempts in the Texas legislature to restrict transgender access to restrooms. Examples in this category include:

> [Please pray for] understanding by those who disagree with this week's Supreme Court ruling regarding gay marriage.

> Lord, thank you for letting gays and lesbians get married legally, so our moms can get married!

> [Please pray] that state leaders act fairly and stop this bathroom bill and other LGBT discrimination.

> [Please pray for] protection for the LGBT+ community hiding at my old high school, as people can get expelled for being who they are.

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[2] Note that some are not complete words, but substrings of multiple words. For example, "homophob" is a substring of "homophobe," "homophobia," "homophobic."

Personal Relationships

Several petitions ask that God touch the hearts of relatives who are not accepting of the petitioner or other's sexuality or relationship.

[Please pray for] my parents to accept my relationship with NAME.

[Please pray that] my parents/family accept me for being gay.

[Please pray for] me as I vacation with my parents, a captive audience to their questions and disgust.

A few requests related to personal relationships potentially negatively impacted by the sexuality of the petitioner.

[Please pray for] my wife and me, unsure what to do next as we understand that I am gay, and our marriage.

[Please pray for] me as a try to grieve my late mother, whose greatest shame was that she had a gay son.

Discrimination or Acceptance from Religious Institutions

A few prayer requests relate to discrimination by churches or to the acceptance of affirming churches.

[Please pray for] our friends who were asked to leave their church home; pray that their broken hearts will heal.

[Please pray that] MCC Austin will stay the course of openness, acceptance, celebration of differences.

Other Discrimination

Some requests ask for help countering discrimination in general.

[Please pray for] LGBT people in homophobic cultures.

Travel mercies as I leave for Trinidad, my first trip to a country with strict anti-gay laws.

[Please pray for] my nephew who is struggling with being trans in a small town

[Please pray for] an end to discrimination of LGBTQ kids.

General

Finally, some requests reflect the daily concerns of everyday life, but with a distinctly LGBTQ flair.

[Please pray for] NAME, grieving the loss of his husband.

[Please pray for] my new transgendered daughter

[Please pray for] the fulfillment of my dream to be Queen of the Gay Pride parade.

The common threads that emerged – social justice, family and relationship issues, discrimination from religious and other groups – are not surprising. These are all issues that one might expect to be of concern to an LGBTQ audience. What is perhaps surprising is how little these issues impinge on the prayer behavior of this specific congregation. Requests identified as "gay-specific" comprise a mere 1 percent (n=81) of all prayer requests in the sample. Even among those, many were repeats. For example, the request:

> [Please pray for] LGBT people in homophobic cultures

appeared 13 times with minor variations. It is likely that the digital filtering method missed some petitions that could be labeled as "gay-specific." Others, such as:

> [Please pray for] me and my husband

could be from a same-sex couple or not; there is no way of knowing. What stands out is that the prayer concerns of LGBTQ people track so closely the prayer concerns of non-sexual minority individuals who have their own concerns with social justice, family and relationships, and, sometimes, discrimination.

Conclusions

Rodriguez has suggested that:

> A fundamental concept in any discussion of gay and lesbian Christians is the issue of conflict . . . the issue of conflict is not just about the clash that can occur between gay and religious identities, but also about the anxiety that arises in a gay or lesbian person experiencing such conflict (9).

If such conflict, whether occasioned by a disapproving external religious environment or by internal psychological dissonance between one's gay and religious identities, is inherent in the experience of gay persons of faith, then one might expect such conflict to manifest itself in the private religious activity of gay people of faith.

This study compared the prayer behaviors of a group of predominately LGBTQ individuals with the prayer behaviors of a group of (presumably) largely heterosexual individuals to test the hypothesis that the conflict of which Rodriguez writes would lead to notable differences in the private prayer contents of these two groups. What was suggested instead is that gay and lesbian people are remarkably like everyone else, at least in their petitions to the divine. The percentages of requests in the two populations tracked fairly closely across ap Siôn's three dimensions of intention, reference and objective.

Among the prayer requests from the predominately LGBTQ church, relatively few petitions are identifiably "gay-specific." Some are concerned with social justice for the LGBTQ community; some concern conflicts with family over sexuality; others lament discrimination, specifically occasioned by sexuality or gender identity. Not apparent was any palpable and pervasive angst indicating an overwhelming sense of conflict or oppression. For the most part, it appears that gay and lesbian people of faith largely have the same quotidian concerns as everyone else.

These results may be partially explained by the specific population sampled. Unlike many other LGBTQ folks, the prayer authors sampled from MCC Austin had not chosen the path

of distancing themselves from organized religion. Instead, they found or helped to create for themselves "safe spaces where they can practice a version of Christianity that neither condemns nor simply tolerates homosexuality, but instead embraces homosexuals as having been created in God's image" (Rodriguez: 26). The religious message they receive on a consistent basis within their chosen church home is that God loves and accepts them just as they are. This, no doubt, ameliorates the effects of whatever conflict they may have felt between their gay and religious identities, and likely is a fertile environment for the development of resilient and healthy religious self-identities. It is difficult to generalize from this sample to LGBTQ members of other Christian denominations. This research is more suggestive than dispositive. However, it does suggest that healthy identity integration is possible for LGBTQ persons of faith, perhaps even the norm given an appropriately supportive religious environment.

Productive future research could study the prayer petitions of LGBTQ folks in a more mainstream religious environment, one in which conflict or approbation are more prevalent. Also, this comparison of the two church groups was not able to control for several independent variables that likely contributed to many of the differences observed: U.K. vs. U.S., rural vs. urban, tourists vs. settled congregation. It would be instructive to compare prayer request samples from church environments that differed less dramatically. Finally, prayer data is messy; for example, should prayer requests that repeat week after week be counted as multiple requests or as one?

Carrying out prayer research, particularly concerned with the content of prayers, is difficult. It requires working with data that are messy and often not readily available. The interpretation of the data must be done with great care. For example, the relative percentages of illness as a prayer concern (SM: 21% vs. MA: 37%) described above could be misconstrued as indicating that gays or their acquaintances are sicker than their straight counterparts, a careless conclusion not supported by the evidence. Despite these difficulties, prayer studies provide an unguarded glimpse into the private religious activities of the prayer authors and may provide valuable insight into what is in their hearts and minds.

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