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# Assessing visitor responses to Luke Jerram's *Gaia* installation in Lincoln Cathedral: prayers and well wishes for the world

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## ABSTRACT

For six days during the period that Lincoln Cathedral hosted Luke Jerram's installation, *Gaia*, visitors were invited to reflect on the world and to write on postcards prayers and well wishes for the world. Analysis of the content of 112 postcards demonstrated that the installation stirred people to reflect on things that really mattered to them. Seven main themes were identified, four concerning vulnerability and three concerning faith and values. The world is vulnerable to conflict and war, vulnerable to degradation, vulnerable to loss of biodiversity, and vulnerable to unhappiness. Faith and values were reflected in awareness of the ephemeral nature of human life, a reminder of God's presence, and a call for respectful living.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

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Cathedral studies; empirical theology; prayer; biodiversity

## Introduction

In their assessment of the significance of innovative events and installations within Anglican cathedrals, McKenna, Francis, and Stewart (2022) drew on Edward Bailey's (1997, 1998, 2002) theory of implicit religion to argue that such events and installations serve to soften the boundaries between the sacred and the secular. Installations in particular may draw people across the threshold into the sacred space, where the sacred space itself may have an impact on the installation and raise additional curiosity about things that really matter, or in the terminology of implicit religion about commitment, about integrating foci, and about intensive concerns with extensive effects.

In their analysis of the range of events and installations as noted on the websites of the 43 Anglican cathedrals in England and the Isle of Man, McKenna, Francis, and Stewart (2022) suggested that 'perhaps the most significant events for attracting large and diverse audiences were works of art and installations with a scientific theme' (3). As examples of such installations they drew particular attention to two designed by Luke Jerram. They noted that the *Museum of the Moon* had been hosted at Bristol, Chichester, Derby, Durham, Ely, Exeter, Gloucester, Leicester, Lincoln, Liverpool, Peterborough, Rochester, and Wells; and

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that *Gaia* had been hosted at Liverpool, Peterborough, and Rochester. In 2019 at Peterborough Cathedral there were over 22,000 visitors during a three-week residency, while at Liverpool Cathedral there were 170,000 visitors during a four-week residency. At Liverpool Cathedral prayer stations were placed around the Cathedral to help visitors reflect on the earth's significance in creation. It was noted that around 48,000 candles were lit while *Gaia* was in place compared to 10,000 usually used in the same period. Rochester Cathedral website described how the installation allowed visitors to view the earth in the way that astronauts do, detailing how common features of the experience for astronauts 'are a feeling of awe for the planet, a profound understanding of the interconnection of all life, and a renewed sense of responsibility for taking care of the environment'.

In spite of the potential impact on visitors of installations like the *Museum of the Moon* and *Gaia*, we have not been able to locate in the literature published research designed to document and evaluate this impact. The value of undertaking research among visitors to cathedrals has been demonstrated by a growing body of studies employing a variety of methods. For example, Burton (2015) analysed comments left in visitors' books, ap Siôn (2015a) explored the prayers posted on prayer boards, and Francis, Annis, and Robbins (2015) designed a pencil and paper survey for visitors. More recently, Kirby, Francis, and Village (2023) conducted an online survey among people who had purchased tickets to attend Peter Walker's installation in Liverpool Cathedral, *Space, the Universe and Everything*, a light and sound show. Their data demonstrated that participants perceived a positive impact of visiting the installation on their level of spiritual wellbeing as conceptualised and operationalised within the relational model of wellbeing proposed by Fisher (2010, 2011, 2016, 2021).

Francis (2024) reported the findings from two online surveys conducted among people who had purchased tickets to attend Peter Walker's pre-Christmas installations in Liverpool Cathedral, in 2022 (the angels are coming) and in 2023 (the manger). The survey attracted 691 responses in 2022 and 464 responses in 2023. These data demonstrated in 2023 that 39% of the participants considered that the experience of the *son et lumiere* had increased their likelihood of attending a carol service in the Cathedral, and 22% considered that their experience had increased their likelihood of attending church on Christmas Day/Eve. By coincidence, the 4,749 attendance at the Christmas Eve carol services was a 21% uplift on the pre-Covid 2019 attendance; the 1,232 attendance at Midnight Mass was a 73% uplift on the 2019 attendance. While the research design was not strong enough to confirm causality, the coincidence itself may be regarded as remarkable.

In spite of the growing importance of events and installations within Anglican cathedrals, this development has not avoided controversy. In their assessment of this development, McKenna, Francis, and Stewart (2022) drew particular attention to the controversy caused by the Helter-Skelter installed Norwich Cathedral and the Crazy Golf Bridge installed in Rochester Cathedral. More recently controversy was stirred by the Silent Disco hosted in Canterbury Cathedral. Such events have been subject to negative commentary about both the appropriateness of such activities in cathedrals at all, and the impact they have on the core identity of a cathedral as a place of prayer and worship.<sup>1</sup>

## Hosting Gaia in Lincoln Cathedral

As part of its theme for 2024, *Our world, God's creation*, Lincoln Cathedral hosted Luke Jerram's installation *Gaia* between 5 and 25 February 2024; it badged the installation in the following way:

Measuring seven metres in diameter, *Gaia* provides the opportunity to see our planet floating in three dimensions in the vast space of Lincoln Cathedral's Nave.

Contemplate the wonder of life on earth and experience the Overview Effect; astronauts report a feeling of awe for the planet, a profound understanding of the interconnection of all life, and a renewed sense of responsibility for the environment.

This event is included in your cathedral admission.

Conscious of negative publicity and taking account of the controversies surrounding similar events as noted above, the Cathedral was interested in documenting the spiritual impact of the installation. In order to seek to avoid potential criticism through misunderstanding (particularly from the Cathedral worshipping community) the link of the installation to the Cathedral's current theme was highlighted in sermons and incorporated into prayers at regular worship events. This included both preparation through preaching and prayer within regular worship (targeted at existing worshippers) and activities, to stimulate or aid reflection by casual visitors to the Cathedral, such as the prayer wall.

During the period when the installation was in place the Cathedral was open Monday to Saturday 10 am to 4 pm and Sundays 11.30 am to 2.30 pm. For adults the entrance fee is £11 (or £7 on Sundays); for children entrance is free up to 16 years. Outside these times (between Morning Prayer and 10 am, and from 4 pm until Evensong), the Cathedral was also open with no admission charge. Alongside the installation the Cathedral arranged a series of events. On three Thursday evenings the Cathedral was open between 6.30 pm and 8.30 pm to allow visitors to experience the earth's majesty at night, followed by Compline under *Gaia* at 8.45 pm. From Monday 12 to Friday 16 February between 10 am and 3.30 pm arts and crafts were available in the Cathedral's learning centre, including making collages, and making a 'four seasons' plate to take home. On Monday and Tuesday of that week the StarLincs mobile Planetarium was set up in the Chapter House. On Thursday Rhubarb Theatre hosted interactive storytelling in the Chapter House, drawing on Sean Henrick Moore's book, *Is this my home?* On Friday at 11.30 am there was a musical recital, including works by Handel, Mahler, and Sibelius.

## Research aim

Against this background, Lincoln Cathedral wanted to document the spiritual impact of Luke Jerram's installation, *Gaia*. One approach to doing this was to invite visitors to write their prayers for and wishes for the world, as stimulated by the installation, and to place them on the 'prayer wall'.

## Method

### Procedure

During the February half term (Monday 12 to Saturday 17 February 2024), in the context of the *Gaia* installation, visitors were invited to reflect and think about the world, and write prayers and well wishes for the world. A sign was displayed on a set of boards to create the ‘prayer wall’, and postcards and pens were provided for visitors to write prayers and well wishes for the world. Completed postcards were displayed for visitors to view throughout the installation. They were then prayed for and blessed at a service on Sunday 3 March before being recorded onto a spreadsheet. A total of 112 postcards were recorded in this way. These transcripts were then read and classified within the groups and categories presented in the results section.

## Results

As can be seen from the following comments (transcribed from the cards), the installation stirred people to reflect on things that really mattered to them. For some the installation highlighted the vulnerability of the world. The world is vulnerable to conflict and war. Prayers were voiced in a variety of ways for peace.

- I hope there will be no more wars and bring peace to the world.
- No more wars that all children are safe and receive education.
- I wish people would stop wars.
- I pray for all the people that are affected by war.
- Ceasefire in Gaza. Peace and the end of suffering.
- I hope for no more wars and for people to care for one another.
- No more wars, love and respect everyone. The earth is for everyone.
- There will be peace, and people learn to respect each other despite their differences.
- For no war, no hate and people to respect one another.

The world is vulnerable to degradation. Prayers were voiced in a variety of ways for greater care of the world and its resources.

- Respect, love and honour the uniqueness of our world.
- I hope for climate change to stop.
- No more pollution.
- I want the world to stay beautiful.
- Not to throw rubbish in the sea.
- Being reminded of the beauty of the earth and the miracle of creation.
- Nature gives us survival. If planet earth suffers, the human race will too.
- The world to stay for ever.
- That the great barrier reef will never be destroyed.

The world is vulnerable to erosion of biodiversity, and to the annihilation of plants or animals. Prayers for endangered species were voiced in a variety of ways.

- To increase endangered species.
- To stop trashing it and stop killing animals.

The world is vulnerable to unhappiness, disease, brutality, and deprivation. Prayers for personal and social wellbeing were expressed in a variety of ways.

- I hope my babies grow up in a world full of kindness.
- For the world to be kind and no violence.
- For peace and harmony.
- People are not homeless and not poor.
- That we realise soon that happiness is found in caring for each other, and not material things.
- For everyone to be treated equally.
- Cures for cancer and diseases.
- Love for all humanity, clean water and food for all.
- Respect, responsibility, humility for fellow man and the world we live in.

Being in the Cathedral for some was a reminder of the ephemeral nature of human life. Prayers were voiced in a variety of ways for the loss of family, friends, and companion animals.

- I enjoyed lighting a candle for my beloved dog [name] who sadly passed away.
- I hope I get to feel close to my stepson [name] RIP.
- Saying hi to people that are not around anymore.

Being in the Cathedral for some was a reminder of God's presence and invitation to them. Prayers were voiced in a variety of ways to express this recognition.

- That God is always with you.
- God's love is unconditional, and His perfect sacrifice is what make you worthy to receive.
- God is always with you.
- For God to come into people's hearts no matter who they are.
- For God to come to me.
- May God bless us all in hopes we may find Him.
- To love God and to love each other.
- Thank you God for people to live in this world. God bless all.

Being in the Cathedral for some was a reminder of fundamental human values, including respect, kindness, and appreciation, extended to self as well as to others.

- Be respectful for each other.
- Be kind, respectful and caring.
- Be thoughtful for all that you have in your life.
- Believe in yourself.
- Love one another.

- Treasure every day, every hour, every minute, every second.
- Be kind, talk and always listen to the problems of others.
- Invest more in loving your friends than hurting your enemies.
- Reconcile with your enemies and turn them into friends.
- Treat others how you would like to be treated.

It can be seen that the concerns represented by the comments left on prayer cards covered a wide range of concerns, which will be discussed in more detail in the discussion that follows.

## Discussion

Building on a small body of research within the field of cathedral studies designed to assess the spiritual impact on visitors of installations (see Francis 2024; Kirby, Francis, and Village 2023), the present study was designed to document the spiritual impact of Luke Jerram's installation, *Gaia*, in Lincoln Cathedral. The method employed was an invitation for visitors to write prayers and well wishes for the world on postcards. Content analysis of 112 postcards identified two major categories of prayers. The first category comprised four themes that highlighted the vulnerability of the world: the world is vulnerable to conflict and war; the world is vulnerable to degradation, including climate change; the world is vulnerable to erosion of biodiversity, including endangered species; and the world is vulnerable to unhappiness, disease, brutality, and deprivation. It is easy to see how these themes may relate directly to the *Gaia* installation or may have been stimulated by it. Moreover, when the prayers generated by this study are placed alongside the prayers gathered in other cathedrals by ap Siôn (2013, 2015a, 2015b, 2015c, 2017, 2024) it becomes clear that the *Gaia* installation has had an impact on focusing content so clearly on the vulnerability of the earth.

The second category of prayers identified by content analysis of the 112 postcards comprised three themes of a more diverse nature, but each reflecting a fundamental aspect of spirituality: for some being in the Cathedral was a reminder of the ephemeral nature of human life; for some being in the Cathedral was a reminder of God's presence and invitation to them; for some being in the Cathedral was a reminder of fundamental human values. It is less easy to see how these three themes may relate directly to the *Gaia* installation and how they may have been directly stimulated by the installation. Moreover, these themes have more in common with the prayers found in other cathedrals by ap Siôn (2013, 2015a, 2015b, 2015c, 2017, 2024).

Three main reflections followed from the foregoing analysis. First, at its most basic, the participation of people in the prayer wall activity demonstrated the way that it encouraged participation by visitors in a spiritual activity related to the *Gaia* installation, enabling those with implicit spiritual or theological impulses to voice these in concrete form. As a consequence, the language used by those leaving prayers does not necessarily conform to theological norms that might be characteristic of more formalised prayers (especially in the Anglican tradition, where worship and liturgical texts are deemed by many to be a primary expression of doctrine). However, the themes that were covered across the content of the prayer wall included many ideas or motifs that are either

consonant with or expressions of ideas that can be easily reconciled to Christian doctrine. For example, 'Being reminded of the beauty of the earth and the miracle of creation' offers a direct connection with the Christian doctrine of creation, 'Love one another' is a direct quotation from the biblical writings of John (see John 13: 34–35), 'Treat others how you would like to be treated' is evocative of the second great commandment (see Mark 12: 31).

Second, in order to understand the impact that the *Gaia* installation had on the prayers left by visitors on the prayer wall that is the focus of this paper it is necessary to outline an understanding of what might be expected of interactions in a similar context without the influence of the *Gaia* installation – to provide a baseline from which comment can be made. The relative immaturity of this field of study makes baselining the prayers in this way something of a challenge. However, previous work by ap Si n (2013, 2015a, 2015b, 2015c, 2017, 2024) helps us to understand something of the content that might be expected of prayers offered by visitors in the context of a spiritual place such as the cathedral. The prayer wall clearly provided a means of allowing those who were visiting Lincoln Cathedral and engaging in reflection on the art installation to express as prayers issues and concerns that are common among people visiting cathedrals and engaging in prayer. Among the general concerns that are commonly expressed on prayer boards in cathedrals, the following themes were found repeated within this specific activity: prayers for the sick; and prayers for the departed. Whilst there are other opportunities to offer such prayers (in the form of prayer boards that are always present in the Cathedral), it is probable that this specific prayer wall, associated with the installation, provided an additional means for people to express their spiritual needs – potentially engaging people who would not otherwise have done so in this spiritual activity.

Third, significant conflicts had entered the public consciousness in the period prior to the installation taking place in Lincoln Cathedral: the invasion of Ukraine, and the conflict taking place in Gaza. Whilst the first of these had a local impact (with another area of the Cathedral having been adopted over a longer time-frame as a focus for prayer by those directly impacted by its effects) it was the conflict in Gaza that was more visible in the news and media at the time of the *Gaia* installation. These factors can be seen in the prominence of prayers for peace, some of which contain explicit references to Gaza or children (a highly visible element of the reporting of that conflict in the media at the time of the installation). This connection between topical events and prayers offered on the prayer wall highlights the potential that spiritually focused activities complementing installations such as *Gaia* have to enable people to express spiritual reactions to events that are having a particular impact in life as experienced at that time. Again, it can be seen that this particular prayer wall provided an opportunity for people to express concerns in the form of prayers that were unrelated to the installation itself, but clearly motivated by specific topical events in society.

Fourth, the clearest impact of the *Gaia* installation on the prayers that were offered on the prayer wall are seen in those prayers offered in the following categories: Greater care of the world and its resources; and Endangered species. In these two areas, there is a strong and direct correlation between the artistic installation portraying the world with a concern for the care of its ecology, including expressions of concern for human stewardship, appreciation for the interrelationships that sustain life, and an appreciation



for its beauty. The various petitions made within this category indicate the way that the installation stimulated reflection on a variety of themes. In addition, it is clear (though not fully quantifiable) that some of the prayers that fitted the baseline categories demonstrated an intensification reflective of engagement with the *Gaia* installation. These included prayers addressing topics such as: Peace of the world (beyond the topical concerns for the environment), universal values, and God's presence in the world. In these responses, it is possible to discern that the contemplation of the world stimulated by the installation intensified prayers addressing the ways that humanity can have a negative impact on a creation that is inherently peaceful, good and imbued with the presence of the Creator.

## Conclusion

Acknowledging that the prayer wall that is the focus of this paper was explicitly placed to encourage visitors to reflect on how they responded to the *Gaia* installation, this paper has sought to discern the role that such an installation can have in enabling people to express in concrete terms thoughts of a spiritual nature that would otherwise remain implicit and unspoken. The following points might be made by way of conclusion:

- The installation provided a focus which was accessible to a broader range of visitors and was illustrative of the theme embraced by the Cathedral for this year (Our World: God's Creation). By being linked to this wider thematic approach within the Cathedral's overall programme of worship and mission, the installation strengthened and added value to that theme.
- The prayer wall was simply one aid to focus the visitors' attention during their visit and, whilst many responses on the wall were influenced by the installation and overall theme of the programme of which it was a part, the themes selected by participants were broader than just the themes stimulated by the *Gaia* installation itself.
- Alongside the concerns related directly to the *Gaia* installation, the issues raised reflect many of those raised in church/cathedral prayers (such as prayers for the sick and dying, and remembrance of those who have died). This indicates that those stimulated by this activity engaged in deeper spiritual concerns that reached beyond the installation itself.
- Whilst not expressed in 'theological' or prayer-related language, the sentiments were heart-felt. This suggests that the combination of installation and complementary prayer activity engaged those who may not be deeply involved in institutional church life in an activity that was inherently spiritual. This highlights the importance of the availability of the Cathedral as a safe spiritual space for activities that are not presented purely in spiritual terms can reap benefits that are spiritual in nature.

The Implicit Religion model underpinning the process adopted above provided a useful theoretical framework for this study: the data furnished tentative evidence that those attending a so-called 'secular' event in a cathedral or sacred space were suitably motivated to engage in what might be defined as a 'spiritual activity'. These initial conclusions highlight the need for more detailed analysis of the motivations of those attending secular

events of this nature and their perceptions of the Cathedral as an institution for hosting such events. In this way, the present study provides a worthwhile introduction to need for greater systematic analysis of the visitor economy within venues such as cathedrals. There are a number of ways that this might be directed – looking at the impact of the Cathedral building itself (e.g. is it just a big space or did they find something more meaningful and/or unexpected which influenced them in a way which could be termed ‘spiritual’ ‘religious’) and the activities taking place within it (e.g. how do activities promoted by cathedrals help those on the fringes of (or outside) ecclesial life engage with issues of spirituality and faith). Such approaches provide an opportunity to expand on existing work in cathedral-based research studies, and the initial conclusions reached in this paper highlight the way that such research provides valuable insights into the spiritual engagement of visitors and the value installations may have in eliciting a spiritual response among visitors to religious venues such as cathedrals.

The clear limitation with the present pilot study is that the prayer wall activity was live for only a short period of time and generated just 112 responses. However, in a pilot project the response was adequate to proof test the approach and to commend it for a future project.

## Notes

1. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-kent-49162116>, accessed on 12<sup>th</sup> July 2024; <https://ewtn.co.uk/article-canterbury-cathedrals-rave-in-the-nave-draws-the-ire-of-believers-and-nonbelievers/>, accessed on 12<sup>th</sup> July 2024; and <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-kent-68231565>, accessed on 12<sup>th</sup> July 2024

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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**Peter Neil** is the former Vice-chancellor of Bishop Grosseteste University, Lincoln and now serves as an Emeritus Professor and member of the World Religions and Education Research Unit in the institution. He is Canon of Lincoln Cathedral; at the time of this project he was Residentiary Canon of the Cathedral. His research interest is in people's beliefs and practices.

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## Data availability statement

Data are available from the corresponding author on request.

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