

Listening in Stereo and Communicating in Semaphore: Child Sexual Abuse Survivor-Led Strategies for Culture Change in the Catholic Church

Alana Harris

Abstract: This expository piece, focusing on a grassroots movement called LOUDfence to address child sexual abuse in religious settings, explores the ways in which the symbolic activity of tying ribbons to church fences offers an active and adaptable listening strategy for giving visibility and voice to survivors and survivor-allies. Working through signs, symbols, embodied actions, and ecclesial metaphors, it offers a methodology and mode for creative, trauma-informed, and lay-led cultural change in Catholic and Anglican church contexts.

A kitchen table in Cumbria (in the north of England and on the border with Scotland) might seem like an unlikely place to start a global movement, but we know there is sound precedent across history for surprises from the peripheries. *LOUDfence UK* originated in the small village of Kirkbampton in October 2021 as a response to a local child sexual abuse revelation centred around the bishop of Carlisle.¹ It was a simple act of solidarity deployed by Antonia Sobocki, a Catholic survivor of family abuse, to support her neighbour and give everyone in the church, survivors and survivor-allies, a voice. That first LOUDfence three years ago, and the more than twenty that have followed since, pivoted around tying ribbons of all colours and styles to railings, suspended wires, around trees, and as internal displays within churches.² In these liminal

¹ Maddy Fry, “Bishop of Carlisle admits ‘Error of Judgement,’” *Church Times*, October 9, 2020, www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2020/9-october/news/uk/bishop-of-carlisle-admits-error-of-judgement.

² Phil Coleman, “Church Abuse Activist: ‘These Ribbons are a Cry for Change,’” *News & Star, The Cumberland News*, October 11, 2020, www.newsandstar.co.uk/news/18781342.church-abuse-activist-these-ribbons-cry-change/, and “Pioneering Carlisle ‘Loudfence’ Campaign to Beat Clerical Abuse Looks Set to Go National,” *News & Star, The Cumberland News*, October 30, 2021, www.newsandstar.co.uk/news/19683333.pioneering-loudfence-campaign-beat-clerical-abuse-looks-set-go-

settings, the ribbons and handwritten messages symbolically enable people to send and receive messages of care, compassion, and support. In giving visibility and voice to the eviscerating effects of Child Sexual Abuse (CSA), LOUDfence aims to foster honesty and truth telling, seeking to break cultures of silence, taboo, and containment. It is a form of “deep” listening, trauma-informed theology, and feminist pastoral praxis in which we hear (and see) the “speaking wound.”³

LOUDfence installations across Britain have been mostly ecumenical, involving Catholic and Anglican parishes, and often over multiple days. In September 2023, two representatives of LOUDfence UK addressed the Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors and met Pope Francis, who offered prayers and blessings to the work, alongside expressing hope that their informal ministry would spread to other places.⁴ Following an invitation to hold a LOUDfence at Lourdes (and in Paris at the Plenary Assembly of the Conference of Catholic Bishops of France) in March 2023, a sister movement, *Rubans contre l’oubli*, has started.⁵ In April 2024, a LOUDfence (curated by the UK volunteer team, in consultation with the US bishop and local survivors), was held at St Joseph’s Cathedral, Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston in West Virginia.⁶

These diocesan-focused events have brought together local survivor groups and CSA safeguarding teams, working with bishops and priests, men and women religious, and hundreds of concerned people within, but *also estranged from or outside* the churches, to grieve, remember, and recognise abuse in communities. A LOUDfence may be likened to those “spontaneous shrines” that spring up on the roadside to commemorate trauma, or flowers placed outside

national/#:~:text=It%20encourages%20those%20affected%20by,42%20of%20the%20country's%20cathedrals.

³ Margaret D. Stetz, “Listening ‘With Serious Intent’: Feminist Pedagogical Practice and Social Transformation,” *Transformations* 12, no. 1 (2001): 7–27; Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience—Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 9.

⁴ Vatican News, “Protection of Minors: Pope Meets with Two Women from LOUDfence during Plenary,” September 23, 2023, www.vaticannews.va/en/vatican-city/news/2023-09/protection-minors-plenary-annual-report-audience-loudfence.html.

⁵ See rubanscontreloubli.fr and x.com/ContreLoubli.

⁶ Chris Altieri, “UK Abuse Survivors Campaign Seeks Cultural Change in the Church,” *Crux*, April 8, 2024, cruxnow.com/church-in-the-usa/2024/04/uk-abuse-survivors-campaign-seeks-culture-change-in-the-church/; Coleen Rowan, “West Virginia Diocese Welcomes LOUDfence Campaign of Awareness, Support for Abuse Victims,” *Catholic Review*, April 13, 2024 catholicreview.org/west-virginia-diocese-welcomes-loudfence-campaign-of-awareness-support-for-abuse-victims/.

places associated with loss and suffering⁷—a pop-up public memorial that has the capacity to surface and re-sound the pain, festering hurt, and profound damage suppressed and often hidden in our communities.

In its DIY methodology and symbolic mode, a LOUDfence ranges well beyond most procedural, church-based safeguarding or CSA institutional actions, reaching from the liminal site of a church boundary fence to dialogue, potentially, with the passing public. One such occurrence was recollected by Antonia, flowing from the LOUDfence in Plymouth in February 2023:

A teenage girl passed by and noted the ribbons. She was on her way to collect her grandfather for his dinner from the pub further along the road near to the church.

A little while later she returned with her grandfather, and he stopped to look at the ribbons. He asked what they were for. . . . He looked at the ribbons with his granddaughter. He asked if he too could tie a ribbon. His granddaughter looked at him and asked “Why granddad? We don’t know anyone who has been abused?” He answered: “Yes you do. This was me. I was raped as a child. I don’t know why I’m talking about it. I’ve never spoken of it until now.” . . . They had a very open conversation then and there.⁸

As a lay movement of volunteers outside institutional structures but in conversation and collaboration with church authorities, the LOUDfence movement, as experienced and enacted across England, Wales, and Scotland, offers a suggestive model for active listening in a synodal church.

This short expository piece, focusing as a case study on a recent LOUDfence held at the Catholic and Anglican cathedrals in Newcastle (in the north of England) in March 2024,⁹ seeks to expound two interrelated facets of LOUDfence as a flexible, adaptive, and lay-attuned listening practice with potentially global application in responding to the scourge of CSA in our churches but also, and perhaps especially, in wider society too.

I contend that a LOUDfence might be thought of not only as an *event*, but also a *methodology* and *mode* for survivor-led cultural change through its capacity to communicate in semaphore by using

⁷ Jack Santino, “Performative Commemoratives, the Personal, and the Public: Spontaneous Shrines, Emergent Ritual, and the Field of Folklore,” *Journal of American Folklore* 117, no. 466 (2004): 363–372.

⁸ Oral history interview with Antonia Sobocki, June 5, 2024, with Ethics Clearance from King’s College London, HR/DP-23/24-40771.

⁹ See newcastle.anglican.org/news/survivors-of-church-based-abuse-host-special-loudfence-service-at-newcastle-cath.php.

universal signs and sacramental symbols. Its coloured ribbons and displayed Christian images and objects communicate messages without a flurry of words and deploy a visual register to “speak” across emotional and institutional distances, like coded flags held aloft. These listening practices require “ears attuned” to the rite and rote evoked by the material and visual installations of a LOUDfence. Nevertheless, for those with “eyes to see and ears to hear” there is an opportunity for attentive listening in stereo—as multi-modal, multi-channel meanings are differentially conveyed to survivors, survivor allies, institutional stakeholders, members of the public passing by, the media, and indeed past and future LOUDfence participants (as the symbolic registers grow, diversify, and acquire accretions).

In the discussion that follows, examples are offered to demonstrate the creative and performative rituals, and liturgical and sacramental actions assembled, to give often non-verbal, embodied “voice” to pain, trauma, damage, and unhealed individual and collective wounds within the church. A LOUDfence makes recourse to longstanding, but over the last few decades somewhat dormant, symbolic tools and folk or vernacular vocabularies drawn from the traditional “Catholic” imaginary to make the *sensus fidelium* heard.¹⁰ The LOUDfence movement promises a form of grassroots, polyvalent “synodal listening in the spirit” as a portable, temporary, and potentially iterative sounding board that surfaces, amplifies, and sends out messages of sorrow and support to nameless survivors and their suppressed experiences in a form of active memorialisation. It can be differentiated from the more formal, official, and permanent public memorials to CSA survivors planned in Australia and France following the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse and the Independent Commission on Sexual Abuse in the Catholic Church (CIASE).¹¹ Nevertheless, it also finds itself in a continuum with these other forms and formats of listening, speaking, testifying, lamenting, repenting, and witnessing.

¹⁰ Colleen McDannell, *Material Christianity—Religion and Popular Culture in America* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998); Andrew Greeley, *The Catholic Imaginary* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001); David Morgan, *The Embodied Eye: Religious Visual Culture and the Social Life of Feeling* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012); Gaëlle Bargain-Darrigues and Gustavo Morello, “Lived Religion Beyond Words: A Denotive Analysis of Participant-Produced Photos of Meaningful Objects,” *Sociological Review* 71, no. 5 (2023): 1037–1057.

¹¹ See www.dss.gov.au/families-and-children-programs-services-children/national-memorial-for-victims-and-survivors-of-institutional-child-sexual-abuse.

TRAUMA-INFORMED AND CREATIVE METHODS TO GIVE VISIBILITY AND VOICE TO CSA

The practice of tying ribbons to cathedral fences in commemoration of victim-survivors of CSA started in Ballarat (Country Victoria, Australia—another periphery) in 2015, while the Royal Commission held hearings in that highly traumatised community designated as the epicentre of the nation's abuse crisis.¹² Several Australian academics have written independently about the ways in which LOUDfences in that setting speak and act as a form of protest and accountability—a confronting installation to speak truth to power.¹³ These acts of defiance and contested memorialization sound in the context of a “traumascape” and function as a “work of acknowledgement” to the continuing pain of survivors and their cry for institutional transformative justice. One of the most poignant LOUDfences in Australia was the one hastily assembled, without permission, at St. Mary's Cathedral in Sydney in January 2023 when Ballarat-resident Paul Auchetl tied ribbons for his deceased brother during Cardinal George Pell's memorial mass.¹⁴

There is, however, a different origin story that wraps around the LOUDfences held in the UK—Antonia Sobocki was prompted to her act of tying ribbons to an Anglican church fence by a diocesan scandal, her appreciation of women's collective agency, and ecumenical solidarity in a small rural village.¹⁵ The LOUDfence events that have followed over the last three years are hard to define and describe simply and concisely. LOUDfence is a word that acts as a “brand” as well as a descriptor, a collective noun, a programme, and sometimes even a verb. A LOUDfence might span a single day (or multiple days or even months, as in one parish). They are mostly curated by Antonia and a core team but are also crowd-sourced, with attendees adding coloured ribbons and fabric to the fences, writing messages, and

¹² Kathleen McPhillips, “‘Unbearable Knowledge’: Managing Cultural Trauma at the Royal Commission,” *Psychoanalytic Dialogues* 27, no. 2 (2017): 130–146.

¹³ Dave McDonald, “The Work of Acknowledgement: ‘Loud Fence’ as a Community-Level Response to Institutional Child Sexual Abuse Testimony,” *Social and Legal Studies* 33, no. 2 (2024): 213–235; Megan Deas, Kerry McCallum, and Kerry Martin, “Mediating via Materiality: Continuing Critical Conversations about Child Sexual Abuse in Australia,” *Difficult Conversations* (London: British Council, 2023), doi.org/10.57884/6P72-TZ16.

¹⁴ Christopher Knaus, “‘Unfinished Business’: Ballarat Abuse Survivor to Tie a Ribbon at St. Mary's before George Pell Funeral,” *The Guardian*, January 23, 2023, www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2023/jan/26/unfinished-business-ballarat-abuse-survivor-to-tie-a-ribbon-at-st-marys-before-george-pell-funeral.

¹⁵ Jane Chevous, Alana Harris, and Antonia Sobocki, “‘A Solidarity Dance’: Feminist Approaches to Abuse,” in *Feminist Theologies: A Companion*, ed. Kerrie Handasyde, Katharine Massam, and Sean Burns (London: SCM, 2024), 135–148.

participating in planned prayers and activities. A LOUDfence might be a stand-alone day event (with a Mass) or folded into a scheduled series of actions over several days encompassing processions, customized liturgies, acts of reparation, and bidding prayers. Participants are invited through institutional safeguarding networks (and diocesan survivor representative bodies), through word of mouth and advance notification of an event on social media, and there is always also an element of serendipity—the curious passerby or two who sees the ribbons fluttering in the breeze and stops to engage. In the UK, the ribbons and messages are usually displayed for an agreed and fixed period, but as will be discussed below, varied diocesan conventions are evolving to preserve—or symbolically transform—the ribbons afterwards. As will become apparent, while a LOUDfence is an *event*, it is also a *method* or *mode of modelling culture change* through creative repertoires and rich cultural symbols. It uses images, metaphors, and a devotional and sacramental imaginary (including *ex votos* and icons) to speak through multiple registers when words fail or are inadequate. Survivors can surface their story or signal their presence—by tying a ribbon or writing a message (outside church grounds) or through partaking in ritual activities within the buildings—without having to fully disclose (and risk re-traumatisation or instrumentalization). Survivor-allies like me, processing our anger, shame, and sense of collective complicity and responsibility, can show our support, solidarity, and compassion by typing a ribbon cipher, encountering the written fragments of traumatic experiences (and lifelong wounds) arrayed on the cathedral or parish church fences, and offering a supportive shoulder or listening ear (if invited to do so). Drawing on the foundational semiotics and modifying them upon their migration to Britain and movement around England, Scotland, and Wales, a diversified form of performative communication has emerged drawing upon the particularities of places and locations “storied” over the centuries.¹⁶

Thus far in Britain a LOUDfence has always been held with the permission of, and in close consultation (though with varying degrees of enthusiasm) with diocesan authorities, following extensive preparation and multiple planning meetings with the bishop and cathedral/church officials, safeguarding staff, and local survivors and survivor-allies. The ecumenical cast of a LOUDfence, characteristic of almost every installation over the last three years, has also been critical as the synchronisation of a display at *both* Anglican and Catholic cathedrals spreads the framework and focus for surfacing CSA in religious settings. This approach is in line with the

¹⁶ Marion Bowman, “Arthur and Bridget in Avalon: Celtic Myth, Vernacular Religion, and Contemporary Spirituality in Glastonbury,” *Fabula* 48 (2007): 16–32.

methodology of the 2022 UK Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse, which highlighted serious child protection and safeguarding failings in *all* religious organisations—and many other child-focused institutions too—so that the Catholic Church alone as a minority church in multi-religious Britain has not been the sole focus of publicised survivor anger and societal opprobrium.¹⁷

The UK LOUDfences held have also illuminated the widely-known but little discussed fact that the family, as a site for physical and sexual abuse, is the most dangerous place for children and, as a consequence, religious organisations have, until now, mostly shirked their responsibility to minister to these victim-survivors as part of their transformation into a safe and survivor-sensitive institution.¹⁸ In charting the ways in which a LOUDfence offers an opportunity to convey trauma and give voice to pain and solidarity—through visual signalling including colour, material objects, spatial arrangements, and ritual—a recent ecumenical installation serves as an illuminating case study.

COMMUNICATING IN SEMAPHORE: ANGELS, STRAWBERRIES, AND RIBBONS BLOWING IN THE WIND

From March 3–5, 2024, the iron railings of the Norman-style St. Nicholas Cathedral (Church of England) and Pugin-designed St. Mary's Catholic Cathedral, both in the centre of Newcastle, were festooned with coloured ribbons. Nestled amongst the riot of colour were formal well-wishes from Fr. Hans Zollner (laminated, to protect the letter from the weather),¹⁹ longer endorsements (on coat of arms letterhead) from bishops of other English dioceses, and personalised and hand-written tags and one-sentence *memoria* notes (and black ribbons) for named individuals (many of whom are no longer alive through suicide). Participants at the event added their own ribbons and wrote messages—on diocesan-designed postcards, the back of an Antony Gormley “Angel of the North” cardboard *ex voto*,²⁰

¹⁷ Alexis Jay, Malcolm Evans, Ivor Frank, and Drusilla Sharpling, *The Report of the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse* (London: House of Commons, 2022), www.iicsa.org.uk/final-report.html.

¹⁸ Tanja Repič Slavič, “Relations, Roles, and Dynamics within Incestuous Families,” *The Person and the Challenges: The Journal of Theology, Education, Canon Law, and Social Studies Inspired by John Paul II* 10 (2020): 177–191.

¹⁹ Hans Zollner is a Jesuit priest, psychologist, professor at the Gregorian University, and former member of the Vatican's Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors.

²⁰ Antony Gormley is an acclaimed sculptor, who attended a nearby Benedictine Catholic school in the north of England and erected this metal angel in Gateshead (7 miles from Newcastle) in 1998. For more information about the once controversial,



or unadorned luggage tags. Inside the Catholic cathedral, arranged on the steps leading up to the altar, was a display of shoes—adult sizes and some very small, some painted in gold leaf (and with an explanatory sign that they commemorated the women religious victims of Marko Rupnik)²¹—each with a note commanding the viewer: “see me.”

Half a mile away at the Anglican cathedral, adorning one of their fourteen-century perpendicular columns, was a “strawberry field”—little red gems knitted, crocheted, or fashioned in cardboard by parishioners across the diocese. This co-participatory craft project was designed by survivor-artists and pivoted around their insight that

now iconic sculpture, see www.gateshead.gov.uk/article/5303/The-history-of-the-Angel-of-the-North.

²¹ Elise Ann Allen, “Former Nuns in Rupnik Abuse Case Reveal Identities while Calling for ‘Complete Transparency,’” *Catholic Herald*, February 22, 2024, catholicherald.co.uk/former-nuns-in-rupnik-abuse-case-reveal-identities-while-calling-for-complete-transparency/.



sometimes something beautiful can grow, with time and nurturing, out of “muck.”²² There are fascinating lessons to be drawn here about craft, community, mission, and connection which Rev. Dr. Steve Taylor is exploring with his “ordinary knitters” project.²³

There was also the opportunity to engage with Sarah Troughton’s “Transformation” series—ten linocut angels (“like the angel that liberated Peter in Acts,” she says)—bridging heaven and earth and traversing emotions such as shame, betrayal, and despair, alongside justice, dignity, and honour.²⁴ Reproduced on postcards (and evoking the brass rubbings she did in churches as a child), they were available to take as a memento of the event or use as a gentle visual prompt to conversation with others. When the Catholic bishop of Hexham and Newcastle preached at the opening LOUDfence Sunday Mass (March

²² “LOUDfence Strawberry Craft Project,” Safeguarding: www.newcastle.anglican.org/safeguarding/if-i-told-you-what-would-you-do-/loudfence-strawberry-craft-project/ and “If I Told You, What Would You Do?” Project, Safeguarding: newcastle.anglican.org/safeguarding/if-i-told-you-what-would-you-do-/.

²³ See “Ordinary Knitters,” www.facebook.com/ordinaryknitters/.

²⁴ “Angels Creative Project,” Safeguarding: newcastle.anglican.org/safeguarding/if-i-told-you-what-would-you-do-/angels-creative-project/.





3, 2024), he tailored his sermon around one of these postcards, performatively linking both cathedrals as a powerful signal of Christian unity through prayer, penitence, and advocacy.²⁵

Outside the Catholic cathedral, facing the main road and opposite the busy central train station, pink and green ribbons were tied to the open hand of a life-size statue of Cardinal Basil Hume, a locally-born former archbishop of Westminster but also a Benedictine, a religious congregation whose prestigious schools (Downside and the nearby Ampleforth) were the subject of a separate ICCSA Investigation Report.²⁶ Inside St. Mary's, during an opening liturgy of remembrance and repentance, Bishop Stephen Wright reiterated the apology to victim-survivors he made at his recent installation and pledged to make his diocese safe and supportive of those hurt by abuse within the church or indeed elsewhere.²⁷ At the closing liturgy on the evening of Wednesday, May 5, his Anglican counterpart Right Rev. Dr. Helen-Ann Hartley tied a LOUDfence "pledge ribbon" (another new development, printed by LOUDfence organisers initially to give to Pope Francis) around the statue of the cathedral's patron, St. Nicholas—thereby committing the diocese into which she has newly arrived to be a haven for survivors and hub for survivor-focused art therapy.

From this qualitative, ethnographic, and visual survey, it is possible to discern the culturally-coded and locally-specific semiotics activated by this LOUDfence—for example St. Mary's Cathedral's *ex votos* reference its nineteenth-century heritage encompassing Gateshead (where the steel sculpture *The Angel of the North* is located, in contrast to the differing Anglican diocesan borders) as well as tacitly signalling Gormley's education at Ampleforth and the region's industrial past. The ribbons tied to the open hand of the much-loved but equally administratively accountable Dom Basil, OSB, were visually arresting for passersby but also underlined a veiled but pointed reference to the current primate of the Catholic Church in England and Wales (and his immediate predecessor, too) in their handling of perpetrator priests and failures in compassionate ministry

²⁵ "The Third Sunday of Lent, Sunday March 3, 2024, St. Mary's RC Cathedral," www.youtube.com/watch?v=NmAyJKd4qgo, at 33.45.

²⁶ Alexis Jay, Malcom Evans, Ivor Frank, and Drusilla Sharpling, *Ampleforth and Downside: English Benedictine Congregation Case Study* (London: House of Commons, 2018), www.iicsa.org.uk/reports-recommendations/publications/investigation/ampleforth-downside.html.

²⁷ Christopher Lamb, "English Catholic Bishop's Installation Models Synodality with Abuse Victims," *National Catholic Reporter*, August 8, 2023, www.ncronline.org/news/english-catholic-bishops-installation-models-synodality-abuse-victims.

to victim-survivors.²⁸ This can be contrasted with the desire of parishioner-survivors at St. Nicholas to supplement the more generic coloured ribbons with diocesan-sourced (through the Women's Institute network), individualized hand-knitted strawberries—linking the LOUDfence event to their broader “If I Told You What Would You Do?” programme and other local, survivor-led artistic initiatives. In an embrace of active co-production and “craftivism” (activism through crafting),²⁹ the distinctive bureaucratic structure of the Anglican Church and its embrace of “established church” parochial reach was given tangible expression.

As an *event*, *methodology*, and *model* for culture change, LOUDfence deploys a variety of creative repertoires and a rich palette of cultural symbols. In analysing the ways in which LOUDfence promotes voice, performatively speaks, and ritually acts, it is helpful to draw upon Leonard Norman Primiano's concept of “vernacular religion.” This concept enables a recognition of LOUDfence as a democratic listening practice, a grassroots initiative to give experiential expression to belief (and grief), flexible, adaptable, and a powerfully multi-vocal mechanism for “calling out” the abuses of power, scandalous hypocrisy, and cultures of deflection and denial.³⁰ LOUDfence draws upon a deep cultural reservoir of symbolism and creative praxis to deploy similar imaginative strategies to those interrogated by Marion Bowman and Ulo Valk in their ethnographic survey of vernacular religion across different Christian and spiritual traditions.³¹ As Molly Farneth has argued within a US context, attention to the rituals people create, maintain, and transform offers insight into dynamic and accessible strategies available to forge community, rebalance power, and heal breaches of trust and faith.³² LOUDfence's aspirations to “depth sound” the abuse crisis in the Catholic and Anglican Churches are “encoded” in the ribbons fluttering on fences—and the rituals devised to complement their

²⁸ “Catholic Church Abuse: Cardinal Vincent Nichols Criticised over Leadership,” *BBC News*, November 10, 2020, www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-54889033; Christopher Lamb, “Claims against Cardinal Cormac Murphy-O'Connor ‘Lacked Credibility,’” *The Tablet*, September 29, 2018, www.thetablet.co.uk/news/10798/claims-against-cardinal-cormac-murphy-o-connor-lacked-credibility-

²⁹ Sarah Corbett and Sarah Housley, “The Craftivist Collective Guide to Craftivism,” *Utopian Studies* 22, no. 2 (2011): 344–351.

³⁰ Deborah Dash Moore, ed., *Vernacular Religion: Collected Essays of Leonard Norman Primiano* (New York: New York University Press, 2022).

³¹ Marion Bowman and Ulo Valk, *Vernacular Religion in Everyday Life: Expressions of Belief* (London: Routledge, 2012).

³² Molly Farneth, *The Politics of Ritual* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2023).

installation—yet this seemingly simple and abstract visual signalling is readily decipherable and symbolically powerful.

LISTENING IN STEREO: AMPLIFYING DIVERGENT AND DISCORDANT VOICES

As will be apparent from this case study, a LOUDfence is an intentionally temporary and ephemeral memorialization—often a temporary fence or guy line will be erected to display ribbons (as at Liverpool Catholic Cathedral on March 9, 2024)³³—and like a performance, this makes the commemorative process a living, organic, customisable, and potentially iterative occurrence. The Anglican diocese of Carlisle, for example is preparing for its fourth LOUDfence, as part of a designated “safeguarding season” or annual period of lamentation (for perpetrators and bystanders), and within his pastoral message in October 2023, the bishop of Penrith gave thanks for this period of focused listening and learning, implicitly referencing earlier LOUDfence events as staging posts in the diocese’s learning about praxis-oriented actions to make the church a safer environment.³⁴

These more ephemeral approaches might be contrasted with recommendation 17.6 of the Australian Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to CSA, which suggested the building of a national and permanent memorial for victims and survivors in the vein of holocaust memorials or the National September 11 Memorial Museum.³⁵ An initial design of glass archways, called *Transparency and Truth*, won an artistic competition in 2021, with construction timetabled to begin this year.³⁶ However, insurmountable structural difficulties have required the Australian government to reopen the competition design for a new tender, and the costs for the planned 2026 launch have spiralled to \$7.9 million Australian dollars.³⁷ An academic involved in the French equivalent investigation, CIASE, has

³³ “LOUDfence: Catholics and Anglicans Stand Together against Abuse,” www.liverpoolcatholic.org.uk/news/loudfence-catholic-and-anglican-churches-stand-together-against-abuse.

³⁴ “Diocese of Carlisle, Safeguarding Season October 15—November 3, 2023,” www.youtube.com/watch?v=6DEHQhBkMRY.

³⁵ Stephanie N. Arel, *Bearing Witness: The Wounds of Mass Trauma at Memorial Museums* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2023).

³⁶ “National Memorial for Victims and Survivors of Institutional Child Sexual Abuse,” www.dss.gov.au/families-and-children-programs-services-children/national-memorial-for-victims-and-survivors-of-institutional-child-sexual-abuse.

³⁷ ABC News, www.dailymotion.com/video/x8yv2jm.

also recommended a permanent memorial,³⁸ but the focus of attention in that national jurisdiction presently seems to be redress and legal compensation.³⁹

The danger of aiming for a more permanent memorial—in the vein of the “sites of conscience” movement⁴⁰—is that whatever is created or erected needs to be recognisable and meaningful to a broad range of victim-survivors and must not signal completion, “turning of the page,” or “moving on” with undue identification with (or containment to) one site and constituency. Community-engagement workers and trauma-informed artists are acutely aware of and wrestling with these complexities and ambiguities. In Ballarat, the in-progress CSA memorial (sponsored by the Council and part-funded by the Australian government) is called “Continuous Voices” in recognition that any commemoration needs to be backward-facing *and* forward looking, resonating with the many CSA experiences gathered in and offering opportunities for spatial (and ritual) amplification.⁴¹

The LOUDfence movement in the UK—if we can call it that—implicitly recognises that an iterative, incremental, and evolving redress, annexed to a healing and reparative process—needs to be part of any memorialization plan. Scholars analysing the interpersonal dynamics of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa, or community reintegration actions after “the Troubles” in Northern Ireland, have devised a “staircase model of intergroup apologies,” which analyses and conceptualises the sequencing and deepening of a pathway to reconciliation and transitional justice.⁴² A LOUDfence is a *moving* memorial—emotionally and literally. It is a mobile, portable, pop-up, and simple display—requiring minimal financial outlay and relatively little time to assemble. It relocates to

³⁸ Alice d’Oléon, “A Memorial for Clergy Abuse Victims is a Must, Says Advocate,” *La Croix International*, November 6, 2023, international.la-croix.com/news/ethics/a-memorial-for-clergy-abuse-victims-is-a-must-says-advocate/18645.

³⁹ Christophe Henning, “Nearly 1,400 Sex Abuse Victims Seek Compensation from the Catholic Church in France,” *La Croix International*, March 15, 2024, international.la-croix.com/religion/nearly-1400-sex-abuse-victims-seek-compensation-from-catholic-church-in-france.

⁴⁰ See www.sitesofconscience.org/?gad_source=1&gclid=CjwKCAjw7NmzBhBLEiwAxxRHQ-aob2vQSSB1d4U1-4or_AY7ulQHN29M3TsdYNwRzWe03RJAGNcB0DxoC_KMQAvD_BwE.

⁴¹ “Compassion through Creative Art, Continuous Voices,” www.creativeballarat.com.au/continuousvoices.

⁴² Michael J. A. Wohl, Matthew J. Hornsey, and Catherine R. Philpot, “A Critical Review of Official Public Apologies: Aims, Pitfalls, and a Staircase Model of Effectiveness,” *Social Issues and Policy Review* 5, no. 1 (2011): 70–100; Samuel J. Nunney and Antony S. R. Manstead, “Step by Step: Testing the Staircase Model of Intergroup Apologies,” *European Journal of Social Psychology* 51, no. 3 (2021): 538–550.

the places it is called and modulates slightly with each move. The Cardiff Cathedral LOUDfence (October 21, 2023) featured “love spoons” (carved wooden tokens of love) *ex votos* for messages. Similarly, the LOUDfence staged in Oban (June 30–July 1, 2024) was co-hosted by the Church of Scotland and Catholic diocese of Argyll and the Isles featuring tartan ribbons, a bagpipe lament, and messaging in both English and Scots Gaelic. This form of “listening memorial,” co-produced and evolving as attendees participate in its creation, is cumulative, stepped, and staggered, but also increasingly symphonic.

The “listening” is also reciprocal and dialogical—victim survivor groups in a LOUDfence location work with (lay) church safeguarding officers and are brought into structured, focused, and purposeful conversations with the clergy and bishop. In Newcastle, some of those who attended the LOUDfence and disclosed their abuse there to a clergy or safeguarding staff member have now initiated investigations and are accessing support structures, alongside functioning as an informal advisory group. Dialogue that is opened out, often for the first time around the event preparation, continues after a LOUDfence formally “ends” with new initiatives (clergy training, pastoral reviews) and often preparations for another LOUDfence as an annual event.

One powerful example of a follow-up activity from a LOUDfence held in Birmingham across May 7–13, 2023, is the “Love in the Heart of the Church” initiative. Ribbons from St. Chad’s Catholic Cathedral fence were added to the LOUDfence ribbons collected from St. Philip’s Anglican Cathedral LOUDfence (October 3–9, 2022) as a mark of ecumenical acknowledgement of CSA survivors in the Catholic and Anglican dioceses. On September 9, 2023, fibre artist Mahawa Keita and an ecumenical group of survivors took part in a workshop to weave the ribbons,⁴³ symbolising connection, compassion, and care, into an altar piece. The textile “icon” situated deliberately behind the altar and between two candles, is permanently displayed in St. Philip’s Cathedral in Birmingham and will travel, as a peripatetic memorial object, to a suburban parish in the diocese this September 2024.

Green shoots are emerging from this intense activity over nearly three years in parish churches and cathedral across Britain, sparking new conversations, rippling waves of effect/affect, and even some signs of thaw, *rapprochement*, and *metanoia*. Some of this culture change emerges merely from the initial planning and execution stages,

⁴³ “LOUDfence Ribbons Make Artwork to Recognise Abuse Victims and Survivors,” www.birminghamdiocese.org.uk/news/loudfence-ribbons-make-artwork-to-recognise-abuse-victims-and-survivors.

with clergy confessing they have “never met a survivor” and were therefore initially fearful of “saying the wrong thing” or “not knowing what to do.” Usually there is a great deal of anxiety and reticence in the lead-up to a LOUDfence, swinging paradoxically between the emotional extremes of disengagement and scepticism (wondering whether something so simple will make help or have any impact at all) to the other emotional dial of extreme fear and trepidation of “opening Pandora’s box” with risk of reinjury, offence, and protest, or escalated litigation. The nearly two dozen LOUDfences held have required time, patience, and trust to surmount these fears, dissociation tactics, and silencing cultural taboos.

From in-progress research on the effect of a LOUDfence after its staging, it appears that those actively involved in these occasions report an increase in *understanding* trauma and *emotional intelligence*. This is most acute for supportive clergy, who speak of the humility and vulnerability of listening to survivors’ testimonies and reassuring people that they are seen, believed, and will be helped (where the professional safeguarding team then step in). Bishops who have held a LOUDfence have welcomed addressing “the elephant in the room” and, realized that the church needs to “own” this dark and shameful history and the toxic cultures that have incubated the abuse, draw lessons, and work proactively (rather than defensively and evasively). In one diocese, following their first LOUDfence, refreshed “professional development” courses were initiated in the seminary, with compulsory retraining instated for existing clergy. In another diocese, a consultancy organization has been started by victim-survivor trainers (one of whom is a priest) who are leading practical, candid, and child-centred conversations about CSA disclosures, sex education, and safeguarding practises in Catholic schools.⁴⁴

The visual and sonic power of a LOUDfence, with its ribbons blowing on a church railing and communicative repertoires for sounding out spaces profoundly damaged by abuse, is well testified by the Day of Prayer for Victims and Survivors held at St. Anne’s parish church in Buxton, diocese of Nottingham on April 24, 2024. This was a particularly poignant and powerful occasion that brought together a hurt and grieving community following the jailing in 2012 of their former parish priest, Paul Cullen, for abuse of three young children in the 1980s. He died in prison in 2018 while serving a custodial sentence. Alongside a powerful photo of Bishop Patrick and clergy prostrating themselves before the altar which circulated widely on social media, the parishioner-designed installations throughout the church included a prayer tree for handwritten messages and a painting

⁴⁴ See “Survivor Training—Beyond Just Words,” survivortraining.org.uk/category/who-we-are/.

in the Lady Chapel, evocative of the #metoo movement, urging people to overcome silence. The LOUDfence in that parish is still “up” five months later, as the continuing presence of the ribbons and installations in the church function as a prompt for conversations and ongoing recovery work.

It remains to be seen what other cultural semiotics will be harnessed to a LOUDfence when it moves beyond a UK setting. The French sister movement *Rubans contre l’oubli* often uses heart-shaped tag cards and (ribbon-laden) temporary fencing in their transportable LOUDfence events. In one sense, LOUDfence already operates transnationally through the digital space, with extensive use of Twitter/X to send, receive, and post messages of testimony, compassion, and support. The first American LOUDfence held on Sunday April 7, 2024 in Wheeling drew survivors from outside West Virginia through the reach of social media, and in the days following a CSA survivor retweeted a photo of a tag written for him (anonymously) and hung on the cathedral fence: “For Greg M., survivor of sexual abuse and trafficking, we see you and hear you and love you. We are sorry!” His accompanying tweet commentary read: “Someone DM’d me this photo and message earlier today. I was moved to tears that someone would think to include me. And on D[ivine] M[ercy] S[unday], I feel seen and cared for.”⁴⁵ Here is a form of speaking and listening circulating and recirculating, on a loop and amplified through social media, which mixes images and text, church devotionals (Divine Mercy Sunday) with extemporised, crowd-sourced rituals. Sometimes this speaking and listening is immediate and embodied, such as volunteer Patricia’s compassionate care—survivor to survivor—in offering comfort, privacy, and tissues at the Newcastle LOUDfence.⁴⁶ Conversations, exchanges, and disclosures often happen at a fence when ribbons are being tied and messages affixed, such as the survivor who evocatively communicated to me the personal impact of a LOUDfence for her:

I have had a public institutional apology for the first time [alongside the legal processes I have negotiated] and I now feel like my abuse has been taken into the heart of the institution, ingested like an antibiotic into the wounded body of Christ.

⁴⁵ “Me Name is Greg, @ElCaminoGreg,” x.com/HTH_Now/status/1778581547920277554.

⁴⁶ Patricia Debney and Alana Harris, “‘Praying for No More Empty Shoes’ alongside Survivors of Child Sexual Abuse,” *The Tablet*, April 25, 2024, www.thetablet.co.uk/blogs/1/2770/praying-for-no-more-empty-shoes-alongside-survivors-of-child-sexual-abuse.





Drawing powerfully on suggestive ecclesiological framings of the church as the Mystical Body of Christ, this survivor's insights chime with other reanimations of this ecclesial analogy, offering richly suggestive and queered theological analogies into the various wounds under which the contemporary church labours, including misogyny and homophobia, HIV/AIDS, and the destruction and injustices of the global ecological crisis.⁴⁷

CONCLUSION

A LOUDfence is not intended to be a substitute for legal, financial, and personal redress for victim-survivors, and care needs to be taken to ensure that this trauma-informed, creative, and highly adaptive mode of memorialization is not captured or co-opted by religious authorities as a form of virtue signalling or evasion of criminal and remedial responsibility. Nevertheless, when deployed as a

⁴⁷ Samuel Ernest, "HIV/AIDS Ecclesiology and Ruptures of the Body," *The Polyphony*, June 21, 2021, thepolyphony.org/2021/06/21/hiv-aids-ecclesiology-ruptures/.

complement to more individualized and formal accountability, its methodology can speak to the deeper, relational, and readily internalized healing and restitution envisaged through a “transitional justice” conceptual framework. The movement is also currently powered by a mostly feminized and voluntary labour force, which raises pertinent questions about women’s leadership and pastoral contributions within institutional Catholicism. If a specific and trained “survivor listening ministry” was to be launched, given the early stages of a serious exploration of this possibility in one English diocese, what would this skilled pastoral work mean for laywomen, with potential extension into a more formal diaconate ministry?

This article has explored the ways in which the LOUDfence movement is an example of an imaginative, survivor-led action for culture change in the church, through foregrounding its symbolic, even sacramental repertoire for speaking about violence, pain, and brokenness that resonates profoundly with a cruciform-shaped understanding of the church as the Mystical Body. It is unsurprising, therefore, that there is a deep seam of devotional tradition reanimated by the LOUDfence movement, including recourse to the Blessed Virgin Mary, with emerging vernacular theologies re-welcoming Mary as “the first safeguarder.”

Alongside this highly flexible and adaptable vocabulary—which communicates materially and metaphorically—a LOUDfence fosters new places for listening from its liminal place betwixt and between the inside-outside of the church and the slippage between the public and private spheres. This active listening, and the circulation of these messages of love, support, belief, and acceptance through physical and digital landscapes prompt us to venture forth and enlarge the space of our tent.⁴⁸ LOUDfences are models for active listening in a synodal church—avenues for survivors and survivor-allies to lament, speak truth to power, and demonstrate the experiences and insights of the *sensus fidelium*. They are excellent case studies for a synodal church needing to find ways to embrace “lived religion” and an “ordinary theology”—the affective, embodied, prosaic, and intensely practical theologizing of Christians (often women) who have received scant formal theological education but are drawing on profound faith resources and experiential insights at what Jeff Astley calls “the church’s front line.”⁴⁹

⁴⁸ “Working Document for the Continental Stage 2022,” www.synod.va/content/dam/synod/common/phases/continental-stage/dcs/Documento-Tappa-Continentale-EN.pdf.

⁴⁹ Jeff Astley, *Ordinary Theology: Looking, Listening, and Learning in Theology* (London: Routledge, 2022). See also Nancy Tatom Ammerman, *Studying Lived Religion: Contexts and Practices* (New York: New York University Press, 2021).

Material and embodied ways of listening and atoning are foregrounded in this movement, so it is little wonder that the next stage in its development is the inauguration of a National Pilgrimage of Reparation from October 18–20, 2024. Bringing together the Anglican and Catholic Archbishops of Wales, pilgrims gathered at St. Winefride's Holy Well in Flintshire and pray for healing and rebirth at a medieval site (1115 CE) recently dedicated to CSA survivors, given the saint's experience of sexual violence.⁵⁰ Tapping into a deep Catholic past and subterranean Celtic spirituality that embraced clootie wells, rag trees, holy wells, and powerful saints' shrines, there is an ancient and indigenous spiritual repertoire in the UK—with potential appeal to places beyond—being reanimated with synodal-like praxis to address a global epidemic⁵¹ acknowledged as “the Cross of the Moment.”⁵² **M**

Alana Harris is a trained theologian and historian of religion who works at King's College London. She has published extensively in the field of “lived religion,” and her interdisciplinary research focuses broadly on oral history testimony, gender and embodiment, materiality, and Catholic devotional cultures.

⁵⁰ “News Briefing: Britain and Ireland,” *The Tablet*, May 6, 2024, www.thetablet.co.uk/news/18704/news-briefing-britain-and-ireland.

⁵¹ Massimo Faggioli and Alana Harris, “Pursuing the Long Shadow over the ‘Domestic Church’: Toward a Global History of Abuse in Catholic Settings,” *Catholic Historical Review* 110, no. 2 (2024): 339–368.

⁵² Pat Jones, Marcus Pound, and Catherine Sexton, *The Cross of the Moment: A Report from the Boundary Breaking Project* (Durham: University of Durham, 2024), www.durham.ac.uk/media/durham-university/research-/research-centres/catholic-studies-centre-for-ccs/The-Cross-of-the-Moment_digital.pdf.