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## Event as Spiritual Pilgrimage: A Case Study of the 'Cherish' Christian Women's Conference

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# Event as Spiritual Pilgrimage: A Case Study of the 'Cherish' Christian Women's Conference

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In examining an aspect of the eventization of faith (Pfadenhauer, 2010), this article considers an annual women's conference, 'Cherish', a church-led event. Due to the pressures on the space available in its former home in the organising church's campus, the growth in the event's popularity has resulted in the church organisers moving the event venue to a commercial arena. The research questions the extent to which this popular conference meets the criteria of the academic characteristics of pilgrimage, and aims to clarify to what extent the thousands of women who attend the Cherish conference experience the event - and their journeys - as a spiritual pilgrimage, to which many return, year after year. Primary research was undertaken using an online questionnaire, with additional rich data sourced from the event's Twitter feed, going back to 2009, as well as the researcher's personal experience as an event attendee.

The research concludes that whilst these women make a physical and geographical journey, travelling across the UK and from around the world to this spiritual event, they also make a spiritual journey of inner transformation, and community-building. Many leave behind their everyday lives and their families for a temporary escape, to which they return, reinvigorated. Having moved the event location from a church campus into a commercial arena, the new site appears to be as acceptable as a holy space as the former venue, where the presence of the divine is still recognised, and the attendees grow together, confident in their new home, and bringing their community with them into a new city.

**Key Words:** eventization of faith, pilgrimage, spiritual journey, church event

## Introduction

This paper seeks to develop an understanding of the concept of eventization and its relationship to spiritual pilgrimage, focusing on 'Cherish', a Christian women's conference, held annually in Yorkshire, England.

The academic study of events management, whilst now two decades old, has, until recently, largely been limited to the consideration of logistical and strategic issues, assuming the existence of events as a positive element within society. However, the critique of culture by Adorno (1991), underpins more recent considerations of the hegemonic influence of events by Rojek (2013), and arguments of the dissenting nature of some events, by Lamond and Spracklen (2015). Earlier radical critics of social control, such as Debord (2012), accused the 'society of the spectacle' of leading people into 'a concrete inversion of life, an

autonomous movement of the nonliving' (2012: p. 32). Debord's 1960s challenge questioned whether we are living a truly social life, or simply an inauthentic representation. As bread and circuses were used to manipulate the Roman Empire's masses, the predominance of events in our lives today - and especially the spectacular aspects of many events - might logically correspond with Debord's Hegelian Marxist analytical perspective (Debord, 1998; Bunyard, 2009).

Religions in general, and the Church in particular, find themselves criticised by (secular) academic discourse for a range of reasons, including their historical role within the hegemonic cultural structure. Recently, Yancey, Reimer and O'Connell (2015) have reported the existence of significant academic antipathy towards the church, and especially towards evangelical Protestants.

With a worldview influenced by my position as an ordained priest in the Church of England, with over 30 years of practical and professional experience in events, as well as being an academic in events management, I have chosen to examine a specific church event from within. Hence, this paper stems from my professional interest in events and in church activities, and is combined with my own spiritual background and religious belief. The aforementioned developments in the emerging academic discourse of critical events studies have encouraged a search for deeper meanings in events that might previously have been taken for granted.

The 'eventization of faith', as introduced by Pfadenhauer (2010), applied the concept of experiential marketing to a study of an international Roman Catholic youth event held in Germany in 2005. Despite the overwhelming impact of the internet, forms of experiential marketing are increasingly foundational to the strategic approaches of many organisations today,

as they seek to engage customers' senses, inspire them to take action, and strengthen their commercial relationships. My wider research seeks to develop a deeper understanding of the conceptual issue of eventization, as it relates to the area of faith, focusing on the events-related activities of churches, mainly in England.

The historical origins of religious events (such as festivals, feasts, fasts and mystery plays) have evolved into what dominates much of the secular cultural post-modern landscape of today, in what might be seen as the eventization of life in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Similarly, ancient pilgrimages have formed the basis of modern tourism, and the consequential discourse within tourism studies considers the differences and similarities between a 'tourist' and a 'pilgrim'. Turner and Turner, cited in many other sources (including Gladstone, 2005: p. 170), concluded that 'a tourist is half a pilgrim, if a pilgrim is half a tourist' (Turner and Turner, 1978: p. 20). The aim of this paper is to add to

**Figure 1 : Women Congregating Outside the FDArena, May 2015**



R Dowson, 2015

the debate on pilgrimage, considering identity and gender aspects, and identifying the rituals, traditions and motivations of a group of thousands of Christian women who attend the Cherish conference each year. The development of this event is traced over its fifteen-year history, and the research seeks to relate the experiences of the women attending the event to the concept of pilgrimage. This review is made more complex because in 2014, the event organisers, Life Church Bradford, moved from the event's initial location in their church campus in Bradford, Yorkshire, to the newly opened First Direct Arena (FDArena) in Leeds, led mainly by capacity restraints on the original church venue. The impact of this development is explored, as the venue moved from what many might define as a spiritual home in a sacred space, to a commercial arena, analysing the event through the lens of this concept of pilgrimage, as experienced by event participants. The FDArena is owned by the local council (<https://www.smg-europe.com/venues/10/first-direct-arena/>), but managed by SMG, a leading venue management company (<http://www.firstdirectarena.com/venue-information/>).

Life Church positions and connects itself with global worship brands such as the Australian Hillsong (<https://hillsong.com/>) and other megachurches (mainly American). The international flavour of Life Church and its conferences, as well as the increasingly global itineraries of its leaders and worship team demonstrate the power of its relationships with such megachurch organisations.

This paper asks, to what extent do the thousands of women who attend the Cherish conference experience the event - and their journeys - as a spiritual pilgrimage, to which many return, year after year. Observation analysis supports my personal experience of this event, having attended over seven times: alone, as well as along with friends, family members, local, UK-wide and international participants.

## Literature Review

Whilst pilgrimages have been undertaken for thousands of years, Christian pilgrimage began with the reign of Emperor Constantine, in the 4<sup>th</sup> century AD (Coleman and Elsner, 1995; Ron, 2009; Manchala, 2014). In developing his typology of contemporary religious travel, Ron assesses the range of definitions of pilgrimages and their characteristics, arguing that there is an inconsistent variance between 'narrow and formal' and 'broad and informal' definitions

(2009:289). Many scholars have entered the discussion about the relationship between a pilgrim and a tourist, and Ron chooses a narrower definition in creating his typology, concluding that 'Christian Conferences and Conventions' fall within the non-pilgrimage forms of Christian travel (2009, p290). It is this aspect that I wish to examine in more detail; in order to undertake such an assessment, it is necessary to identify the different characteristics that are suggested in academic literature, to identify what pilgrims do, and who they are. The section below lists the characteristics so identified.

The characteristics of pilgrimage are wide-ranging, beginning with the immediately obvious: a journey that involves physically travelling (Glazier, 1992; Barber, 1993; Cohen, 1979; Digance, 2006; Olsen and Timothy, 2006), although there are debates about the significance of the length of the journey, with some aligning towards Turner's view of a unique journey to a faraway place, as opposed to a nearby pilgrimage that may be undertaken on a regular basis (Coleman and Eade, 2004; Dubisch, 1995)

Other sources focus on the more mystical inner journey (Singh, 2006; Digance, 2006; Sharpley and Sundaram, 2005), which may have a religious purpose, and be motivated by spiritual factors (Barber, 1993; Olsen and Timothy, 2006; Blackwell, 2007). An internal, spiritual purpose for pilgrimage may result in the pilgrim developing new understanding (Gladstone, 2005; Kaelber, 2006), or be undertaken for reasons of personal piety, to achieve expiation or salvation, to demonstrate religious devotion, and even to meet a sense of personal obligation (Digance, 2006). Pilgrims might search for and even expect to be rewarded with a mystical or magico-religious experience (Dubisch and Winkelmann, 2005; Digance, 2006) and experience a sense of worship and spiritual growth (Olsen and Timothy, 2006), of feeling closer to God, moving from meaninglessness to authentic existence (Cohen, 1979; Olsen and Timothy, 2006). This contrasts with a potential focus on consumption and experience, such as buying memorabilia (Evans, 1998; Olsen and Timothy, 2006).

A pilgrimage may be made to a specific holy or sacred site or place (Glazier, 1992; Barber, 1993; Cohen, 1979), or to experience a sacred atmosphere or a sense of place (Olsen and Timothy, 2006). Such an occurrence may be mediated through the intervention of a priest or a person in a similar role (Digance, 2006), and can have a number of different outcomes, such as the development of a sense of belonging

(Cohen, 1979), named by Turner and Turner as *communitas* (1978), although this aspect is challenged by Sallnow (1981), as noted by Dubisch (1995). Such community formation could occur during or after a pilgrimage encounter (Olsen and Timothy, 2006).

A pilgrimage is a time of liminality (van Gennep, 1960; Badone and Roseman, 2004; Collins-Kreiner, Klot, Mansfeld and Sagi, 2006), a period of transition from the mundane secular humdrum world of everyday existence to a special and sacred state, offering temporary escape from the realities of life. In contrast to the sacred focus, this might include 'me time', and an opportunity for pleasure seeking (Digance, 2006). Education of the self and others may also occur (Olsen and Timothy, 2006), leading to experiential learning in a way that is not possible from books (Borley, 2000; Cohen, 2006) - transformational, transcendent, life-changing experiences (Coleman and Eade, 2004; Digance, 2006; Herrero and Roseman, 2015). Rituals can form a key part of the pilgrimage, at any stage of the journey or any part of the experience (Olsen and Timothy, 2006). The characteristics above will be used to identify correlations in the responses to the primary research.

A brief exploration of the role of gender in pilgrimage, examining women's involvement in pilgrimage from an historical perspective, begins in ancient times with the travels of wealthy Jewish women to the Temple in Jerusalem, as an expression of their piety, with records dating from the 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE (Kanarek, 2015). These examples showed that these pilgrim women often travelled together with other female relatives; sisters, mothers, daughters, grandmothers. In Medieval times, the subordinate role of women in society and their position within the household as subject to their husband or father (Mecham, 2008), made distant travel for pilgrimage difficult, and as a result, such journeys were often made closer to home, to minimise the impact on their domestic responsibilities (Bailey, 2012). These women brought with them gifts, of goods they had made themselves, such as 'kerchiefs, towels, jewellery, and similar objects of a domestic and personal nature' (Mecham, 2008:585), and liturgical objects, but also made financial gifts to support female and male religious communities and charitable works (although money was more commonly given by men). Such pilgrimages were noted for their 'shared devotional culture' (Mecham, 2008:611), and female pilgrims also faced hardships, giving up comfort on their journey 'in return for spiritual reward' (Bailey, 2012: 294).

Bailey's interpretation of Dubisch's research found examples of women pilgrims:

*expressing their faith in a characteristically feminine way: by weeping and wailing, and acting out 'emotion-laden dramas'* (Bailey, 2013:493).

This female emotional behaviour was part of a 'powerful public performance of self' in a gendered 'performance space... in which they can express emotion, socialize with others, and find legitimate time away from family and home' (Bailey, 2013:493, citing Dubisch, 1995:218). Control of pilgrimage space in the Middle Ages was by male clergy, and in the 13<sup>th</sup> Century, Pope Boniface limited opportunities for women to make pilgrimage journeys by legislation (Webb, 1998:22).

Events may involve a blurring of the boundaries between what is sacred and profane (Ostwalt, 2012), which on the face of it sounds controversial, but in reality, the green running man health and safety symbol placed above a church exit can sit alongside the holiest place, the altar. In the same way, event content can range from the sacred to the profane, linking to the requirement of pilgrimage to provide meals and accommodation, as well as 'a host of secular attractions and entertainments' (Putter, 1998:38), in addition to more pious and spiritual aspects.

One of the characteristics of pilgrimage, noted above, considers the relationships between individuals undertaking a pilgrimage or attending an event, defined as 'communitas' by Turner (2012, p. 169), in which a state of oneness and equality is experienced. As a structuralist, Turner developed a definition of ritual that stemmed from his recognition of life as:

*performance - as literature, as theatre, as storytelling, as game, as a movie script or scenario, or as a symphonic composition* (Abrahams, 1969:vii).

In this vein, pilgrimage and other events are clearly in line with these other activities that describe the ways in which people celebrate together, living life as a group (Dowson, 2015), experiencing a sense of solidarity (Esposito, 2010), during the period of the event or pilgrimage. Turner's anthropological roots emerged from van Gennep's (1960) analytic framework that identified structure in ritual: beginning with 'separation from the everyday' into a 'ritual world removed from time and space' (Abrahams, 1969:ix), a liminal space that is visible within the concept of pilgrimage. Van Gennep identified rites of passage that opened up in

that time and space, in which the normal structures of society were released, and in the social fabric of those activities (Block, 2008), according to Turner (2012), a new community was formed. Falassi (1967) also developed a model that identified and defined different types of ritual, and these will be examined later, in the light of the Cherish conference experience.

A theology of space and place may be related to the church tradition, to the leadership of the church, or even to individuals. Whether places are sacralised by actions (according to Grimes, 2006), or whether they are sacred in and of themselves (Smith, 1987; Smith, 2004), it is clear that church buildings are normally viewed as sacred. But what happens when a sacred activity (or an event with sacred content) is moved into an ostensibly secular venue?

These theoretical aspects will be explored and applied to the research data available.

### Background to the Event

Since the 1970s, Christian festivals have emerged in the UK, such as the overtly political, theologically liberal, music and arts-based Greenbelt, traditionally held over the final weekend in August (<http://www.greenbelt.org.uk/about/history>). The activist evangelical Spring Harvest, aiming to 'equip the church for action' (<http://www.springharvest.org/our-history>), is based at various Butlins Holiday Camps for several weeks over the Easter period. Since 1989, the New Wine leadership conference has been held annually (George, 2013; <http://www.new-wine.org/home/about-us>).

For Life Church (<http://www.lifechurchhome.com/>) (which emerged from the events-focused Covenant Ministries), since the late 1990s, events have formed an important part of the church's culture, categorising them as opportunities 'to create vibrant life-giving events for existing Christians, for discipleship and development' (Dowson, 2012b). According to a former pastor at the church, their initial 'Worship and Word' combination of events built on internal strengths, and evolved over time into four larger annual conferences (Cherish, Excel, Rock Nations, and Stronger), produced for the benefit of the wider church. These events sprang from a conviction by the church's leaders that 'we felt God say to us that we should just build this church as strong as we could, as large as we could, and then from it, be a resource to the body of Christ' (Dowson, 2012b). The overall purpose of these

events was to enrich, inform, and help equip the wider church, sharing what they had learned as a church, to help other churches develop. For over fifteen years the church has run these annual conferences, utilising its state-of-the-art technical facilities and meeting spaces, including its very own on-site Starbucks. The primary event in this itinerary is the women's conference, Cherish (<http://www.lifechurchhome.com/conferences/cherish/>), which has a strong sense of being the brainchild of Charlotte Gambill, (<http://charlottegambill.com/>) a Senior Pastor at the church, and her team.

The Cherish conference is held during the school holiday week that sits in the UK's end-of-May Bank Holiday, over a three-day period. Following increasing attendances, the organisers at Life Church (then called Abundant Life Church) decided to run the event twice, back-to-back, with Conference 1 starting with Day 1 on the afternoon of the Bank Holiday Monday, and running until the evening of Day 3 on the Wednesday, and Conference 2 held from Thursday afternoon to Saturday evening, with guest speakers preaching to overflowing congregations at the church's Sunday services the next day. However, by 2012, there were strong concerns amongst the church's leaders about the negative effect that repeating the conference was having on their staff and volunteers, as well as on the local and international speakers (Dowson, 2012). The numbers attending were increasing so strongly that they considered running the conference three times back-to-back, but the impending completion of the new Arena in the nearby city of Leeds caused them to consider taking the event offsite. Concerns were expressed by a former pastor at the church:

*our instinct is to say, it will lose something immediately, because what people experience when they come here, is the church (Dowson, 2012b).*

But, by 2013, the decision had been taken to move Cherish to the First Direct Arena in Leeds, soon after the new venue opened in 2014.

Challenges included meeting the significant additional financial cost of hiring an external venue, but perhaps more importantly, there was the question of whether the event would have the same dynamic. There was no way of knowing how much of the success of Cherish was linked to it being attached to the church and its campus. An alternate view was that Cherish was more connected to the church leaders, rather than the church buildings, that:

Figure 2 : Evening Worship Session at the 2015 Conference:



R. Dowson, 2015

*actually Charlotte IS Cherish. And that wherever she turned up and did her thing, the Cherish Girls would follow* (Dowson, 2012b).

The organisers were aware of other churches that had made the leap, such as the Australian megachurch, Hillsong, which had also run conferences in their own church venues in Sydney, but after the Olympics, they moved to the Olympic Arena. In the UK, the Anglican church, Holy Trinity, Brompton (known as HTB; [www.htb.org/](http://www.htb.org/)), home of the massively successful Alpha Course ([www.alpha.org](http://www.alpha.org)), moved an event to Earls Court, in 2012.

The questions raised internally in this debate were:

*What do people gather round? What is the event around? Is it around the campus, or is it around the leadership, who wherever they go, potentially carry the ethos with them?* (Dowson, 2012b).

The Cherish format consists of three keynote speakers, including Charlotte Gambill, alternating so that each

one speaks once during the day sessions, and each takes an evening. Only on one occasion up to 2015, has the speaker not been female. Each preaching session can last up to an hour, preceded by at least half an hour of 'worship', but each session is dramatically begun by a specially-co-ordinated 'opener', produced and delivered by the in-house team of talented musicians, dancers, and technical experts, to look and sound at least as professional as many commercial equivalents.

At some point in the proceedings a guest musician features (such as Natalie Grant), or a band, usually from a connected international church, such as the California-based Bethel Music Collective, or Australia's Hillsong, and frequently a children's choir from the African charity, Watoto ([www.watoto.com](http://www.watoto.com)). Charities and giving play a significant part in the conference, with regular opportunities being provided, to donate to a range of charities with which Cherish is connected. By Day Two, the evening sessions are preceded by an activity that resembles a modern-day version of the 1970s 'It's a Knockout' or even Takeshi's castle, as women queue up to participate in

crazy activities, spurred on by a (male) comedy duo who also happen to be pastors in the church. The non-serious side of Cherish emerges in many sessions, from the in-house boy-band and the presentation of a gift memento of the event to each participant, to free ice-cream and hand-decorated cupcakes handed out to all attendees during the extremely short comfort breaks. The original format appears to be similar to the Hillsong Australian 'Colours' event for women, described by an observer as 'essentially a women's lifestyle event, with sleek marketing, a stellar cast of speakers and strong worship to boot'. This local commentator remarked that in the UK, until Cherish, 'never before had women been able to go to a serious Christian conference and get a manicure or pedicure in between meetings!'. Such activities underline the emphasis of Cherish's leadership team to make this not only a female-friendly event, but 'girly' beyond all doubt.

The list of YouTube clips in Appendix 1 provide a flavour of the overall event, some officially produced, whilst others come from enthusiastic attendees, eager to share their experiences and the messages of the conference. Such productions offer additional views of the event from an insider perspective. In 2014, for the inaugural conference held at the First Direct Arena in Leeds, there were just under 5,000 women attending; by 2015, there were over 6,000, coming from across the UK, and from countries including South Africa, Australia and the USA, from Germany, Sweden and Norway.

So, the question inspired by Ron's (2009) typological model of contemporary Christian travel is whether (or to what extent), Cherish is religious event tourism, as Ron would argue, or pilgrimage?

### Method

This study is based on Cherish, an event that I have participated in at least seven times, over a period of ten years. As such, the approach and understanding of this research emanate from within the Cherish community, although I am not a member of the church that organises the event. The academic community is challenged to recognise the difficulty of viewing from within (an emic perspective) (Collins, 2005), as compared to an academic view from outside the Church. Being fluent in the language, customs and texts of an individual church facilitates the understandings and assumptions of that church and its activities, as opposed to the traditional academic 'etic'

view from 'outside'. However, this close relationship brings with it risks and dangers, in terms of making assumptions about meaning, and even resisting asking certain questions or drawing certain conclusions, for fear of damaging the relationship with the organisations or individuals involved.

An online questionnaire was developed to gauge the broad views of respondents, aimed at individuals (female and male) who had attended and / or worked at the event, whether based within the church organisation or not, and including those who worked at the new venue (since 2014). General invitations to participate were made through Facebook and Twitter, with a request for snowball sampling; however, due to slow response rates, this was repeated throughout August 2015, using specific contacts with known individuals on Twitter and Facebook, and some emails sent to those not on social media. However, although some 55 responses were gained using this method, it was not until September 2015 that an internal 'gatekeeper' facilitated access via the Cherish Facebook page, promoting the questionnaire and the research, resulting in almost 100 additional responses in a matter of days, resulting in a total of 146 responses. Additional detail was obtained by searching on social media (especially Twitter) using a range of hashtags, including #cherishconf #cherishgirls #cherish2015 #cherish2014 and so on, back to 2009, as well as using data from the official conference and church Twitter feeds and Facebook pages, and guest speakers' pages. The several thousands of tweets obtained provided extra data, and depth of evidence. In addition, the availability on YouTube of official Cherish videos produced by Life Church, and of unofficial videos released by event participants, provided another rich seam of data.

Questions aimed to build on the literature by applying the criteria for defining the concept of pilgrimage to the data obtained through primary research, whether from the questionnaire or social media. The questionnaire also included a range of demographic questions.

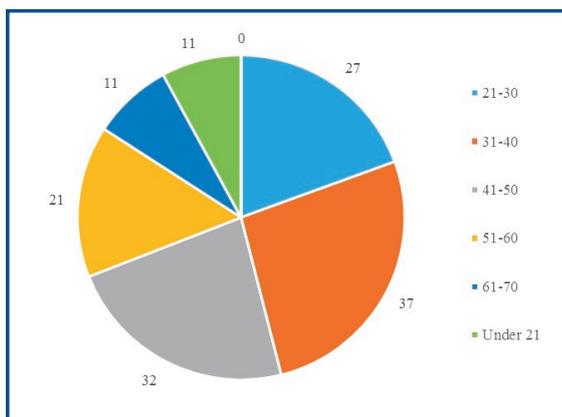
In keeping with the traditional approach to research on churches and their communities, Geertz's (1973) 'thick description' influences the method in this study, integrating the research into the specific UK church context and environment. This research paper is a precursor to a more in-depth ethnographic study for my PhD on the concept of eventization and church, in which similar questioning will be used, building on the

structure and data gathered here. The primary research is underpinned by my own observation analysis, attending and participating in Cherish and other events at a range of churches, and observing the way that events are planned, communicated and received within different church organisations. This emerging practice of autoethnographic studies (Bryman and Bell, 2011) within events management research positively challenges the significance of an author's own 'emotional subjectivity' in any research (Wright, 2011:8). This research has a deliberate element of autoethnography (Muncey, 2010), as a participant and observer, embedded within the Cherish event and culture over a ten year period.

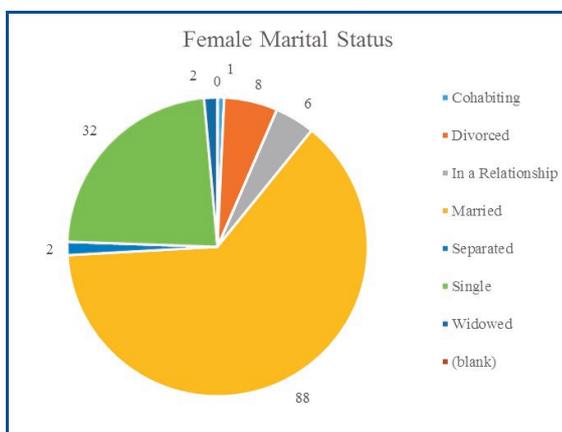
## Results and Discussion

The demographic profiles of the respondents are shown in the graphs below: of 146 responses, 95% were female. The level of international responses was not as wide as anticipated, knowing that groups and individuals attend the conference from countries as far

**Figure 3 : Female Age Groups**



**Figure 4 : Female Marital Status**



afield as South Africa, Australia and the USA, as well as from across the UK and Europe. Over 88% of respondents were from the UK, and although other respondents included individuals born in Nigeria, Zimbabwe, Australia, and several European countries, some of these respondents stated their usual place of residence as the UK.

Table 1 (a-d) assesses the attributes of the Cherish conference according to Falassi's (1967) typological model of ritual, using data gathered from the questionnaire responses, historical Twitter feeds, and personal experience of the researcher in participating in the event over a ten-year period, as well as previous research (Dowson, 2012).

So how do the Cherish conference organisers and participants use the language of pilgrimage? Starting with the description of event, its theme and purpose, Cherish marketing communications use phrases such as 'for the journey', or 'united in purpose, to share this journey', and 'the journey continues'. The title of one conference was 'in her shoes', evoking the pilgrimage concept of journeying. On Facebook, Cherish organisers describe the event as:

*more than a conference, it is a movement. It is full of fun moments, great speakers, special treats but above all it's about an army of women who gather together once a year to make a difference and to impact in this world* (<https://www.facebook.com/CherishConference/info?tab=overview>).

This aspiration mirrors some of the characteristics of pilgrimage, in community and shared identity. The primary research responses underline this sense of belonging to a movement, to being part of a 'sisterhood', and feelings of solidarity as identified in Turner's 'communitas'. However, in common with many commercialised pilgrim sites, concern is expressed by some, comparing the 'homely and welcoming' atmosphere of the church campus in stark contrast to the experience at the FDArena, described as being 'unfriendly', where they:

*don't get to speak to people. Busy rushing all over the place. Came home utterly exhausted but not in a good way as I experienced at Life Church.*

This mirrors the experiences of pilgrims visiting commercialised sites, where 'doing' activities take precedence over simply 'being' in a sacred space. However, many responses recognise that despite the

**Table 1a : Attributes of the Cherish Conference According to Falassi's (1967) Typological Model of Ritual**

Rites	Application to Cherish:
Rites of purification, cleansing, chasing away evil by fire / holy water / sacred relics / symbols	<p>As in the home church building itself, the FDArena has no permanent sacred objects or symbols. Instead, the usual visual and sound event paraphernalia are present, with large screens and banks of speakers, which dominate the stage area.</p> <p>Lacks formal or traditional written liturgy, but every session includes 'modern liturgy and traditions' (Dowson, 2012:91).</p> <p>At the end of every session, an 'altar call' takes place, usually with an extempore prayer of repentance and new beginnings offered. The informal dress code could be interpreted as symbolic of 'abundant life'.</p>
Rites of passage, marking transition from one stage of life to another, e.g. initiations	<p>In some respects, attending Cherish could be seen as a rite of passage in itself. When women meet, their first question is often, 'how many times have you been to Cherish?' Teenage girls are brought by their older female relatives, friends, or youth leaders.</p>
Rites of reversal, symbolic inversion e.g. (masks &) costumes; gender misidentification; role confusion; using sacred places for profane activities	<p>A former pastor observed about the organising church that:</p> <p><i>There are people who come here every week, and don't get involved in serving, they just come, they sit in the service, and they go. Now that's actually countercultural</i> (Dowson 2012:91).</p> <p>Similarly, when the event was held on the church campus, it would have been countercultural just to attend Cherish sessions and not participate any of the other activities offered. There were many opportunities then for Cherish attendees to participate in indoor and outdoor activities, before and after the conference sessions, until late into the night, from getting to know other participants whilst visiting Starbucks or one of the other refreshment centres; joining in a tea dance, or learning how to salsa on the decking outside the church; having a facial or a foot spa, or even getting your nails done; enjoying the themed décor, participating in workshops, visiting the exhibition or spending your money in the campus shops. But at the FDArena, entry and exit times for the building are strictly controlled by paid venue security staff, and one respondent, a male staff member at the church, voiced regret at this aspect, seeing</p> <p><i>the only positive from a delegate experience are the numbers. From a serving perspective it is just as much work and far less contact with the delegates.</i></p> <p>Whilst for some respondents, the former venue:</p> <p><i>felt like a special place that could not be replicated, a spiritual location where God's presence was felt as soon as you entered the campus.</i></p> <p>Yet, the FDArena has the 'Wow factor' and enables far more women to attend the event, in a different atmosphere. For some this is positive, worshipping with thousands of other women, whilst others mourn the loss of intimacy and a 'special place'. Falassi's notion of using sacred places for profane activities can be upended here, as the FDArena is essentially a secular, 'profane' space, becoming sacred purely for the duration of this event. A regular FDArena staff member recognised this, stating that</p> <p><i>[Cherish] opens my eyes to different beliefs to my own, and the amount of good people there are in the world; a world where the media only portrays the negatives and makes us depressed about society.</i></p> <p>Costumes are in evidence for boy-band entertainment sessions, dance routines, and the pre-evening warm-up session, resembling 'It's a Knockout', as well as the friendly male welcome team who stand outside the FDArena with their placards, sunny smiles and hugs. They are also evident in the final evening's Cherish Foundation awards ceremony, which replicates the glitter and glamour of any red carpet event.</p>

**Table 1b : Attributes of the Cherish Conference According to Falassi's (1967) Typological Model of Ritual (Cont.)**

Rites	Application to Cherish:
<p>Rites of conspicuous display, objects of high symbolic value put on display, touched or worshipped; used in processions; guardians and social / political/ religious elite display their powers</p>	<p>In contrast to most churches, Life Church (and the Cherish conference) does not hold traditional religious objects in high regard, or of sacred purpose. However the state-of-the-art sound system and music equipment includes guitars costing thousands of pounds each. Equally, the in-house and guest musicians add to the sense of awe and worship, enabling 'time out with the Holy Spirit' and an 'encounter with God'.</p> <p>The church campus has its own Starbucks, a feature that almost appears to be the subject of worship by caffeine fans, as women proudly display the iconic logo. The FDArena holds no such luxury, so many women bring their coffee in from outside.</p> <p>Charlotte Gambill, the Cherish founder, often appears bejewelled and dressed in her 'Sunday best', as do many of the women attendees. But it is through her skills of oratory that she displays her powers, engaging rapt attention for 40 minutes and more, the whole space silent, or roaring with laughter or tears.</p> <p>An important aspect of the conference that often ties in with this theme is that of giving gifts. Cherish attendees bring with them specific items that will be given away through the church connections, and these are displayed prominently within the event space. Past gift themes have included school bags and rucksacks, warm nightwear for older ladies, children's shoes, or items for premature babies and their mothers. The Cherish Foundation awards have included gifts of cars, holidays and home improvements; in the church venue, the cars would be displayed in the entrance foyer or even in the main hall.</p> <p>A lavish Green Room for speakers, with after-parties each evening and even reserved seats for church groups indicate elements of conspicuous display.</p>
<p>Rites of conspicuous consumption, feasts, food &amp; drink; gifts showered on guests; sacred (Holy) communion</p>	<p>Green Room and post-conference feasts and after-parties for speakers and special guests.</p> <p>On the church campus, Cherish participants could share in tea-parties and coffees at Starbucks; at FDArena the throng of women delegates leave the venue and converge on Leeds city centre restaurants at break-times, filling the city centre.</p> <p>As well as giving gifts, Cherish attendees receive free gifts such as a necklace or photograph frame bearing the Cherish brand, and end-of-session treats, including handmade cupcakes or even ice-cream.</p> <p>The Cherish Foundation awards - usually a holiday or home improvements - are funded by monetary gifts from the Cherish conference attendees the previous year, and given to women, nominated by their friends, who display courage in adversity. During the ceremony, award winners also receive a goody-box and a beautiful arrangement of</p>
<p>Ritual dramas, retelling of myths and legends or historical re-enactment</p>	<p>Biblical readings mainly come from The Message version of the Bible, providing a more accessible language in comparison to many traditional churches. Whilst the conference is unlikely to include biblical exegesis, the 40-minute plus preaching sessions include telling and re-telling Bible stories as well as personal histories and relevant anecdotes.</p> <p>Dance plays an important role in the Cherish conference, as the talented in-house dance team puts on a dramatic display to introduce each evening session, accompanied by the musicians.</p> <p>Pre-recorded videos enable the sharing of testimonies of speakers, guests and charities supported by the conference, including Compassion (<a href="https://www.compassionuk.org/">https://www.compassionuk.org/</a>) which enables the sponsorship of individual children, and the Watoto children's choir made up of orphans from Uganda (<a href="http://www.watoto.com/the-choir">http://www.watoto.com/the-choir</a>).</p> <p>The Cherish conference pre-session entertainment or 'warm-up' routine is based on a game show format includes ritual dramas (Dowson, 2012)</p>

**Table 1.c : Attributes of the Cherish Conference According to Falassi's (1967) Typological Model of Ritual (Cont.)**

Rites	Application to Cherish:
Rites of exchange, from commerce - buying and selling - to gift exchanges and charitable donations	<p>The conference resources shop sells event-branded clothing, music, DVDs and books, CDs of the talks, as well as publications by the guest speakers and the home church leadership.</p> <p>Exhibition stands advertise a range of connected charities and activities undertaken by the church, including the Life Church College, (<a href="http://www.lifechurchhome.com/college/">http://www.lifechurchhome.com/college/</a>), formerly known as 'Academy', a one-year fee-paying, accredited leadership course, with participants from around the world.</p> <p>At every Cherish conference, the participants receive a gift, given out at the end of a morning session by young men dressed in tuxedos. These gifts are all Cherish-branded and have included slipper-socks, necklaces, bracelets, photo frames and a pair of angel wings.</p> <p>The cost of the Cherish conference itself is a rite of exchange, with attendance fees around £60 per person. It is a common practice for women to buy more tickets than they need and give them away, either to friends, or to people they don't know (via the registration desk on the day, or using social media to make connections). A discount is available for early-bird purchases and group bookings; attendees at one year's conference are strongly urged to buy their ticket for the following year whilst they are on site.</p> <p>The Cherish Foundation awards are supported financially by donations from conference attendees, and awards have included cars, home makeovers and holidays, for women who have faced adversity.</p> <p>Charitable donations and talks by charity representatives are a regular focus of the event, usually timed to follow 'Cherish News' (the equivalent of the notices in a traditional church, or even a cinema advertising break), which focuses on giving at every session, whether to charities, to the church, to the conference, or to the guest speakers. The church and the conference show none of the (British) reticence when talking about giving money. Donations can be made through cash giving, cheques, completing the forms on the back of printed envelopes with debit or credit-card details, and more recently, text-giving by mobile phone.</p> <p>The exhibition stands include specific charities which are closely linked to the conference (and to the church), such as A21, Mercy Ministries, Hope for Justice, Watoto, as well as the church's own activities (Life Church College).</p>
Rites of competition, games, sports, contests of all kinds either highly unpredictable and merit-based or ritualized and predictable	<p>End-of-session rituals include an altar call, which can feel competitive, as attendees are given 'just one more opportunity', 'one more chance' to come forward.</p> <p>The session where the children's charity - Compassion - is promoted, culminates in the offering of children's photographs for sponsorship of individual children. In 2015, over 500 children were accepted for sponsorship by Cherish participants.</p> <p>The pre-evening session 'warm-up' routines are much like 'It's a knockout' or 'Get me out of here' game shows, with contests trying to win prizes, such as a free ticket for the following year.</p>

greater size of the new venue, it is still possible to connect spiritually in a powerful way, and for some this element becomes more compelling as a result of the growth in size of the group. Even in the entertainment environment of an arena, it is possible to experience a sense of transcendence, a transformational, life changing encounter, just as traditional pilgrims would, where the oneness that is experienced has both spiritual and physical significance.

Worship in the sessions, in terms of singing sacred songs and modern hymns, facilitates a spiritually-charged atmosphere of connection with the divine,

whether in the church building or in the Arena – again, some report a more powerful encounter in the larger space, whilst others find the new location detracts from their spiritual experience and enjoyment of the event.

The decision to move venues is appreciated, especially for practical reasons, as 'the capacity was reaching its limit it meant things such as toilet queues, coffee breaks etc. took a long time and meant some people missed out'. Whilst for some, the benefit of moving to a larger space with greater numerical potential is outweighed by negative consequences, where the event

*seems rather big and more like a concert than a conference.*

**Table 1.d : Attributes of the Cherish Conference According to Falassi's (1967) Typological Model of Ritual (Cont.)**

Rites	Application to Cherish:
De-valorization rites, take place at the end of the event. Restoring normal time and space, closing ceremonies. Formal / informal farewells	<p>Whilst there is no actual altar in either the Life Church home campus, or in the FDArena, the process equivalent to an 'altar call' takes place at the end of each session.</p> <p>'Party on out' forms the end-of-Cherish spectacular, where the church's musicians and dancers perform a superb (secular) entertainment, as fountains of sparkles from confetti cannons fill the air.</p> <p>When the conference was held on the church campus, there were numerous opportunities for socialising once the formal sessions (and especially the evening sessions) had ended, as participants flocked into the Gallery coffee lounge, Starbucks and the resources shop, as well as the tea lounge where they could dance the night away, with no feeling of having to leave the campus. Afternoons were filled with treats, and delights such as foot massages and beauty treatments were on offer in the pamper rooms. Some social events took place, for example, the decking outside the church might host a salsa class. On departure from the campus, the volunteer host team were there to say goodbye, and even the car park team waving farewell as women left the campus.</p> <p>A big change (and some of the research responses indicate that this is a negative change) has occurred, now that the event is held in a commercial venue, rather than on the church campus. There is a difference in de-valorization rites for the conference. Professional venue security staff immediately usher participants out of the building through the nearest exit, curtailing the old rituals of shopping, coffee and joyful socialising with no feeling of time limits. Whereas women previously had the freedom to 'play out' on the safe space of the church campus during their time at the conference, the FDArena 'spits' the women out into the Leeds city centre, where they are free to go out, but many prefer to return to their hotels or homes. Farewells now take place on the concourse outside the FDArena.</p>

Others appreciate the possibilities that the new location brings, which

*[despite being] less welcoming, more impersonal, fewer home comforts, [has] more spaces and greater experience for others to be part of Cherish'.*

Members of the hosting church appreciate the opportunity, for themselves, to join in more, released from burdens of hospitality in the Arena, as most roles are undertaken by paid venue staff, rather than volunteers. Many of the responses are balanced, identifying benefits as well as disadvantages; They

*'miss the relaxed chill atmosphere of being at church, but the power of seeing people in an arena worshipping God far outweighs this [and although] it has lost the intimacy of Life Church . . . it is amazing how women are coming from far and wide to fill the arena. It is still a great event.*

Education and spiritual experience are key to pilgrimage; these aspects are found in the responses of Cherish participants, who are able to

*spend time with God without the distractions of home life. Listening to the speakers and*

*learning new ways of reaching others in our communities at home. Spending time with friends and meeting new friends.*

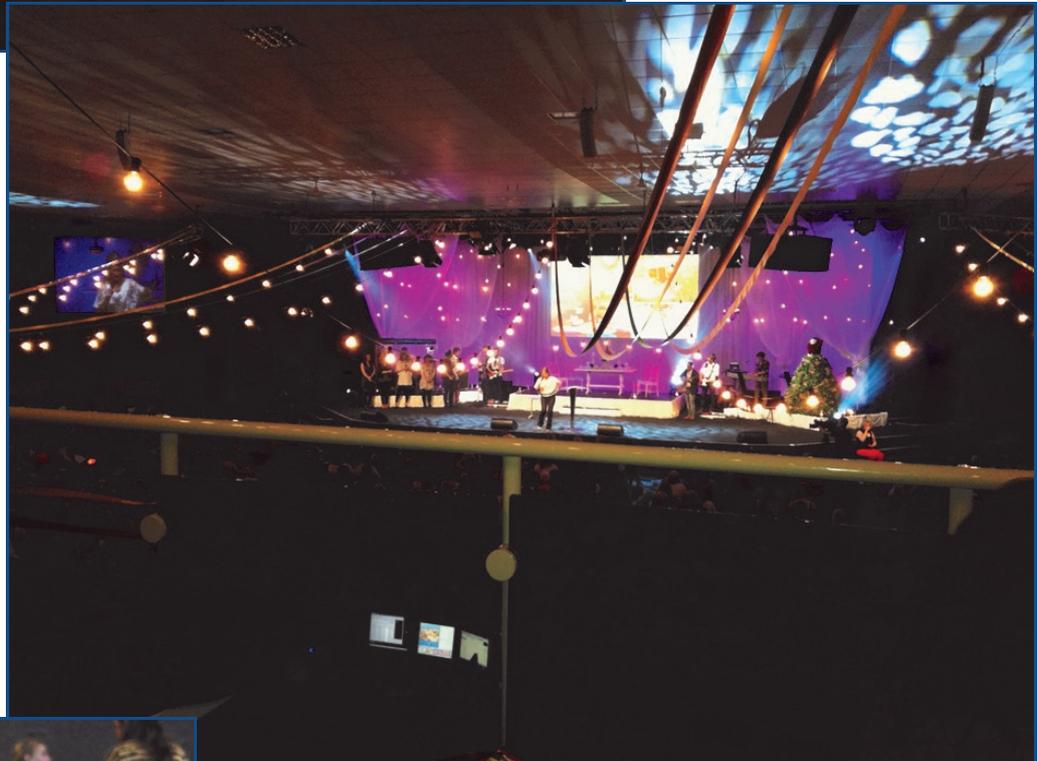
Although the home church might fundamentally disagree with the concept of priestly mediation, there is no doubt from experiencing numerous Cherish conferences, that the role of speakers includes that of educator, and some speakers (especially Charlotte Gambill), make spiritual interventions; for example in 2015, on several occasions, speakers announced that they were ditching their prepared words, following a strong sense of divine direction to build on the message of a previous speaker. Their powerful rhetoric is further underpinned by delivery of what is recognised by many conference attendees as 'prophetic' interventions.

The women take the opportunity to

*[stock up on] spiritual fuel/food, one chance in the year I get to (somewhat selfishly) leave my hubby and three children to fend for themselves and concentrate on learning, praising and enjoying the company of women with a common love - Jesus!'*

Thus, they are clearly replicating the medieval practices of early female pilgrims.

Figure 5 : Images of Cherish (and Starbucks!), Life Church, Bradford



Source: Author

**Figure 5 : Worship Session at the 2015 Conference:**

R. Dowson, 2015

Another common practice in pilgrimage is the purchase of memorabilia as part of the consumption experience; this too is found at Cherish, with many respondents enjoying shopping, both in the Cherish shop and in Leeds city centre, along with eating out and drinking coffee as specifically mentioned activities.

### **Conclusion**

So, in conclusion, to what extent is the Cherish women's conference a pilgrimage? Even utilising Ron's (2009) preference for a narrow definition of pilgrimage, there are key criteria of traditional pilgrimage that are met by the Cherish conference. The broader definition is even more applicable. For most of the women attending, there is a physical and geographical journey, as they travel from across the UK and come from countries around the world, even though hundreds of women attend the church at its main locations in nearby Bradford and in Leeds itself. More importantly, the women tell of their spiritual journeys, of inner transformation and experiencing the

transcendent, of feeling closer to God and at one with other participants. Many value the liminal space offered by the event, leaving behind their everyday lives along with their husbands and children, in exchange for a temporary escape, and to which they return reinvigorated. The change of venue from what might more naturally be regarded as the 'sacred space' of a church building to a secular arena, appears to be accepted as a holy space, where the presence of the divine is not only recognised but also engaged with (even if the theology of the church leadership and members prefer to recognise the people as sacred rather than the building itself). The Cherish women march together as pilgrims, a growing army expanding into the future, firmly ensconced in their new home, and taking their community with them into a new city.

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## Appendix 1 - Websites

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- Charlotte Gambill <<http://charlottegambill.com/>> [Accessed 26.08.2015]
- Cherish Facebook Page <<https://www.facebook.com/CherishConference/info?tab=overview>> [Accessed 26.08.2015]
- Greenbelt Festival <<http://www.greenbelt.org.uk/about/history>> [Accessed 26.08.2015]
- Hillsong <<https://hillsong.com/>> [Accessed 28.08.2015]
- Holy Trinity, Brompton <[www.htb.org/](http://www.htb.org/)> [Accessed 28.08.2015]
- Leeds First Direct Arena <<http://www.firstdirectarena.com/venue-information/>> [Accessed 22.01.2016]
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- Watoto <[www.watoto.com](http://www.watoto.com)> [Accessed 01.09.2015]

## Appendix 2 - Youtube Clips

- [Accessed 28.08.2015]:
- (Official showreel promoting the 2015 conference at Leeds First Direct Arena) <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t0r0WYnwcjg&sns=em>>
- (Official showreel promoting the 2014 conference, the first to be held at the First Direct Arena) <[https://youtu.be/uc\\_cufgXoMQ](https://youtu.be/uc_cufgXoMQ)>
- (Official showreel promoting the 2013 conference at Life Church, Bradford <<https://youtu.be/xzsAiTaZ3MU>>
- (Attendee film, 2015) <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZcOwYmLdFP4&sns=em>>
- (Attendee film, 2015) <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=>