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## Events, Christian Faith Communities, and the Public Square

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# Events, Christian Faith Communities, and the Public Square

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Living as members of a faith community can be problematic in world regions where secularism controls the public sphere. The secularisation of European society, for example, has made it more difficult for religious groups to have a voice in public affairs. However, in many instances, religion has seen a revitalised role in the public square. Even in places where religion is believed to be best served as a muted witness in the private realm, Jews, Christians, and Muslims share a long tradition and heritage of political dissent, such as gathering on street corners to express their faith and their views. This political dissent is often guised in the form of events as a method of creating a public presence. The purpose of this paper is to examine and typologise the ways in which Christian faith communities (mainly in the United Kingdom) engage in the public square, through the medium of events. Contributing towards the development of the concept of the Eventization of Faith, this study interprets ‘events’ broadly, through a critical events perspective, acknowledging the contestation of secular spaces for sacred or faith-related purposes (Dowson & Lamond, 2018), as well as the potential for contestation of sacred spaces used for non-faith events. This paper acknowledges overt and covert motivations of Christian faith communities in their engagement in public and sacred spaces through the medium of events.

**Key Words:** churches, religious tourism, events, public square, Eventization of Faith

## Introduction

For centuries, religion has played a defining role in socio-political and legal developments within various countries and cultures. However, in recent decades, the role of religion in the public sphere, at least at global and regional scales, has been muted by secular influences in many Western parts of the world. For example, the late Rabbi Jonathan Sacks (2003:10) suggested that in Europe, religion lost its staying power in the public realm after the Reformation because religion was seen as a divisive element in European society. As such, more secular alternatives to peace and co-operation were sought in the sciences, arts and, eventually, in the socio-political structures of countries. Thus, religion was eventually pushed aside in favour of secular ways of mediating between cultural and political differences, to the point where the rise of industrial capitalism and individualism in modern societies led some theorists to

argue that religion as a ‘public good’ would eventually fall out of favour with the masses and recede to the fringes of Western society; that the ‘sacred canopy’ that used to envelop the world would fragment and thus lose its mediating power in the public sphere (Berger, 1967; Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Bruce, 1992, 2002).

However, globalisation, with its intense pulling together of world regions and societies, sometimes suddenly, has intensified, rather than eradicated, the profile of religion in the public sphere. In some world regions, the religious right has made inroads into politics at various scales (Pew Research, 2019). Pilgrimage has become more accessible to the middle classes due to developments in transportation technologies (Olsen, 2019), making pilgrimage a lucrative travel market. In addition, religion plays an important role both in civil society and the welfare state (Gauthier *et al.*, 2013). Religion can also become an ethical and moral arbiter in the context of

economic and political globalisation, and, in some cases, religion can moderate geopolitical conflict (Sacks, 2003). Yet, religion also plays a role in increasing tensions between religious and social groups and is often used as justification for terrorist attacks and persecution against ethnic minorities. Thus, religion can be both a source of discord and conflict resolution (Sacks, 2003:4).

Whilst religion has witnessed a resurgence in the public sphere, the ongoing secularisation of Western societies does have implications for faith communities who live within these secular contexts. This is particularly noticeable in Europe and North America, where the numbers of people who claim to be religious are falling and the numbers of people who claim no religion are increasing (Pew Research, 2019). This leads to the question of how faith communities can at least maintain, if not increase, their influence within the public sphere. One way in which this is achieved is through religious groups, such as Jews, Christians, and Muslims, engaging in political dissent in public spaces, such as gathering on street corners to express their faith and their views, against secularisation. Such political dissent is often disguised in the form of events as a technique of creating a public presence.

This paper addresses a gap in the academic literature regarding the role of Christian churches in their appropriation of and contribution to the public square through the medium of events, and considers questions regarding the previously assumed or recognised ‘right’ of churches to inhabit public spaces and discourses. After examining the literature on the ‘Eventization of Faith’ and the use of public space by faith communities, attention is turned to the diverse ways in which faith communities choose to engage in the public sphere, with many examples taken from the Church of England.

## Definitions

An event is often an attempt by communities to achieve recognition or notice in the public sphere, while ‘Eventization’ is the process of turning something into an event and organising events around a theme, activity, or object. Current events management textbooks define an event as follows:

*a temporary planned gathering with a purpose that is memorable or special* (Dowson, Albert & Lomax, 2023:3).

*an experience that has been designed* (Getz & Page, 2020:8).

*happenings with objectives* (Raj, Walters & Rashid, 2017:11).

*those non-routine occasions ... set apart from the normal activity of daily life of a group of people* (Shone & Parry, 2019:4).

Thus, an event is a planned occasion with a purpose that is different from the activities of day-to-day existence. However, a separate development in defining an event is found through the academic exploration of ‘critical events,’ which perceives events as:

*[P]rocesses. They are a set of mixed activities rather than a thing. We need to rethink events as something closer to an adjective or verb. Events need to be understood as **evental**, in the sense that the processes and activity of politics is better understood as the **political*** (Lamond, 2023:5; emphasis added).

Lamond argues for a ‘deeper understanding of meaning’ of events as ‘transformational’ (ibid). For Dowson and Lamond, the

*concept of ‘event’ is probably closer to a Platonic Pauline kind of moment, than something that’s constructed. And then as events managers – we don’t manage events, what we do is manage multiple narratives so that events can happen for people. So a good event is one that is transformational, because the narratives that the event manager has brought together, means that we can’t be the same afterwards* (2018:159).

Within the discourse of critical event studies, the concept of events as being contestational in nature is at its very heart (Lamond & Platt, 2016:3). Applying these critical perspectives to an appraisal of church engagement in the public square (including events) recognises this sentiment, particularly in the theological considerations demonstrated by former Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams, which are discussed later.

In addition to being contestational, events are also ‘spectacles’, which refers to events as being visually

striking performances, extravaganzas, and wonders. However, as Debord noted, spectacles can be inauthentic or even contemptuous, depending on whether one believes that a spectacle removes any sense of authenticity from events, replacing authentic experiences with a 'representation' of authenticity (Debord, 2012:32), which diminishes our ability to engage authentically with others. Considering the rise of 'experience economy' (Pine & Gilmore, 2011), how do these views of contestation relate to faith practice in the public square?

## Literature Review

### *The Public Square and Public Space*

According to Pinto and Brandão, public space provides the 'binding element' (2015:175) within a society where communities constitute the 'collective parts' (2015:176) of an urban area that 'co-produce strong social and cultural dynamics' (2015:177), both within open spaces such as urban squares, as well as in 'dissociated places' (ibid) that are further away from urban cores. The contestation of such spaces can be ameliorated by the creation of 'continuity network[s] of public use' (2015:175), with the positive appropriation and acceptance of accessible space by different users, including people of faith.

Eliade (1978) notes the historic (pre-Christian) aspects of the religious 'valorizations' of space, whether in urban centres or within people's homes, concluding that ceremonial complexes – public spaces utilised for religious purposes – can be found in the most ancient urban centres. Such spaces, whether used for processions, games, dances, singing, sports competitions, spectacles, or banquets, demonstrate the ancient religious function of organised collective occasions for rejoicing, which function still exists today.

Lehtovuori considers the 'Giddensian structure-agency idea in treating production of space in events' (2005:39), whereby different communities and organisations dominate or appropriate certain public spaces and decide which events can take place in which spaces. Within this context, Lehtovuori argues that 'cities should cater for diversity and alterity, allowing for articulation and integration of the Other' (2005:15). The question then arises: in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, has religion in its various

organisational varieties moved from its former dominant public position to become the 'Other', especially in the context of appropriating public space for religious purposes?

### *Churches and the Public Square*

This paper was inspired during a sermon that the first author gave on 'Wisdom,' which, in a period that continues to be dominated by political change, remains a vital and relevant topic. In Proverbs 8:1-4, we read:

*Does not Wisdom call, and does not understanding raise her voice? On the heights, beside the way, at the crossroads she takes her stand; beside the gates in front of the town, at the entrance of the portals she cries out: 'To you, O people, I call, and my cry is to all that live.'*

Speaking in the first person – a style usually associated with the divine voice – the writer of Proverbs personifies Wisdom as a woman who stands at the crossroads of the public square making her appeal to all who pass by. However, the public square is more than a place of meeting. In a modern context, there is a long-standing debate about Wisdom and the voice of religion in public discourse. Should we leave our own religious and moral values behind, at home, when we arrive at the public square? Should Christians and people of other faiths confine their religious beliefs and values to worship meetings only? Is personal faith strictly between individuals and their God, or should this faith be promoted in the public sphere? To examine these questions further, the following sections consider aspects of the special nature of the relationship between the Church of England and the British State, and the implications for the engagement of this faith community in the public square.

### *Church of England – Established Church*

As the established church in England, the Church of England is fully embedded in the British state structure, with full legal rights and responsibilities. For example, there are 26 Church of England bishops in the UK Parliament who sit, as of right, in the House of Lords. Known as the 'Lords Spiritual,' they read prayers at the start of each daily session and play a full and active role in the life and work of the Upper House of the British

Parliament (White, 2017). One of the senior bishops in the House of Lords, Bishop Nick Baines has blogged regarding the challenges of politics and power, arguing that:

*Power – to be exercised with responsibility and humility in the interests of the common good – is a hard business. Decisions will always disappoint someone. Leadership can be very lonely, even in the best of teams. But, it always exposes the truth about character...*

*Our handling of power displays the reality of our character. If we merely resort to lies, game-playing and manipulation in the service of ideology, then the truth about our character, virtue and motivation will become evident* (2019, no page).

As a member of the House of Lords, Bishop Nick Baines is one voice of the Church in the public square; he speaks on issues of concern, including poverty; Brexit; how Christians should engage with politics; ethical issues related to matters of justice; climate change; and economics. Massey, a woman priest and Church of England vicar, notes with some passion:

*The power of my church building to speak to its community – churchgoers or not – of the God with them, God for them, God in the midst of them* (2020, no page).

As such, by their very presence, Anglican churches are one way in which the voice of the Christian faith is expressed in the public sphere. Along these lines, Corcoran (2019) notes the positive relationship between religion and civic engagement on an individual level, suggesting that there is a correlation between religious faith and engagement in community contexts through higher levels of financial giving and volunteering by members of faith communities, both in religious and non-religious contexts.

This paper builds on Corcoran's work on studying religious civic behaviour by considering individual and corporate faith contributions to the public square. We interpret such actions within Corcoran's broader definition of civic engagement, such as through participation in religious rituals (as expressed in processions, services, and other events). Such participation results in what Durkheim called 'collective effervescence' (Durkheim, 1912),

*describing how the affective arousal of an assembled crowd creates the potential for both social conformity and group-based agency* (Liebst, 2019:27).

This specific outcome is highly sought after today in events of all kinds, especially in secular experiential events such as music festivals (Wood & Moss, 2015).

### *Rowan Williams*

Rowan Williams, former Archbishop of Canterbury, retired in 2012 and was elevated to the peerage later that year, enabling his continued contribution to the House of Lords until 2020. The role of Archbishop of Canterbury, as '*primus inter pares*' (first among equals), acts as a unifying force within the wider Anglican Communion, although the role does not hold any authority outside of the two English provinces of York and Canterbury. A prolific writer and scholar, Williams (2012) authored a comprehensive treatise on the role of faith in the public square. His collection of essays and speeches offers a thoughtful and sensitively balanced perspective on this topic, justifying the continued contribution in the public square, not only of the Church of England, but also of other faith communities.

In his writings, Williams first differentiates between 'procedural secularism', or policies that do not 'give advantage or preference' to any one particular group, including faith communities, in the public sphere, and 'programmatic secularism' (2012:2), which refers to the development of public policy that rigorously bans private convictions of faith from public space. Problematically, programmatic secularism denies people of faith the ability to balance their loyalty to the state, which is paramount from this perspective, with their personal and privately held religious beliefs. This view would deny faith traditions the right of expression in the public square. Procedural secularism, however, recognises and values all contributions (faith and non-faith alike), in public discourse and representation.

Williams goes on to acknowledge the vital contributions of diverse religious communities to the global political agenda, which programmatic secularism opposes as 'theocracy' in efforts to repudiate its influence in the

public square (2012:23). He argues that the act of denying faith communities the possibility to contribute to the public square, 'is to make an active choice for stagnation' within that society (2012:26), with the end result being an 'empty public square' (2012:27). Williams proposes an alternative, whereby:

*religious convictions are granted a public hearing in debate; not necessarily one in which they are privileged or regarded as beyond criticism, but one in which they are attended to as representing the considered moral foundation of the choices and priorities of citizens (ibid).*

For Williams, the engagement of faith communities in the public square provides 'a visible celebration of the sacramental reality by which believers live' (2012:44), in which faith communities become a visible 'partner in the negotiations of public life' (2012:53). Despite movements towards secularisation in Europe and elsewhere, 'the public visibility of religion has increased' (2012:76; and see Gauthier *et al.*, 2013). Liberal states and societies risk becoming illiberal when they lack 'the willingness to listen to the questions and challenges of the Church' (Williams, 2012:79), in essence restricting diversity and tolerance. Williams recognises that the public square is a contested space, at times shared between the secular and the sacred, whether for events or other activities.

### **Eventization of Faith**

Prior to the 2020 pandemic, cultural expressions of society often found themselves operating through the medium of events. As noted above, events are conceived, constructed, and conveyed with the intention of transforming direct participants and other stakeholders. Whilst the pandemic temporarily halted all public engagements, public events have since resumed, albeit often with no mediating safety enhancements, such as wearing masks, social distancing, and maintaining vaccination efficacy. This re-engagement with live events has led to a resurgence of attendance at events, and church communities are no different from any other in the resumption of Eventization that is the hallmark of the experience economy (Pine & Gilmore, 2011).

Since Pfadenhauer's introduction of the phrase 'Eventization of Faith' (2010:391), research on this topic has critically considered theological and practical

perspectives in the context of events. Some of these perspectives include the use of a sacred object or space to encourage engagement with a range of different groups (Dowson, 2019; Dowson, 2020b); creating events and pilgrimages around communal activities (Dowson, 2016; Dowson, Yaqub & Raj, 2019); and developing thematic programmes around religious events for congregations and local communities (Dowson, 2015). The sustainable use of church buildings and associated sacred spaces as event venues has also been a focus of research, whether this use is temporary, one-off, or for regular events (Dowson, 2020c). Pfadenhauer's (2010) study of World Youth Day highlighted the openness of the Catholic Church to introducing innovative approaches for engaging with existing and new faith adherents, such as adopting the style of contemporary music festivals. Dowson (in press, 2023), has also reflected on the use of events as a strategic marketing tool to strengthen faith and church membership and the ethical implications of the implicit/explicit and hidden/overt aspects of evangelism and mission.

Another aspect of Eventization is the move towards 'Venuefication' (Dowson & Lamond, 2018). This is the use of buildings and public spaces extended beyond their primary purpose, providing a venue for events (or for different types of events). Such activities may be free-to-access group or community activities (such as park runs), or ticketed and commercial in nature, placing physical barriers or financial constraints on local residents who are then not able to use public spaces such as parks and city squares, or buildings such as museums or sports stadia (Smith, Osborn & Quinn, 2022). This can lead to contestation over these buildings and public spaces, which can take the form of changes to the character of a space, modifications to levels of inclusion, and even the complete removal of local access from events. Conversely, the visit of Pope John Paul II to Dublin in 1979 left the city largely deserted, abandoned by all except a few non-Catholics, as the vast majority of the population gathered to greet the Pontiff (Boyd & Ward, 2018:189).

Yet, scholars who study events tend to ignore religious aspects, despite acknowledging the historical origins that influenced the development and practice of contemporary festivals (Ronström, 2016; Smith *et al.*, 2022). Indeed,

while Ronström (2016) recognises the historically dominant position of faith communities in European as the premier ‘festival organiser[s],’ appreciating their influence today in public events, in terms of ‘ritual behaviour, expressive forms, calendar, communality and spiritual meaning’ (2016: 69), these forms of public events are relegated to being viewed simply as an ‘old form of cultural production’ (2016: 67) and not worthy of specific consideration. Smith *et al.* (2022) also provide scant attention to the role and influence of religious festivals and celebrations in contemporary events in their related research. However, Falassi (1987) recognised the important role of religious festivals as a unifying force within communities, while Brown, Frost and Lucas (2018) pay equal regard to religious and secular civic expressions that lead to social and cultural cohesion, taking a cultural-architectural scholarly perspective. Bramadat, Griera, Martinez-Ariño and Burchardt (2021) focus on urban religious events in contested spaces within secular, multi-faith, and international contexts, from a sociocultural study of religion scholarly perspective, rather than an events focus.

### Research Questions

This paper focuses on the identification of a diverse range of church-related events to assess and interpret their engagement with the public square according to criteria emerging from the research questions established below. The research questions include:

- How do faith communities attempt to engage with the public square through the medium of events?
- Is public space contested space, or is it a shared sacred / secular space for events and related activities?
- Can secular space be transformed into holy ground, at least temporarily, by the actions of religious groups?

Until the pandemic, events were increasingly used by churches and their congregations to engage with each other, their congregations, and with local communities, both individually and corporately. This paper explores those different thematic aspects, to typologise this practice, employing accompanying examples.

Figure 1: Typology of Events

<b>Cultural Celebrations</b>	<b>Business and Trade</b>	<b>Arts and Entertainment</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Festivals, Heritage Commemorations</li> <li>Carnivals, Mardi Gras</li> <li>Religious Rites</li> <li>Pilgrimage</li> <li>Parades</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Meetings, Conventions</li> <li>Fairs, Exhibitions</li> <li>Markets</li> <li>Corporate Events</li> <li>Educational, Scientific Congresses</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Scheduled Concerts, Shows, Theatre</li> <li>Art Exhibits</li> <li>Installations and Temporary Art</li> <li>Award Ceremonies</li> </ul>
<b>Political and State</b>	<b>Private Functions</b>	<b>Sport and Recreation</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Summits</li> <li>Royal Spectacles</li> <li>VIP Visits</li> <li>Military (Tattoos)</li> <li>Political Congresses</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Rites of Passage</li> <li>Parties</li> <li>Reunions</li> <li>Weddings</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>League Play, Championships</li> <li>One-off Meets, Tours</li> <li>Fun Events</li> <li>Sport Festivals</li> </ul>

Based on Getz & Page (2020:53)



**Figure 2: Groupings of Identified Church Event Purposes (Dowson, 2015:179)**

<i>Governance</i>	<i>Spiritual Church Activity</i>	<i>Internally-driven Events</i>	<i>Community Focus</i>	<i>External Organisations Hiring Facilities for Events</i>
Corporate governance	Catechesis Discipleship Holiness Initiation Life-cycle Liturgical Ritual Seasons Worship	Fundraising Networking & growing sustainable networks Social Social justice		Commercial activity Community-based activity
	Change & transformation Education Evangelism & Mission Forming group identity Learning Nurturing Pastoral Relationship-building within the church Ritual Reputation Teaching		Ecumenism Interfaith Relationship-building with / in wider community Civic events	
Copyright R. Dowson 2012				

Secondary research questions include:

- What is the purpose of these events?
- Is their purpose for evangelism and mission, or something different?
- How do these events influence the public sphere?

Through studying different events, the authors seek to develop a typology of church-related events that are utilised to enhance religious engagement in the public square.

In keeping with a traditional approach to research on churches and their communities, Geertz’s ‘thick description’ (1973) influences the methodology in this paper. The siting of the researchers within the environment of the research also fits with Weber’s ‘thick descriptions’ approach (Morrison, 2006). In this research study, the authors seek a deeper understanding of the theory of Eventization of Faith, so each example in the typology contributes to the articulation of this concept. The authors thereby follow Getz and Page’s (2020) typology of events, that places events into six groupings with appropriate examples (see Figure 1).

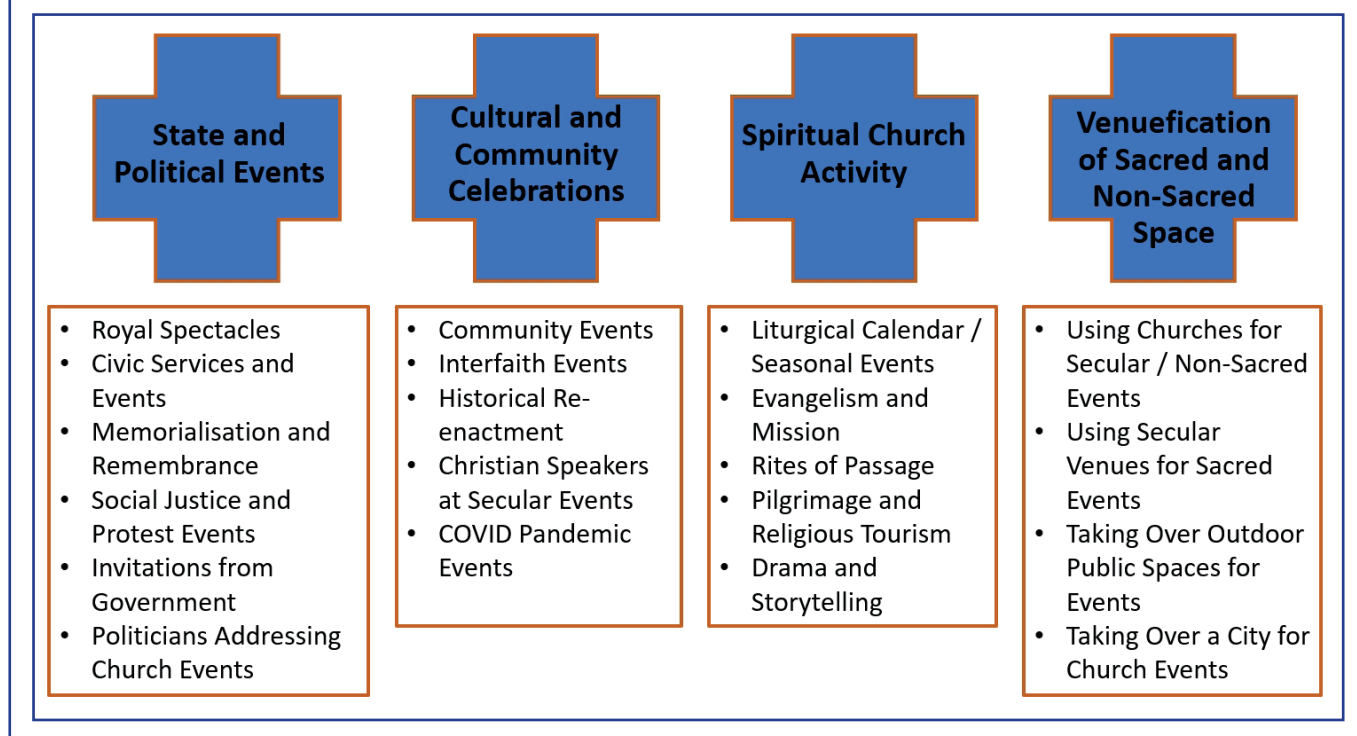
Getz’s typology is the most used method of categorising events by type in event studies and event management.

While the typology has changed over the years to reflect the influence of new research on events, it is used here as a baseline to better understand both the use of public space for sacred purposes and the engagement of faith communities in the public square through the medium of events. To achieve this, examples are considered, mostly from the United Kingdom.

Another typology that informs this paper is Dowson’s (2015) categorisation of the purpose of church events (see Figure 2). This typology is based on a study of events at churches in Bradford, West Yorkshire, UK, and the surrounding area. While identifying five main groupings of event purposes, Dowson observed that events can have multiple purposes. However, as noted above, faith organisations are not always up front about the purposes of the events they host, and at times they may explicitly or implicitly conceal the purpose of an event, particularly in cases where events may produce potentially proselytising religious outcomes.

In this paper, the authors have built on Getz’s (2020) and Dowson’s (2015) typologies, as well as Ron’s (2009) typological model that differentiated pilgrimage from other contemporary forms of Christian travel. Our model includes the following four key groupings:

Figure 3: Typological Model of Church Engagement in the Public Square, Through Events



state and political events;

cultural and community celebrations;

spiritual church activities; and

venuefication of sacred and non-sacred spaces.

The various types of events within each of these headings are shown in Figure 3. The following section explores the ways in which the Eventization of Faith occurs within the public square, including a brief description of each type of event with associated examples, as per Figure 3.

### A Typology of Religious Events in the Public Sphere

#### State and Political Events

Under this heading there is a wide range of different event types, from formal to informal, national to local, unique single events, and events that are replicated multiple times. This grouping of events includes Royal Spectacles; Civic Services and Events; Memorialisation and Remembrance Events; Social Justice and Protest Events; Invitations from Government; and Politicians Addressing Church Events.

#### Royal Spectacles

From royal coronations to State funerals, and from royal weddings to the State Opening of Parliament, the character of the British political system is imbued with an element of spectacle from the monarchy. The Royal Family re-established garden parties to engage with the general population, and public celebrations were organised for Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II’s Silver, Golden, Diamond and Platinum jubilees. These spectacular events aim to reinforce the role of the monarchy within political, social, and religious structures, promoting national identity and reinventing traditions and rituals.

The coronation ceremony of a British Monarch takes place in Westminster Abbey, adjacent to the Houses of Parliament, in which the Sovereign is anointed, blessed, and consecrated by the Archbishop of Canterbury, followed by Holy Communion (Laing & Frost, 2018). Televised royal weddings have garnered global audiences, especially since 1981 (Prince Charles and Princess Diana), while the death of the longest reigning Queen Elizabeth II in 2022 set new records for the viewing of a royal funeral. At Her Majesty’s State funeral at Westminster Abbey, the coffin was placed on the catafalque and draped with the Royal Standard (flag),

accompanied by the royal crown, orb, and sceptre, and the service was led by the Archbishop of Canterbury.

### Civic Services and Events

Civic services are usually held in cathedrals or the main churches of centres of population. Such services involve explicit participation by political leaders, from Members of Parliament to elected local councillors, and often include interfaith and multi-denominational Christian contributions, with representation of the monarch through the position of Lord Lieutenant or their deputies<sup>1</sup>. The role and influence of the Church of England in particular was emphasised during the Summer of 2022, which saw the resignation and eventual replacement of the British Prime Minister, followed swiftly by the death of Queen Elizabeth II. These historical moments were encapsulated in a range of events broadcast live on television and streamed online and recorded for posterity on YouTube and official government websites.

The politically eventful British summer of 2022 was triggered by a Christian event for Parliamentarians on Tuesday 5 July, 2022. Organised by the All-Party Parliamentary Group of Christians in Parliament<sup>2</sup>, the Annual National Parliamentary Prayer Breakfast included a talk by Reverend Les Isaac OBE on ‘Serving the Common Good’<sup>3</sup>. Such events form part of the British state institutional structure. Attended by The Prime Minister, leaders of the main political parties, government ministers, Members of Parliament (MPs) and members of the House of Lords, ambassadors, the Archbishop of Canterbury, many other church leaders, and representatives of Christian organisations, this Prayer Breakfast was the first face-to-face event after two years of being hosted online during the pandemic. A record number of MPs attended, many accompanied by local church leaders from their constituencies, along with delegates attending an international human rights ministerial conference on freedom of religion and belief<sup>4</sup>. While such prayer breakfast events take place in other

countries, the United Kingdom is unique because of the constitutional role of the Church of England, established at the heart of British government and politics.

However, consequences of this one event had profound impacts on the British political environment. The following day Sajid Javid MP announced his resignation from his government position as Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, citing the influence of Pastor Isaac’s talk at the prayer breakfast as the trigger for his resignation. Almost simultaneously, Rishi Sunak resigned as Chancellor of the Exchequer, and over the next 48 hours, another 60 Conservative government ministers, parliamentary private secretaries, trade envoys and party Chairmen resigned from their positions held under British Prime Minister Boris Johnson. On 7 July, the Prime Minister himself resigned. Whilst there were several factors that led to this crisis of government, the initial trigger cited was the experience at the Parliamentary Prayer Breakfast event.

In the UK, the choice of a new Prime Minister mid-term is the prerogative of the party in power<sup>5</sup> and in this instance the Conservative Party’s approval process had two stages<sup>6</sup>. The first involved sitting MPs selecting two candidates to put forward to the second stage via a series of ballots in which those with the lowest votes are eliminated. The second stage culminated in a ballot of all party members, and the candidate with the most votes won. The timetable for this process took two months, during which time Boris Johnson remained in post. Following the announcement on Monday 5 September that Elizabeth (Liz) Truss MP had won the ballot against Rishi Sunak MP to become the next Prime Minister, the following day, both Boris Johnson and Liz Truss flew (in separate private planes, for security reasons) to meet the Queen at Balmoral. Photographs show Her Majesty standing and smiling as she shook hands with the incoming Prime Minister.

Having undertaken what became her final constitutional duty, two days later, stories began to circulate about the Queen, following the announcement that her doctors were ‘concerned for her health’. Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth

1 <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/process-for-the-appointment-of-lord-lieutenants>

2 <https://www.christiansinparliament.org.uk/about>

3 <https://YouTube.be/CQB-UMqD5s0>

4 <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/international-ministerial-conference-on-freedom-of-religion-or-belief-2022-conference-statements>

5 <https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/explainers/appointment-prime-ministers-role-of-king>

6 <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/sn01366>

**Figure 4: Remembrance Day Outdoor Service Led by Local Vicar in Victoria Park, Clayton, Bradford**

Source: Rev. Ruth Dowson

II died on the afternoon of Thursday 8 September<sup>7</sup>. As Monarch and Supreme Governor of the Church of England, all arrangements, from her death to her funeral eleven days later, combined official State mourning with Christian liturgy and ritual, overwhelmingly positioning the Church of England at the forefront of the public square. During this period, an estimated 225,000 citizens paid their respects as they filed past her coffin on the catafalque in Westminster Hall, some having queued for over 24 hours. The funeral was broadcast on live television to an estimated audience of 37.4 million in the UK (over half the population), and globally to some 4 billion (Molina-Whyte, 2022).

### Memorialisation and Remembrance

Memorialisation and remembrance traditionally links to the role of churches in the UK civic environment. Remembrance Sunday is a very important date in the British church calendar, where people gather to commemorate the fallen from the two World Wars, as well as more recent conflicts. Most of these events are held outdoors, where hundreds of people congregate together

to remember the fallen, in public spaces such as parks and church grounds, which is where such war memorials are usually placed (see Figure 4). Other related events are held in churches and in cathedrals on 11 November and on the Sunday nearest to that date.

In contrast with Remembrance Sunday, the role of the church was minimal at a special vigil in Manchester's Albert Square following the 22 May 2017 bombing at the Arianna Grande concert at Manchester Arena, which killed 22 people and injured over 1,000, many of them children. This memorial event was initiated by Mayor Andy Burnham, and included civic dignitaries and performance poet Tony Walsh, as well as a brief contribution from the Bishop of Manchester, the Rt. Reverend David Walker. However, this event was neither instigated by nor led by the church, perhaps an indication of changing priorities in contemporary society regarding the commemoration of tragic events.

Post-COVID-19, these ritual events have extended to memorialise the loss of life from the pandemic, to which churches contribute, albeit in a limited capacity. For example, in London, the unofficial National COVID Memorial Wall is decorated with over 150,000 hand-painted red hearts and messages, each representing

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2022/sep/08/queen-elizabeth-ii-britains-longest-reigning-monarch-dies-aged-96>

**Figure 5: Reverend Chris Howson Performing an Exorcism Rite During Protests at an International Arms Fair, Excel Centre, London**



Source: Rev. Chris Howson, by permission

a life lost to COVID-19<sup>8</sup>. In 2021, students from the UK Centre for Events Management at Leeds Beckett University, UK, presented their suggestions to the All Party Parliamentary Group on Faith and Society for a COVID commemoration event for the UK<sup>9</sup>. These proposals took into account faith perspectives, providing meaningful ritual activities for people to come together – both virtually and locally – to publicly acknowledge their losses and the legacy of the pandemic.

### Social Justice and Protest Events

The Gospels provide multiple examples of Jesus speaking on social justice issues. This provides contemporary Christian faith communities with the impetus to focus on social justice initiatives, as evidenced by Pope Francis in ‘*Laudato Si*’ – the Encyclical Letter of the Holy Father on ‘Care for our Common Home’<sup>10</sup>. In this document, Pope Francis wrote about how Christians should care for the earth as well as for each other and engage in social justice concerns. Equally, the biblical injunction to love others as yourself encourages some Christians to participate in protest events, including Pride festivals.

8 <https://nationalcovidmemorialwall.org>

9 <https://youtu.be/rnqq8AszHe0>

10 [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco\\_20150524\\_enciclica-laudato-si.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html)

For many churches their social justice contributions include pro-Pride churches supporting Pride events<sup>11</sup> and others protesting at international arms fairs (see Figure 5). Churches also protest more mundane public issues, such as the destruction of historical buildings (Dowson & Lamond, 2018).

### Invitations from Government

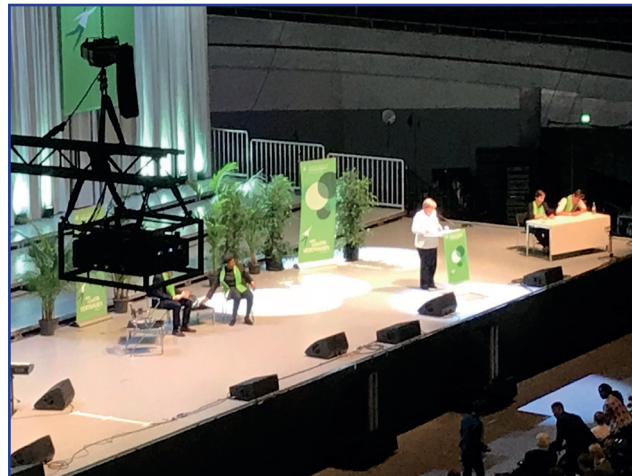
Some official government events are held with the specific purpose for politicians to meet and consult with invited Christian faith leaders. In contrast with the United States, historically, politicians in the United Kingdom rarely express their personal faith sentiments or religious inclinations to gain political support (Williams, 2018). Former Labour Prime Ministers Tony Blair (1997-2007) and Gordon Brown (2007-2010) both identified as Christians (Wyatt, 2020), but it was David Cameron (Conservative PM 2010-2016) who, began the process of

*[moving] away from seeing the state as the essential driver of change and became more comfortable seeing voluntary efforts – often led by church-going Christians – step into the breach* (Wyatt, 2020).

11 <http://www.leedspride.com/fringe-events/post-pride-bi-brunch>; <http://www.leedspride.com/fringe-events/christian-service-of-celebration>

**Figure 6: Kirchentag Conference, Germany**

(Angela Merkel and Barak Obama address the Berlin conference 2017; Angela Merkel and Ellen Johnson Sirleaf address the Dortmund conference, 2019)



Source: Rev. Ruth Dowson

By 2014, having had regular meetings with church leaders and Christians leading voluntary sector organisations such as the Trussell Trust (food banks) and Christians Against Poverty (debt counselling), Cameron instituted the ‘Easter Reception’ at his official residence in Downing Street. This was an event for Christian leaders to network with government ministers (Wyatt, 2020; Williams, 2018). In June 2014, Cameron became the first Prime Minister since Margaret Thatcher (Conservative PM 1979-1990) to attend the annual Parliamentary Prayer Breakfast, embracing all the attendant ‘religious symbols, practices and rituals’ (Williams, 2018:374) that went along with the event.

Despite these emerging ties between the Prime Minister’s office and Christian leaders in recent years, Williams (2018) observed that even with the presence of an informal Christian grouping within the Conservative Party,

*it should not be assumed that British evangelicals line up behind the Conservative Party in quite the same way as do their American co-religionists behind the Republican Party (2018:377).*

In fact, research by Smith and Woodhead (2018) found that worshippers in traditional Church of England churches were more likely to support right-leaning policies (such as BREXIT) than English evangelicals, who ‘appear to be more pro-EU and generally internationalist in outlook’ (2018:208).

### Politicians Addressing Church Events

In some countries, it is a regular occurrence for politicians to attend and speak at Christian events. One notable example is the Deutsche Evangelische Kirchentag, founded in 1949<sup>12</sup>. The Kirchentag is organised every two years and consists of some 2,400 smaller events held over a period of five days. There are over 100,000 attendees, plus 30,000 volunteers helping to manage this complex event. In 2017, then German Chancellor Angela Merkel, and former US President Barack Obama spoke at the Berlin Kirchentag, against the landmark backdrop of the Brandenburg Gate, considered to be a symbol of European unity and peace, with an audience of over 100,000 Christians<sup>13</sup>. In 2019, Merkel addressed the Dortmund conference, alongside Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, then President of Liberia and first elected female head of state in Africa<sup>14</sup>.

In contrast, a direct invitation was made to Theresa May from local pastor Charlotte Gambill to address Cherish, a Christian women’s conference, when they met informally and unplanned in Leeds at the Queen’s Hotel. This avowed Christian Prime Minister turned down an opportunity to address 13,000 Christian women the following day. It is unclear whether, given adequate

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.kirchentag.de/ueberuns>

<sup>13</sup> [https://www.kirchentag.de/aktuell\\_2017/donnerstag/obama\\_merkel/](https://www.kirchentag.de/aktuell_2017/donnerstag/obama_merkel/)

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.evangelisch.de/inhalte/156996/22-06-2019/kirchentag-feiert-merkel>

notice and a formal invitation process, the Prime Minister would have accepted this opportunity.

### *Cultural and Community Celebrations*

Under the heading of Cultural and Community Celebrations, there is a range of event types that encompass different scales, from national to local. These groupings include Community Events, Interfaith Events, Historical Re-enactments, Christian Speakers at Secular Events, and events related to the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **Community Events**

Many churches develop, deliver, and participate in events in and for their own local communities. Such events may have a religious basis, but are often likely to be framed as social or fundraising activities. Churches may also make contributions to local events. Contemporary studies of religious congregations regularly identify local churches as 'centre[s] of identity, community and religious belonging' (Cameron *et al.*, 2005:9), underlining the vital role of local churches. During the pandemic, many churches provided food banks, as this was allowed under the government regulations:

*A place of worship can remain open for the purpose of hosting essential voluntary activities and urgent public services, such as food banks, homeless services, and blood donation sessions* (www.gov.uk, 2020).

These food banks could be viewed as events, as they occur on a regular basis for a limited time period with a planned purpose. While this food support has continued post-pandemic, many churches also include offering 'warm spaces' in their churches and associated buildings. Again, this local provision is Eventized, with some communities working together to co-ordinate the times and places where people could find warmth during the 2022-23 winter period of escalated fuel costs (see Figure 7).

### **Interfaith Events**

Interfaith activities involve organisations of different faith or religious persuasions collaborating to present and represent their faiths in a positive way. In the UK, Interfaith Week is a national government-sponsored programme of events that take place each year in November, with the aims of:

**Figure 7: Poster Showing Local Churches Working Together to Provide Warm Spaces, October 2022**



Source: Christ the King, Battyeford, West Yorkshire, by permission, Rev. Dr. Erik Peeters

- 1) strengthening good interfaith relations at all levels
- 2) increasing awareness of the different and distinct faith communities in the UK, in particular celebrating and building on the contribution which their members make to their neighbourhoods and to wider society
- 3) increasing understanding between people of religious and non-religious beliefs (Cohen, 2021:203-204).

In Bradford, Yorkshire, an interfaith pilgrimage event takes place each month, as participants visit the places of worship of different faith communities, ending their pilgrimage at the city's Cathedral. Nearby, the Leeds, Yorkshire interfaith group 'Concord,' is one of the oldest such groups in the UK, founded over 40 years ago, holding events to build 'friendship, trust, tolerance, understanding and co-operation among members of the faith communities of multi-cultural Leeds'<sup>15</sup>, bringing together Baha'is, Brahma Kumaris, Buddhists, Christians, Hindus, Jews, Muslims, Pagans, Sikhs and others.

<sup>15</sup> <https://concord-leeds.org.uk/>

**Figure 8: The Kings Army of the English Civil War Society, January 2022**



Source: Colin Hart, by permission, <http://www.colinhart.com>

### Historical Re-enactment

Historical re-enactments are differentiated here from biblical dramatisations, particularly those organised by secular historical organisations seeking to recreate authentic events that took place in past centuries. As Honorary Chaplain to the Kings Army of the English Civil War Society, the first author leads a religious service within a formal annual event to commemorate the beheading of King Charles I in 1649. As depicted in Figure 8, several hundred people, dressed in authentic regimental costumes and accompanied by cavalry, cannon, and muffled drums, process at funeral pace down The Mall to Horse Guards Parade for an historically authentic religious service. Events such as this focus on authenticity and meaning, being true to what was happening at the time, and often include some connection to expressions of faith.

### Christian Speakers at Secular Events

Christian speakers are often invited to speak at secular events, such as literature and cultural festivals. Celebrity clergy, including Reverend Richard Coles (formerly of the 1980s bands Bronski Beat and The Communards<sup>16</sup>) and Rev. Kate Bottley (media presenter<sup>17</sup>), can be found adorning the front pages of literature festival programmes, at times promoting their latest book or television programme. The Bishop of Leeds Diocese, The Rt. Reverend Nick Baines<sup>18</sup>, is a regular speaker at the Bradford Literature Festival. Whether or not he is acting in his position as bishop, he seeks to promote the Christian faith in the public square<sup>19</sup>.

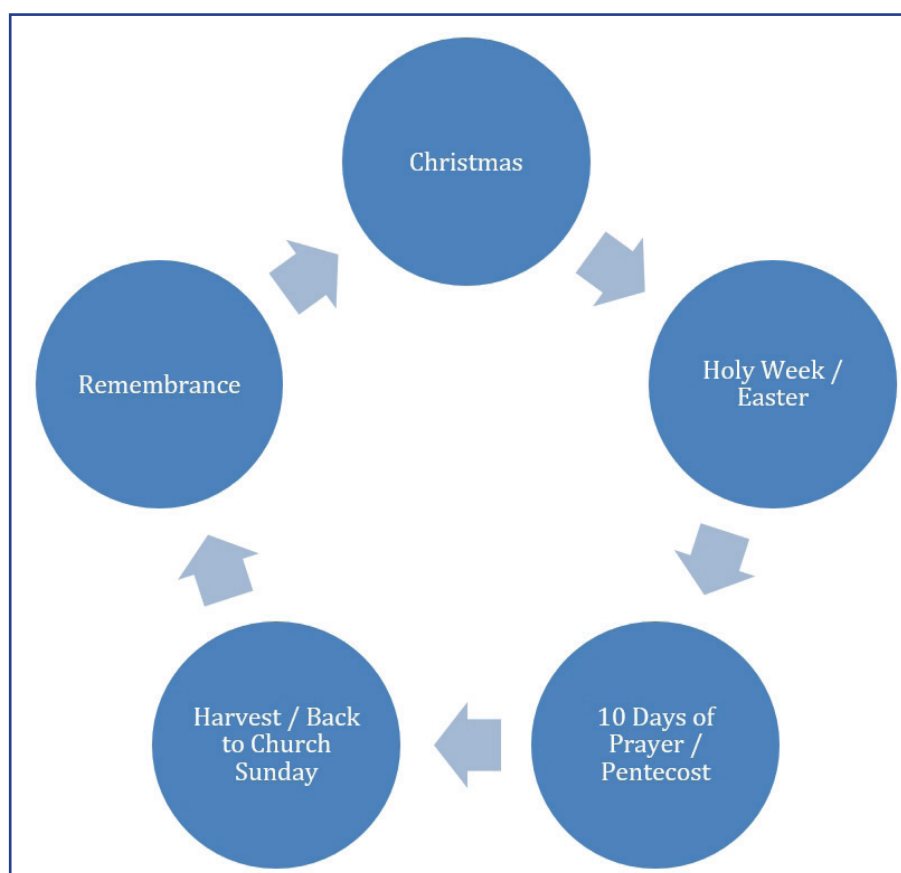
<sup>16</sup> <https://www.richardcoles.com/>

<sup>17</sup> <https://twitter.com/revkatebottley>

<sup>18</sup> <https://nickbaines.wordpress.com/>

<sup>19</sup> <https://www.bradfordlitfest.co.uk/event/world-today-2019/>;  
<https://www.bradfordlitfest.co.uk/event/faith-in-humanity/>;  
<https://www.bradfordlitfest.co.uk/event/page-screen-aftermath/>



**Figure 9: Seasonal Festivals and Events During the Church Year**

Source: Dowson, 2015:175, by permission

### COVID-19 Pandemic Events

The COVID-19 pandemic resulted in an immediate shutdown of all churches and the cancellation of all religious events that could not be moved online (Olsen & Timothy, 2020; Dowson, 2020a). While the United States witnessed several worship protest events, the Church of England literally ‘retreated to the kitchen’, as the Archbishop of Canterbury chose to celebrate communion on Easter Sunday 2020 in a service broadcast via social media from his own kitchen, rather than from the chapel adjoining his official residence. Churches that broke regulations during the lockdown were widely castigated for their transgressions, with notable examples causing deadly outbreaks of the virus. In the early days of the virus spreading in Southeast Asia, the Shincheonji Church of Jesus, the Temple of the Tabernacle of the Testimony (a Christian sect in Seoul, South Korea) accounted for some 60% of the country’s 4,000 confirmed cases, as they continued to attend services and hold prayer meetings (Dowson, 2020a). Meanwhile, in Europe, a Baptist

church in Germany that met on 10 May 2020, after restrictions were relaxed on 1 May, was found to have resulted in 40 new cases of the virus (BBC, 2020). In some ways, the Church of England behaved responsibly by undertaking a complete withdrawal from the physical public square.

### *Spiritual Church Activity*

The types of events in the Spiritual Church Activity category also range in scale and are probably the events in which most people traditionally expect churches to participate. This grouping includes Seasonal events and those related to the Liturgical Calendar, Evangelism and Mission, Rites of Passage, Pilgrimage and Religious Tourism, and Dramatised Storytelling.

### **Liturgical Calendar / Seasonal Events**

Churches hold regular events and celebrations throughout the church year following a cyclical Christian calendar. Some of these festivals move dates from one year to the

Figure 10: Poster Showing a Range of Parish Christmas Events

*Come and celebrate*  
**CHRISTMAS**  
*Bingley Parish Church*

**Sunday 11<sup>th</sup> December**  
**1:30 pm – Christmas Family Nativity Crafts and Film**  
*Inc. activities and refreshments (Free film starts at 2pm)*

**Wednesday 14<sup>th</sup> December**  
**7 pm – “A Night to Remember” - Christmas Memorial service**

**Friday 16<sup>th</sup> December**  
**1pm – 8pm\* “Christmas Tree Festival”**  
*Come and see all the decorated Christmas Trees in All Saints Church*  
*\*Wine & Cheese, with Music from 6.30pm (Tickets – 01274 565079)*

**Saturday 17<sup>th</sup> December**  
**12 noon – 5 pm “Christmas Tree Festival”**  
*Come and see all the decorated Christmas Trees in All Saints Church*  
**2pm – “Nativity live”**  
*Returns for 2022 – A live retelling of the Nativity story – Starts at Myrtle Park Bandstand, and ends in Bingley Market place*  
**From 12 noon “Christmas Fayre”**  
*in Church House – opposite All Saints Church*

**Sunday 18<sup>th</sup> December**  
**12 noon – 4 pm “Christmas Tree Festival”**  
*Come and see all the decorated Christmas Trees in All Saints Church*  
**4.00 pm - Christingle Service (In aid of the Children’s Society)**

**Tuesday 20<sup>th</sup> December**  
**2.00 pm - “Crossflatts Christmas Communion Service”**  
*Christmas Communion with Carols at St Aidan’s, Canal Rd, Crossflatts.*  
**7.00 pm - “Carol Service”**  
*Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols*

**Saturday 24<sup>th</sup> December (Christmas Eve)**  
**4.00 pm - Children’s Crib Service**  
**11.15 pm - Midnight Mass**

**Sunday 25<sup>th</sup> December (Christmas Day)**  
**8.00 am - Holy Communion (BCP)**  
**10.30 am - Christmas Family Eucharist**

*All Saints – Bingley Parish Church, Old Main Street, Bingley, BD16 2RH*  
[www.facebook.com/BingleyParishChurch](https://www.facebook.com/BingleyParishChurch) - <http://www.allsaintsbingley.org.uk> - 01274 565079

Source: All Saints Parish Church, Bingley, West Yorkshire, by permission, Rev. Martyn Weaver

next (e.g., Easter), while others are fixed (e.g., Christmas). Figure 9 shows a widely used model of the seasonal flow of the church year.

During some of these events, the humility manifested by many parish priests through various acts of service, such as washing people’s feet at services and events on Maundy Thursday (Howson, 2012) demonstrates a church culture that ‘subverts centrality and imbalanced relationships’ (Carlisle, 2007:95). Christmas events often include a separate Christmas carol service for the bereaved to remember those they have lost, outdoor and indoor nativity services, dramatised storytelling, and Christmas Tree festivals (see Figure 10). According to Church of England records, over 2.3 million people

attended Church services over the Christmas period in 2019 (Eames, 2021:10). Australian mega-church Hillsong hires out Wembley Stadium for their Christmas Carol service (Dowson, 2017) with the overt purpose of evangelism.

### Evangelism and Mission

Events related to evangelism and mission may take place on a grand scale. For example, in 1954, the American evangelist Dr. Billy Graham led an evangelistic ‘crusade’ in the UK. Attendance figures for these religious revival events were estimated to be around four million people (Brown & Lynch, 2012:332). In the mid-1980s, another series of Billy Graham events titled ‘Mission England’

**Figure 11: Wedding Officiated by Rev. Ruth Dowson**

Source: All Saints Parish Church, Bingley, West Yorkshire, by permission

were held mostly in football stadia, and attended by approximately 1.3 million people over a three-month period, (Guest, 2007:24; Dowson, 2015, 2017). Globally, the primary stated purpose of Catholic Eventization is mission and evangelism (Dowson, 2017; 2023), and Papal visits, also used for evangelism, frequently garner audiences of one million-plus.

In contrast, thousands of local churches host their own evangelistic event series, such as the Alpha course, which originated at the Anglican Holy Trinity Brompton church. Designed as a small group programme, Alpha has been translated into 112 languages, with over 24 million participants worldwide<sup>20</sup>, meeting in churches, schools, pubs, universities, prisons, places of work, and online. In 2022, American producers launched an Eventized online multi-season series, 'The Chosen' about the life of Christ, based on the Gospels, which by February 2023 had garnered 490 million views<sup>21</sup>, taking virtual Eventization of Faith to a new level. On 2<sup>nd</sup> February 2023, the Season 3 finale was released, showing at 1,940

<sup>20</sup> <https://alpha.org/about/>

<sup>21</sup> <https://watch.angelstudios.com/thechosen>

US movie theatres, and achieving the highest-grossing movie of the day with \$1.67 million on its opening night (Chattaway, 2023).

### **Rites of Passage**

The Church of England holds events related to rites of passage, such as births, marriages and deaths. In 2019 (pre-pandemic), over 89,000 baptisms / thanksgiving / naming services, 37,000 weddings and marriage blessings (see Figure 11), and 114,000 funerals and memorial services took place in Anglican churches (Eames, 2021, pp.11-12). These Evental rituals can be seen as the 'bread and butter' of the established church, providing an important function within society, enabling celebrations and commemorations within local communities.

### **Pilgrimage and Religious Tourism**

Pilgrimage and religious tourism often include very public displays and processions. The 'British Ritual Innovation in Covid-19' research project<sup>22</sup> investigated

<sup>22</sup> <https://bric19.mmu.ac.uk/>

religious communities' adaptations to living through the COVID-19 pandemic. One of the key changes they identified was the rise of virtual pilgrimages, which boomed during the pandemic, as people around the world engaged in religious pilgrimage through social media (YouTube, Facebook). O'Keeffe noted that even during the time of restricted movement, the:

*experiential aspects of physical pilgrimage persist through a hybrid and networked array of communications, social media use, cinematography and performance delivery within the online realm* (Edelman, Vincent, Kolata & O'Keeffe, 2021:62).

However, pandemic aside, many religious buildings and events are used for pilgrimage and religious tourism purposes, the most popular in the UK being Anglican Cathedrals: St. Paul's Cathedral London, along with the cathedrals of Canterbury, Durham, Salisbury, Winchester, and York.

### Drama and Storytelling

Many seasonal festivals in public spaces include religious processions which commonly involve the dramatisation and re-telling of scriptural stories or episodes of church history, and are usually connected with a specific season in the church calendar. At a local level, this may involve church members dressing up in costume on Palm Sunday, on Good Friday, or at Christmas. Local farmers often provide animals, including donkeys and sheep, for these religious re-enactments. Several local churches may co-participate in these processions, together taking over the streets of a local community. One type of biblical re-enactment that may be difficult to witness involves dramatised retellings of the crucifixion of Jesus Christ.

## Venuefication of Sacred and Non-Sacred Space

The Venuefication of Sacred and Non-Sacred Space focuses on the use of sacred and secular spaces as event venues. This grouping includes Using Churches for Secular / Non-Sacred Events; Using Secular Venues for Sacred Events, Taking Over Outdoor Public Spaces for Events, and Taking Over a City for Church Events.

### Using Churches for Secular / Non-Sacred Events

Historically, churches have always been used for purposes other than sacred and liturgical events (Johnson, 1912). However, the contemporary Eventization trend has led to secular organisations hiring out churches as venues to host non-faith events (e.g., for conferences; music events; lectures; community events; political hustings; use as Polling Stations; providing the church as an additional venue space in a local community event<sup>23</sup>; or developing a seasonal events programme with music and arts contributions). However, there can be a mismatch in terms of the activities taking place in a sacred space, resulting in embarrassment and controversy (Dowson, 2021). Adherence to Canon Law is not always fully appreciated by those responsible for renting out the space, while those who hire it are not often made aware of potential restrictions on the use of religious spaces as part of the marketing materials or contracts. Some churches are also commercial event venues<sup>24</sup>, while other churches are housed in former secular event venues<sup>25</sup>.

### Using Secular Venues for Sacred Events

Religious events are also held in secular venues. For example, the First Direct Arena in Leeds hosted a conference for Christian women, an event that took place annually for over 20 years (ending in 2022). Approximately 13,000 women came to this secular arena venue for a three-day conference (Dowson, 2016). In Australia, the Hillsong annual conference is the biggest religious conference in the country, filling the Olympic stadium, whilst in the Philippines, regular Sunday Mass services take place in shopping malls (Crux, 2019). In a twist on using secular venues for sacred events, many local churches bring small, informal worship events to non-sacred venues, from Bible study groups meeting in pubs, to 'Beer and Hymns' (church members leading hymn-singing in a pub whilst customers drink beer) or 'Cider and Carols' (church members leading the singing of Christmas carols in a pub whilst customers drink cider)<sup>26</sup>.

23 <http://www.claytondickensian.org.uk/>

24 <https://lifecentrevents.com/>

25 <https://fountainsbradford.org/about>

26 <https://www.beerandhymns.org/index.php/what/the-jesus-arms/>

Figure 12: Poster Publicising a Prayer Walk Event, October 2022



Source: St John's Church Great Horton, Bradford, by permission, Rev. John Bavington

### *Taking Over Outdoor Public Spaces for Events*

The tradition of 'prayer walking' (walking to a location or around an area, while praying) has emerged from the historical Christian ritual of 'beating the bounds,' (Platt & Medway, 2022). This practice is now often disconnected from the liturgical calendar and suffused with more overt aspects of mission and evangelism, displaying the church in action on what may be contested space, the streets. An example of a prayer walk is shown in Figure 12, which shows a poster advertising a prayer walk at twilight followed by a worship event in the church. Such events often have multiple purposes, including fellowship and worship, set in outdoor locations to increase the church's visibility in the area.

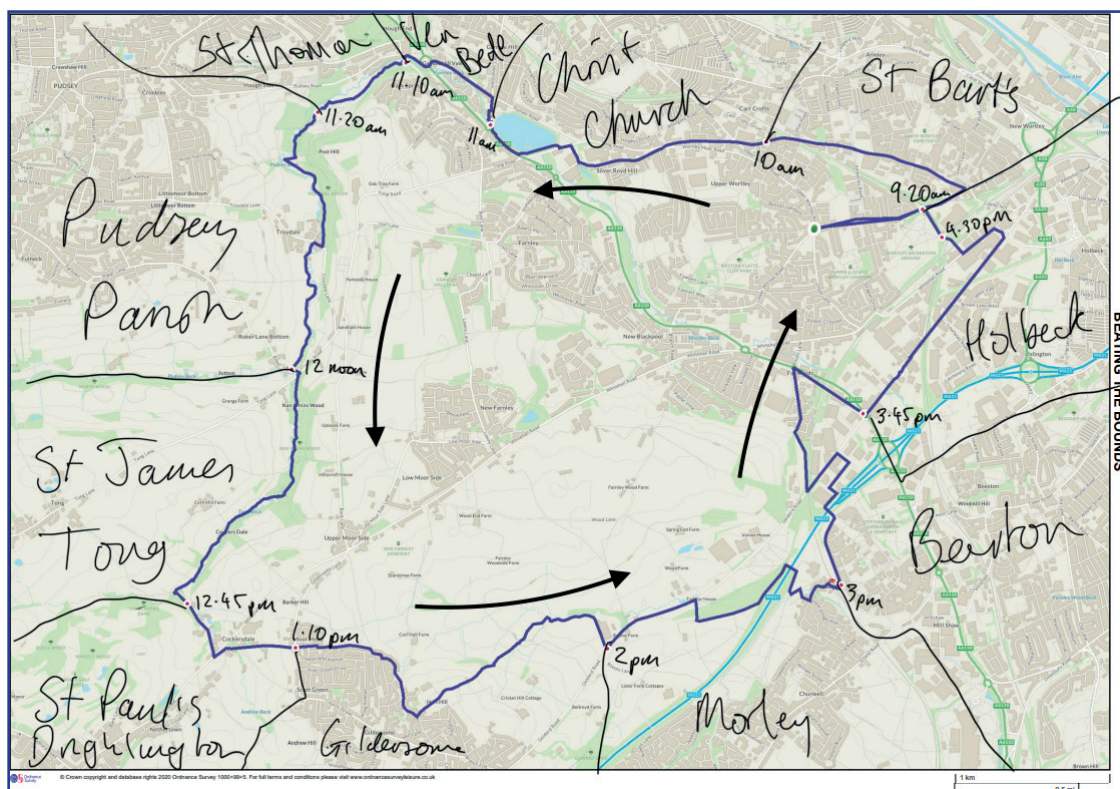
The Manchester and Salford Whit Walks take place at Whitsuntide (another name for the season of Pentecost). This type of processional walking originated as a pre-industrial custom that was both a spiritual and a leisure practice, as workers were given a day off on 'feast' days and during festivals (Platt, Abushena & Snape,

2021). Although in recent decades the meaning of the Whit Walks has become more leisurely than religious in practice, they continue to sacralise secular public spaces.

'Beating the bounds' is a practice that 'renew[s] the claim to the spatial dimensions of the parish' (Platt *et al.*, 2021:827), by walking around the boundaries of the parish. This event is connected to the fact that the whole geography of England is divided into parishes – small local geographic areas that contain a parish church. The example in Figure 13 shows a 15 mile route taken by a local priest around the boundaries of his parish in Yorkshire<sup>27</sup>. Such events take place in public spaces, temporarily claiming those spaces as sacred routes or corridors. In Catholic countries, there is a rich history of processions often linked to Saints Days and festivals, such as the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary on 15 August.

<sup>27</sup><https://www.leeds.anglican.org/news/boundary-walk-brings-prayer-and-parishes-together>

Figure 13: Beating The Bounds Map, August, 2022



<https://www.leeds.anglican.org/who-we-are/news/boundary-walk-brings-prayer-and-parishes-together.php>

In the 1990s, the Church of England announced a ‘decade of Evangelism’, which cumulated in regular local and regional ‘Jesus Events’, with Christians parading through city centres and on local streets, carrying banners and singing contemporary worship songs.

**Taking Over a City for Church Events**

Some church events are so large and complex that they involve taking over a city. For example, every other year, the German Evangelical Kirchentag, as described above, takes place in Germany, dominating the life of an entire city for the duration. The event moves around the country, and at each location, the Kirchentag includes the use of the city’s major event facility (equivalent in size to the UK’s National Exhibition Centre) with composite events in every conceivable venue, from churches to street squares, from school halls to theatres and football stadia<sup>28</sup>. The organisers invite local residents to provide free Bed and Breakfast accommodation for up to 4,000 attendees, demonstrating local hospitality, and providing opportunities for participants to engage in a deeper way with the surrounding community.

<sup>28</sup> <https://www.kirchentag.de/ueberuns>

The Catholic Church hosts an annual ‘World Youth Day’ which takes place in different countries around the world. World Youth Day in Rio de Janeiro Brazil attracted three million participants to its Papal Mass on Copacabana Beach, while in Manila, the Pope’s visit attracted over 6 million participants (Dowson 2017:10). Large pilgrimage gatherings that take over a city or region are frequent, for example when Muslims travel to Mecca for Hajj (Jamal, Griffin & Raj, 2015).

**Conclusion**

Smith *et al.*, (2022) suggest that the trends for ‘Festivalization’ and ‘Eventification’ of cities such as Edinburgh in Scotland and Adelaide in Australia have influence beyond arts and music festivals. In this paper we have argued that this movement is likely to be replicated in Eventization by faith communities. In our efforts to understand faith communities’ attempts to engage with the public square through the medium of events, we have identified groupings of diverse event types, that demonstrate the Evental nature of contemporary church activity through engagement in the public square.

In the context of the diminution of the ‘sacred canopy’ in the West (Berger, 1967; Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Bruce, 1992, 2002), the rise of secularisation has led to a transformation of religion and religious practice away from its dominant position within society, politics, and culture to a situation in which those who practice their faith, especially publicly, have become the ‘Other’. In some countries, including the United Kingdom, any public space can be contested space, whether it is used for sacred purposes or not. While sacramental communities seek to use local spaces for sacred and non-religious events, this contestation can become more evident. As the influence of secularism grows through Western society, non-Christians are less likely to be sympathetic to the Christian calendar or any theological limitations on the uses of churches as event venues.

As the Eventization of Faith continues, there is an increasing use of secular space for events by faith communities, regardless of whether these events are of a religious nature or not. Theological perspectives influence the idea that such spaces can become holy ground, at least temporarily, and this paper has demonstrated the continuing impact of events in the diversity of ways in which churches seek to re-engage in the public square.

At the time of writing of this paper, it is unknown what the public square is going to look like post-pandemic. Questions still arise as to whether pilgrimage and religious tourism will continue increasing as they did prior to the pandemic. Future research opportunities may consider the ways that other faith communities engage in the public sphere. The authors selected the United Kingdom because of the unique role which the Church of England, plays as part of the state and political structure. However, as noted by Bramadat *et al.*, (2021), it is clear that there are many examples around the world of faiths other than Christianity taking to the streets and public squares to express their religious beliefs and practices. Encouraging the development of places where people of any faith and of none can go to find wholeness and safety – treating places as sacred when they are in them – acknowledges the sacredness of space for ‘secular’ and non-faith activities alike. This paper indicates the potential for further research on this fascinating topic.

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