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# Missionaries on a Pilgrimage, or Pilgrims on a Mission? Elements of Pilgrimage in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints Missionary Experience

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The purpose of this paper is to consider the ways in which proselytizing missions by members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints are pilgrimage-like. After outlining the historical and theological background behind the Church's missionary efforts and discuss how this missionary work is organized both practically and social, the similarities between Church missions and religious pilgrimage are compared based on six themes: journeying and the sacred, liminality, communitas, hardships, status, and change and failure.

**Key Words:** The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints; Mormons; pilgrimage; missionary work; missions; missionaries

## Introduction

In recent years, scholars have begun to re-conceptualise traditional religious mobilities, including religious pilgrimage, through the application of secular models of travels to pilgrim-like activities (Collins-Kreiner, 2010). Rather than focusing on visiting holy places as defined by religious authorities, these scholars have suggested, following Morinis (1992: 4), that pilgrimage 'is a journey undertaken by a person in quest of a place or a state that he or she believes to embody a valued ideal'. As such, one can metaphorically 'play' with what constitutes pilgrimage travel and experience through equating pilgrimage to places not traditionally viewed as pilgrimage destinations. Some examples would include travel to national heritage sites, war memorials and cemeteries, the homes of famous people, and sports stadiums (e.g., Alderman, 2002; Campo, 1998; Gammon, 2004; Margry, 2008; Seaton, 2002). From this perspective, any type of travel is pilgrimage-like if it is meaningful to the person traveling, even though the destination is not necessarily tied to religious concerns.

This open-ended understanding of pilgrimage is helpful for the focus of this paper. Rather than investigating the ties between more hedonistic forms of travel and pilgrimage (see Coleman and Eade, 2004; Knox and Hannam, 2014; Margry, 2008), the purpose of this paper is to consider the ways in which proselytizing missions by members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (also known as the Mormon Church; hereafter referred to as the Church of Jesus Christ or

the Church) are pilgrimage-like. While Church missions are explicitly and undeniably religious in nature, missionaries for the Church of Jesus Christ generally do not consider their missions to be akin to pilgrimage, in part because there is no formal theology of pilgrimage in the Church (Olsen, 2016). However, in this paper we apply frameworks developed in the field of pilgrimage studies to missions undertaken by members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints to argue that they are structurally like traditional religious pilgrimages, albeit more deterritorialized. In doing so, we both reconsider the monolithic image that pilgrimage is a medieval sojourn to a sacred place that provides access to divine power and complicate the view that Church missions are journeys based exclusively on proselytic motivations and results. As such, the work here is theoretical in nature, and while the experiences of Church missionaries are a part of this paper, our discussion is based on secondary sources rather than any ethnographic research on our part.<sup>[1]</sup> Also, while we recognise that many Church missionaries participate in missionary work via the Internet and social media (Bosker, 2014; Olsen and Otterstrom, 2019), we limit our focus in this paper to the ground-based, door-to-door, and face-to-face proselytizing missionary efforts of the Church.

To examine the linkages between Church missions and pilgrimage, we discuss several academic theories related to sacred place, pilgrimage, travel, tourism, and

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1. The second author is a practicing member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and served a two-year Church mission from 1992-1994.

short- and long-term missions to examine some of the commonalities and differences between pilgrimage and religiously based missions. We then discuss the historical and theological background behind the Church's missionary efforts and how this missionary work is organized both practically and socially. Then, based on Turner (1969, 1974b) and Turner and Turner's (1978) work on pilgrimage, we discuss six ways in which Church missions are akin to religious pilgrimage—journeying and the sacred, liminality, *communitas*, hardships, status, and change and failure—before concluding.

### Pilgrimage, Sacred Space, and Tourism

Modern discussions regarding the nature of pilgrimage tend to start with Eliade's (1959, 1996) work on sacred space, which argues that a sacred place is an ontological reality (Owen, 2016); that the 'sacred,' 'divine,' or 'real,' 'irrupts' in mundane space, making that spot sacred and qualitatively different from the space surrounding it (della Dora, 2015). To protect the now inherent sacred quality of these places, and to allow the possibility for people to encounter the divine (Eliade, 1959), groups that hold these places sacred mark, maintain, and manage these places (Kong, 2001), usually through the construction of physical buildings marked with religious symbolism and through the performance of religious rituals (Olsen, 2019). However, to access the power of these sacred places one must engage in travel to these holy places, whether for curiosity, to fulfill a vow, to engage in initiatory rituals, to worship, or for educational purposes (Morinis, 1992). As such, the pilgrim directs their footsteps towards a religious space that will present them with an opportunity to commune with the sacred in a manner that is inaccessible at home.

This journey *to* the sacred has been referred to as a place-centred approach to the culture of sacred travel, with pilgrimage research traditionally focusing on sacred places as 'fixed' focal points; where it is easier for researchers to capture a set of ethnographic snapshots rather than examine more complicated 'fluid physical and social processes' (Coleman and Eade, 2004: 2). In doing so, scholars privilege the experiences of religious travelers at sacred places over the experiences they have during their travels. Many scholars have found this approach to pilgrimage studies limited and problematic, and have begun to focus more on the pilgrim experience during their pilgrimage journeys to understand the overall travel experience of religious travelers (e.g., Aziz, 1987; Norman 2011: 96; Pace, 1989; Post, Pieper and van Uden, 1998;

Rountree, 2002). For example, Frey (1998) and Kaell (2014, 2016a, 2016b) each take a strong ethnographic approach to understanding pilgrim experience in their research. At the same time, place 'matters' when it comes to authentic religious experiences (Rickly-Boyd, 2013). As such, while Coleman and Eade (2004) note that research needs to focus on both the physical movement of pilgrims as they move towards sacred sites and their embodied performances at the sites to understand the entire pilgrim experience.

Increasingly, much of the research on pilgrim travel experiences is done in the context of tourism (e.g., Androit, 2009; Belhassen, Caton and Stewart, 2008; Olsen, 2013), where the boundaries between pilgrimage and tourism are difficult (and problematic) to distinguish, particularly from a (post)modern perspective (e.g., Collins-Kreiner, 2010; Di Giovine, 2013; Fedele, 2014; Kaelber, 2006; Mustonen, 2006; Olsen, 2010). Tourism scholars in particular have long argued that modern tourism is akin to religious pilgrimage, and that tourist experiences are analogous to pilgrim experiences, as tourists seem to also experience sacred highs, *liminality*, and *communitas* (Turner, 1974b) like pilgrims do when they travel (Graburn, 1977; MacCannell, 1976; Osterrieth 1997). As such, from an industry perspective, religious pilgrimage is generally treated as a subset of religious tourism (Timothy and Olsen, 2006).

This blurring of the lines between pilgrimage and tourism comes in part from Eade and Sallnow's (1991) view that pilgrimage sites are contested spaces—that the socially constructed nature of sacred space means they are empty signifiers devoid of meaning until signified and sacralised by a particular group (Chidester and Linenthal, 1995). As such, sacred sites are the focus of multiple and conflicting interpretations simultaneously by different religious and secular individuals and groups. This is because these individuals and groups, like pilgrims and tourists, have different views on what constitutes the sacred, which views are not always tied to being in a specific place. Because tourists and pilgrims compete for and interpret sacred places differently (Bremer, 2006), scholars, as noted earlier, have sought to develop more inclusive definitions of pilgrimage to deal with these competing views and practices.

## Missions and Pilgrimage

According to Fife (2004), the metaphorical expansion and inclusiveness of what constitutes pilgrimage can be applied to missionary work and travels. Even though missionaries are not travelling to a place defined as a sacred place by a religious organization—indeed, they are traveling to profane or non-religious destinations!—Fife suggests that they are traveling to sites of evangelical activity, and that the activity of evangelism itself sacralises their mission field. Fife also notes that Turner and Turner (1978) have argued that pilgrimage is sacred movement through time and space, and through that movement, pilgrims (and missionaries) make sacred connections with other people during their travels. Referring to Graburn's (1977) view of tourists and pilgrims (and missionaries) leaving the 'ordinary time' of home and entering 'sacred time' while journeying to their sacred destination, Fife additionally points out that like pilgrims, missionaries experience increased social status when they return home from the mission field. In the spirit of extending the pilgrimage metaphor further, Fife suggests that scholars should expand the temporal limits of pilgrimage to include missionary work that might take several months or even years to complete.

It is important to note that in some Christian faiths, serving church missions is 'anticipatory' (Shepherd and Shepherd, 1994), where there is an expectation that at some point in their lives church members will participate in a proselyting mission. These types of missions are akin to a rite of passage (Nelson, 2003), and while motivations to engage in proselyting missions would include a sense of calling, obeying God's commandments, preaching God's word, developing and solidifying faith, and setting an example for other members of the faith, other motivations might include personal growth, adventure, education, making friends, and to find one's self (Chou, 2013). However, because of the 'anticipatory' nature of these missions, others might serve a mission because of social or obligatory pressures (Chou, 2013). In other Christian faiths, a proselyting mission is not required. However, similar opportunities are provided to preach to and serve others through 'working vacations' or 'short-term mission' trips, where people use their vacation time to 'carry out religiously motivated and framed voluntary service' (Priest and Priest, 2008: 55; see Schwartz, 2003).<sup>[2]</sup>

These Christian short-term missions, particularly the 2-3 week service mission, have become an increasingly popular form of religious engagement in North America among religious youth (Beyerlein, Trinitapoli and Adler, 2011). Research on these missions has focused on their transformative nature on participants as well as members of host communities (e.g., Brown and Morrison, 2003; Coghlan and Gooch, 2011; Howell, 2012; Howell and Dorr, 2007; Lee and Gretzel, 2013; Mustonen, 2006). Some studies have shown that youth that participate in these mission trips are more likely to participate in religiously-based civic activities, increase their religious participation, and have their religious beliefs solidified upon returning home (Beyerlein et al., 2011; Trinitapoli and Vaisey, 2009). However, other studies suggest that many short-term missions fail to fully transform participants because they do not engage with the host community—they eat at Western food outlets, stay in quality hotels, and associate mainly with other mission participants—and as such these trips do not necessarily alter the relationship between the participants and host communities (e.g., van Engen, 2000; Root, 2008). While participants in short-term mission reject any characterisation of their short-term missions as tourism-centric or ego-driven (Howell, 2009), it is interesting to note that the top short-term mission destinations are also in countries with a highly developed tourism infrastructure (Priest and Priest, 2008). While there have been calls for a greater emphasis on community engagement and genuine service for these short-term missions, according to Fife (2004), the actions and underlying intent of the trip participants make these short-term mission trips sacred and akin to a rite of passage.

Are longer-term Christian missions, particularly those that are proselytic in nature, also akin to a type of pilgrimage? As noted above, Fife (2004) seems to think so, arguing that from a metaphorical perspective the temporal and geographical limits generally assigned to pilgrimage travel can be stretched to include longer-term Christian missions into definitions of pilgrimage. At the same time, there are several commonalities between the structure and experience of a pilgrimage and a long-term proselytizing mission in terms of sacred movement or 'crossings' (Tweed, 2006). First, an overarching sacredness comes from the general intention of leaving home for holy purpose. As mentioned above, the underlying intentions of pilgrimage and long-term mission participants make their journeys and experiences sacred and are akin to a rite of passage. Second, the encounters pilgrims and missionaries have with 'Others', whether in passing or

2. Schwartz (2003) differentiates between 'working vacations' (generally two to six weeks in length) or 'short-term mission' trips (longer visits of six months to two or three years). However, in most cases, as is done here, the phase 'short-term mission' is used to represent both ideas.

through sustained contact, have the potential to be sacred (Fife, 2004). Third, elements of sacrifice can be found in pilgrimage and long-term missions in terms of physical hardships, emotional stress and loneliness, persecution, and time commitment. Fourth, pilgrimage and long-term missions are what Coleman and Eade (2004: 2-3) term 'kinetic rituals', where the act of movement is in itself ritualistic. As such, the movement for religious purposes at various levels and scales is a type of ritual and therefore sacred. Fifth, like pilgrims and those who engage in short-term missions, the motivations for those choosing to serve a long-term mission many not always conform to the popular or institutional image of the missionary/pilgrim. For example, missionaries may choose to participate in long-term missions so they can travel to different parts of the world, to meet new people, to create new social bonds, to get away from home, to find themselves/gain personal fulfillment, or to develop spiritually. Finally, it is not too much of a stretch to suggest that missionaries, like pilgrims and tourists (e.g., Light, 2009; Selännemi, 2003; Shinde, 2011; Turner and Turner, 1978; Wagner, 1977), experience 'communitas' and have liminal experiences. That is, through the missionary experience, certain social processes emerge through their experiences with the 'Other' that would otherwise not exist in an everyday setting.

At the same time, there are differences between a pilgrimage and long-term missions. For example, travel for pilgrimage purposes along a route sacralises said route (Turner, 1974b: 182). However, for long-term missionaries, particularly in the modern era, it is not the journey but the destination that is sacred, or at least it has the potential for sacralisation (Fife, 2004). For the long-term missionary, the journey from their home to their mission and back again does not sacralise their travel path; rather, throughout the mission experience there are sporadic and alternating moments of the sacred and profane. Also, as noted above, pilgrimage research tends to take a place-centered approach with a focus on 'fixed' points on the earth's surface. However, long-term Christian missionaries are generally assigned to areas larger in scale, such as a country or a region within a country. In addition, community engagement and service is also a critical part of the work that missionaries perform when serving longer-term proselytizing missions, which is not always a part of the pilgrimage ritual experience. As well, while most pilgrimages focus on the individual pilgrim and their spiritual and temporal needs, sustained missionary engagement with 'Others'

through social interaction can lead to a conversion of the self and alters the relationship one has with the sacred through that social interaction (Fife, 2004: 156).

### The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and Missionary Work

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints was founded by Joseph Smith, Jr. in Fayette, New York, on April 6, 1830 (MacKay, 2016). Smith had previously had an epiphany where God the Father and Jesus Christ the Son appeared to him and told him that Christ's original church had fallen into apostasy, and that Smith was to restore the primitive Christian church. As a part of this 'Restoration', Smith taught that God continued to speak to humanity through prophets and apostles, that the scriptural canon had been expanded with the addition of a book of scripture called *The Book of Mormon*,<sup>[3]</sup> and that the priesthood of God, or the authority to act in God's name, had been restored to the earth after a period of Christian apostasy. Smith also held a pre-millennialist view that he and his adherents were living in the 'the dispensation of the fulness of times' (Ephesians 1:10) and that Christ's Second Coming was imminent. As such, Smith emphasised evangelism among his congregants, and, like other antebellum American Christians, sought to fulfill Christ's great commission to 'teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost' (Matthew 28:19) through inviting people to 'come unto Christ' through baptism into The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

According to a revelation to Joseph Smith, Church members were commanded to

*go forth in the power of my Spirit, preaching my gospel, two by two, in my name, lifting up your voices as with the sound of a trumpet, declaring my word like unto angels of God (Doctrine and Covenants 42:6).*<sup>[4]</sup>

As such, like early Protestant missionaries who were self-selected—or felt they had been called by God to

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3. *The Book of Mormon* is a book of scripture that recounts the religious and spiritual history of a group of people in the Americas from approximately 600 BC to 400 AD. The Book of Mormon is subtitled *Another Testament of Jesus Christ*, and stands as a witness with the bible of the reality and divinity of Jesus Christ. It is considered sacred canon to members of the Church of Jesus Christ.
  4. The *Doctrine and Covenants* is a collection of 'revelations given to Joseph Smith, the Prophet, with some additions by his successors in the Presidency of the Church' (Title page, *The Doctrine and Covenants*).

serve a foreign mission (Chou, 2013; Neilson, 2015)—many Early church members felt it was their obligation to preach to ‘all nations, kindred, tongues, and people’ (Doctrine and Covenants 42:58),<sup>[4]</sup> and therefore engaged in freelance missionary efforts, foregoing formal missionary training to travel without ‘purse or script’ (Luke 10:4) to preach the gospel to their family members, friends, neighbours, and other people they met during their travels throughout the eastern United States and Canada. However, soon after its inception, Church leaders began to formalize the Church’s missionary program and began to formally ‘call’ Church members to serve proselytizing missions. While theoretically every member of the church is to be involved in missionary work (Britsch, 2012), Church leaders moved to a strict ‘appointment-missionary system’, where members, usually older men with families and jobs, were ‘called’ to specific geographical areas outside of their home communities called ‘missions’ (Neilson, 2015). While American Protestant evangelical missionary efforts were focused on non-western, non-Christian lands and peoples, early Church missionary efforts focused on Christians in western Christianized areas of the world, first in North America and then in Europe (particularly England). It was not until the beginning to middle of the twentieth century that missionary work expanded in earnest to non-western, non-Christian areas (Golding, 2015; Neilson, 2015; Olsen and Otterstrom, 2019). It was also during the twentieth century that Church leaders shifted missionary responsibilities to the young men and women of the Church. Church leaders invited interested young men and women to apply or volunteer for full time proselytizing missionary service. In addition, older married couples with no dependent children were been encouraged to serve service or proselytizing missions (Chou, 2013).<sup>[5]</sup>

For young men in the Church, missionary work is ‘anticipatory’ (Oaks and Wickman, 1999; Shepherd and Shepherd, 1994), in that serving a mission is

viewed as a male priesthood responsibility.<sup>[6]</sup> Indeed, in the Church, among young men there are certain ‘status sequences’ that mark the transition from child to adolescence and from adolescence to adulthood (Shepherd and Shepherd, 1994). For example, advancement to the priesthood for boys marks the transition from childhood to adolescence. In the same way, serving a Church mission marks the transition from adolescence to adulthood for young men (Nelson, 2003). While young women are welcomed as missionaries, and have served Church missions since 1898, serving a mission is not obligatory for them, with temple marriage and motherhood seen as a more important pursuits and their transition into adulthood (Golding, 2015; Neilson, 2015; Noble, 2016). As such, Church missionary work has been described as a ‘two-track system’ for male and female missionaries based on sex (Lyon and McFarland, 2003). For example, young men serve at a younger age (18) than young women (19), and male missionaries serve for two years while female missionaries serve for one-and-a-half years. Today, however, 30% of Church missionaries are young women (Noble, 2016), receiving the same training and having similar missionary experiences as their male counterparts (Neilson, 2015).

In the context of the Church of Jesus Christ, it may seem odd for a major Christian faith to base the Church’s primary evangelising efforts on teenage volunteers. However, as Stark (1987: 25) suggests, ‘successful [religious] movements find important things for young people to do on behalf of their faith, that early on they provide ways by which youth can exhibit and build commitment’. As noted by Shepherd and Shepherd (1994: 171; quoted in Chou, 2013: 25),

*The timing of the missionary transition...occurs when youth are most prone to alienation and rebellion against the strictures of adult authority. They are also largely free from the confining, mundane commitments...of conventional adult life....The missionary cause of the Church simultaneously inspires and channels the idealism of its youth while deflecting youthful alienation and rebellion away from religious strictures of [Church] society.*

5. Today, there are just over 67,000 young men and women serving proselytizing missions in 421 missions around the world in any given year (Olsen and Otterstrom, 2019). Chou (2013) suggests that the number of Church missionaries serving missions is far greater than the number of missionaries in any other Christian denomination. Johnson and Zurlo (2018) estimate that there are approximately 400,000 foreign Christian missionaries throughout the world. This number, however, does not seem to include missionaries from the Church of Jesus Christ (see Steffan, 2013). If the current number of Church missionaries were added to this number, the Church’s missionary program would constitute 14.4% of the global Christian missionary workforce.

6. In the Church of Jesus Christ, the priesthood is defined as ‘the eternal power and authority of God’ given to ‘worthy male members of the Church so they can act in His name for the salvation of His children. Priesthood holders can be authorized to preach the gospel, administer the ordinances of salvation, and govern the kingdom of God on the earth’ (Intellectual Reserve, Inc., 2004: 124).

While the short-term missions described earlier are in many cases attempts by American Protestant churches to instil this faith and commitment among their youth and young adults, the long-term missions by young men and women of the Church of Jesus Christ require a much higher level of commitment and sacrifice. Church leaders hope that through facing adversity and having epiphanic or spiritual experiences through encounters with people they meet, teach, and convert, that much like in the case of the pilgrimage experience (see Olsen, 2017; Wearing, McDonald and Ankor, 2016), the faith and religious belief of missionaries will be strengthened and solidified, thereby strengthening the Church as a whole (Chou, 2013).

To serve a Church mission, interested young men and women interview with local congregational leaders, and then send a missionary application to the Church headquarters in Salt Lake City, after which they receive a ‘call’ to serve a mission assignment in a particular geographical area. After receiving this call, the young man or woman travel to one of 12 Missionary Training Centers (MTCs) around the world and receive brief training (Olsen and Otterstrom, 2019). The experience in the MTC for new missionaries is much like a ‘boot camp’ (Stack, 2013), where missionaries enter an intensive program that enhances their understanding of Church doctrine and strict mission rules and teaches them how to proselytize and teach effectively. For missionaries that do not need to learn a new language, they stay in the MTC for approximately three weeks, after which they travel to their assigned missions. Missionaries that need to learn a foreign language enter an intensive six-week language program, where they learn basic vocabulary how to teach in that language before starting their missions (Cowan, 1992, 2012; Stack, 2013). However, there is little by way of cultural training, so much of their negotiating of the culture of their missions comes from day-to-day experience in the mission field (Coates, 1991). While there are monthly missionary training sessions with the Mission President, who is ‘a source of adult authority and guidance...his influence is distant on a daily basis’ (Doty et al., 2015: 35), and therefore most missionary training comes through personal study and day-to-day missionary work.

Upon arrival to the mission field, a companion is assigned to the new missionary, and an assignment to proselytize in a specific geographic area within the mission is given. They are only allowed to leave that area if they have special permission to do so or are ‘transferred’ to another area within their mission

boundaries. Each day, outside of a Preparation Day—where missionaries do their grocery shopping and laundry, engage in physical activity, and at times engage in more touristic activities—missionaries hold to a strict, almost ritualistic, schedule. This schedule begins at 6:30 a.m., where missionaries ‘wake up, pray, exercise, shower, eat breakfast, [and] prepare for the day’, in addition to studying from the missionary manual, *Preach My Gospel*, and the scriptures. Missionaries begin proselytizing at 10 a.m., setting aside 30 minutes for lunch and one hour for dinner, and then return home by 9 p.m. (9:30 p.m. if they are teaching), where they ‘write in journals, prepare for bed, and pray before retiring by 10:30 p.m.’ (Lloyd, 2017, n.p.). Much of the work during the 10 a.m. to 9 p.m. workday is spent finding people who wish to hear the gospel message, whether that is through working with local church members to invite their neighbours and family members to meet with the missionaries or going door-to-door asking people if they wish to hear the gospel message. Time is also spent teaching interested persons the gospel through a series of lessons or discussions based on the questions of these ‘investigators’. When appropriate, missionaries ask investigators if they will ‘come unto Christ’ by becoming a member of The Church of Jesus Christ through baptism.

Church missionaries have a mix of both positive and negative experiences while proselytizing. Positive experiences may include helping others change their lives for the better; converting people to the faith; seeing their own personal growth; and developing friendships with other people, their missionary companions, and other members of the Church in their proselytizing areas. Negative experiences may occur due to conflicts between missionary companions; between missionaries and local church members; having hostile confrontations with people as they proselytize; having people reject the missionary message after initially accepting the gospel message; and watching those who enter the waters of baptism later decide to leave the Church (Chou, 2013). Additionally, many Church missionaries also struggle with cultural adjustments, including developing fluency with foreign languages, understanding cultural norms and values, and following the mission rules. Other missionaries experience physical, emotional, and mental ailments, including injuries, depression, anxiety, loneliness, burnout, and stress-related disorders (Doty et al., 2015; Payne, 2015; Thomas and Thomas, 1990). Missionaries who overcome these negative experiences and hardships and complete the full duration of their missions are believed to have

greater advancement in ecclesiastical duties and tend to have greater chances of marriage within the Church community (Chou, 2013; Shepherd and Shepherd, 1998). Many missionaries who return home early from their missions, whether because of mental or physical illness or because of disobedience to mission rules, struggle to be re-socialized back into the Church community and have ‘feelings of failure regardless of the reason they returned’ (Doty et al., 2015: 41; see also Doty-Yells et al., 2017). Some missionaries who complete their full-time mission end up suffering what Thomas and Thomas (1990) call Mission-Related Stress Disorder (MRSD), which post-mission stress may manifest itself from a missionary questioning whether they could have served more diligently or having difficulty transitioning back to regular life (see Hinckley and Hinckley, 2015; Richardson and Richardson, 2016).

### **Church Missions as Pilgrimage**

As noted above, religious missions are like a pilgrimage in several ways. Proselytizing missions for the Church of Jesus Christ are no exception. Here we focus on five similarities between missions for the Church of Jesus Christ and pilgrimage: journeying and the sacred, liminality, *communitas*, hardships, status, change, and failure.

#### ***Journeying and the Sacred***

The most obvious way that a Church mission is similar to a pilgrimage journey is their emphasis on movement away from home in search of the sacred. Both operate on multiple levels of sacred movement. For example, in the case of a prototypical pilgrimage, the pilgrim moves from the secular towards a sacred center (Cohen, 1992). This sacred center has already been marked as sacred and maintained specifically to allow pilgrims experiences with the sacred in a manner that is inaccessible at home. Thus, for the pilgrim, the closer they get to their sacred destination, the more sacralised their route may become, culminating with the climatic experience of the pilgrimage occurring at the pilgrimage centre (Turner, 1974b). However, pilgrimage routes do not always progress in a linear evolution from profane to sacred, as some locations along a route may be more meaningful to pilgrims than others. Also, in cases where the sacred destination is not a ‘thaumaturgic’ centre (i.e., a sacred place that does not produce miracles) (Slavin, 2003), pilgrims may find that their arrival at their sacred destination is ‘somewhat undermined by the accumulation of experience gained directly by the body on the

move’ (Doi, 2011: 281; see Olsen, 2013: 49-50). As such, the pilgrim journey may not always follow the pattern of increasing holiness the closer one gets to their sacred goal. Rather, the journey may be characterized by sporadic and alternating moments of the sacred and the profane.

As noted above, like other Christian faiths, the Church of Jesus Christ has an inherent desire for evangelising, but it is the element of travel that it involves that differentiates ‘mission’ from this everyday ‘witnessing’. Unlike pilgrimage, in the case of Church missions, there is nothing inherently sacred about their missions outside of the motivation to spread the faith. They do not move through space that becomes incrementally sacralised as they journey towards a sacred center (i.e., mission areas). The journey to their mission areas relies on the available transnational and local transportation infrastructure, and their mission area, while foreign and strange, is not inherently sacred. Rather, it is the missionary’s personal faith that carries the sacred into their mission areas, and through hard work, reliance on spiritual guidance, service, and success in preaching the gospel, their mission area can become holy, even in places where people are indifferent or even hostile to the gospel message. As such, the daily movement of missionaries around their mission area acts as a ‘kinetic ritual’ (Coleman and Eade, 2004: 2-3), where the act of movement, coupled with, in this case, the repeated holy act of proselytization, constitutes a sacred ritual, which ritual sanctifies the space in which this missionary work takes place (see Chidester and Linenthal, 1995: 9).

#### ***Liminality***

Turner (1969: 107) argues that many pilgrims experience what he terms ‘liminality’, where pilgrims find themselves either temporally or spatially ‘betwixt and between’ different stages or states. For example, while on pilgrimage, pilgrims are in-between home and their final destination, and therefore find themselves in an unfamiliar place or a ‘nonordinary sphere of existence’ (Graburn, 1977: 28), and it is through experiences that come while in this in-between position—or through what Edensor (2001:77) terms, ‘performances without parameters’—that transformation within the pilgrim occurs. Turner and Turner (1978: 3) also suggest that liminality is ‘not only [about] transition but also potentiality, not only ‘going to be’ but also ‘what may be’’. The unknown and the expectation of religious or spiritual experiences drive the pilgrim through liminal and physical space and time towards their sacred destination.



Like pilgrims, Church missionaries must step outside ordinary life, often putting off educational and marriage considerations, to access holiness through the act of proselytization, thus prioritizing engagement with the sacred at the expense of other aspects of everyday life. When missionaries arrive in their mission area there is a sense that their journey is unknown but pregnant with promise, which in missionary terms means baptisms and personal growth. Even though the liminal state for missionaries has a specified time frame, the missionary experience operates in and out of time, particularly as time taken to serve a Church mission is viewed to be the 'Lord's time' (Ballard, 2007). This view suspends and sacralises real time, as does the fact that missionaries are given only one personal day a week and can only communicate with friends and family back home through letters, weekly emails, and two phone calls a year on Mother's Day and Christmas.<sup>[7]</sup> As such, missionaries are 'neither here nor there' (Turner 1969: 95).

In the same vein, in a pilgrimage context those in liminal space and time are generally characterised as being free from the trappings of the everyday, that is, they possess little in terms of worldly possessions (Turner 1969: 96). This is the case with missionaries for the Church of Jesus Christ, who bring a limited number of personal items with them on their missions. These belongings mainly consist regulation white shirts, suits or skirts, and name tags. The donning this missionary 'uniform' signifies both a transition from normal life and the unification of missionaries and the missionary effort, in much the same way that the practice of Muslims wearing simple, unsewn white garments during the Hajj or medieval pilgrims walking the Camino de Santiago wearing the 'signs of pilgrimage' (i.e., staff and satchel) symbolized fraternity and solidarity among pilgrims (Hanlon 2000; Dunn, 2016).

### **Communitas**

Tied to the concept of liminality is that of 'communitas'. Communitas, coined by Turner (1974a, 1974b; see Turner and Turner, 1978), refers to the bonds that pilgrims form with each other based on communal feelings of togetherness. These bonds take place in part because pilgrims can transcend ordinary social structures and place the commonalities (i.e.,

religious ties) between pilgrims and others at the forefront of their interactions. Turner went further and identified three kinds of communitas: *existential or spontaneous communitas*, where these feelings of mutual bonds form between pilgrims; *normative communitas*, or an institutionalised form of communitas where organisational, practical, and time constraints crystallise the spontaneity of the existential communitas (such as organized pilgrimage tours); and *ideological communitas*, which refers to 'the discourses, exhortations, and utopian models that often provide the basis and impetus for normative communitas', that is, the idealistic ways that pilgrims imagine and talk about their experiences (Di Giovine, 2011: 248).

While there has been criticism regarding the actual presence of communitas in a pilgrimage setting (see Coleman, 2002; Coleman and Eade, 2004; Coleman and Elsner, 1991, 2003; Eade and Sallnow, 1991; Juschka, 2003), there are aspects of Turner's different types of communitas within the mission experience for members of the Church of Jesus Christ. For example, existential or spontaneous communitas applies to the individual missionary in as far as they identify with the larger proselytizing mission of the Church. As noted above, the anticipatory nature of missionary work ties a missionary to the broad goal of the Church to preach the gospel to 'all nations, kindreds, tongues, and people', and to the over one-million men and women who have served Church missions since the 1830s (Neilson, 2015; Stark, 2005). All missionaries are expected to hold to the same daily schedule and refer to each other as 'Elder' or 'Sister' rather than by their first name, suggesting a uniformity to the missionary work and homogenizes missionaries regardless of their mission area. also, the fact that missionaries are on the Lord's errand also can lead to spontaneous friendship, respect, and a sense of collective universalism between missionary companions and between missionaries and Church members due to their shared religious beliefs and community.

The normative communitas stage probably best describes the Church mission experience. The historical development of the Church's systematised missionary system has been a result of practical concerns in managing large numbers of missionaries (Stark 1987: 22). While missionaries are removed from the everyday structure of their pre-mission lives, they are not released from structure in general. Although missionaries may experience a liminal state and a tie to the greater community of missionaries, they are really

7. Recently Church leaders changed a missionary policy to missionaries to call home weekly to help missionaries alleviate some of their anxiety and depression from being cut off from support systems (Fletcher, 2019).

being placed into a new, differentiated substructure within the larger structure of everyday life. The ideological *communitas* stage is manifested within the broader ‘anticipatory socialisation’ of Church youth (particularly young men) and the theological and doctrinal teachings that they are exposed to from an early age that shapes their desires to serve honourable missions (Oaks and Wickman, 1999).

### **Hardships**

Historically, pilgrimages have been characterised as being long, dangerous, and physically demanding, and negotiating these risks was a sign of true pilgrimage (Olsen, 2010). While the physical aspect of pilgrimage has in many cases been replaced by shorter, motorized pilgrimage tours, the idea of physical hardships and sacrifice still exists. For example, ‘how’ one travels the Camino de Santiago (i.e., walking versus bus or car) takes precedence over ‘why’ one travels the Camino in determining who is a ‘true’ pilgrim (Frey, 2004; Graham and Murray, 1997; Olsen and Wilkinson, 2013). In another example, Galbraith (2000) notes that Polish youth groups going by foot to Częstochowa to see the Black Madonna helps participants develop a sense of community through sharing the physical and emotional hardships of the journey, something which might not be accomplished at the same level if the groups traveled by bus or car. Blackwell (2010) also notes that in India, many pilgrimages incorporate carrying heavy artifacts over large distances as a part of the pilgrimage ritual.

For Church missionaries, their journey to their missions involves typical vehicular transportation, whether by train, car, bus, or airplane. As such, there is no sacrificial element in the missionary’s journey from home to the MTC and then from the MTC to their assigned mission area. However, as noted above, it is not the physical act of travel, but the activities and experiences gained in their mission areas that make Church missions akin to pilgrimage. As well, missionaries take eighteen to twenty-four months from their regular lives and place friendships, education, and marriage on hold as they engage in missionary work. As also noted above, missionaries deal with several challenges during their missions. In addition to homesickness, difficulties adjusting to new cultures, conforming to mission rules, watching people they taught fall away from the Church, difficulties with contacting strangers, burnout, stress, and physical and mental health issues (Adams, 1995; Bordelon, 2013; Chou, 2013; Payne, 2015; Thomas and Thomas, 1990), missionaries are also subjected to rejection or have

hostile confrontations with people from different religions or who are upset the missionaries made contact with them (Chou, 2013). As some missionaries have reported:

*I hated knocking on hundreds of doors and getting them slammed in my face (Chou, 2013: 208).*

*The worst part of being a missionary was facing the people who hated me just because I was a missionary for the ‘Mormon’ church. I had people yell and swear at me, spit on me, throw drinks out of cars at me, condemn me to hell, etc. The hardest part was trying not to resent the people who did these things (Chou, 2013: 208-209).*

*For two years I wore out shoes and grew calluses from daily walking and labor. I was rejected, spat at, pelted with rocks (and once with ketchup packages), insulted, harassed, nearly arrested twice, and once threatened at gun point (Barney 2006).*

Additionally, some missionaries have reported conflict or disagreement with their mission companions, especially companions with mental or physical issues, as well as and Church members who have different views how of missionary work should proceed (Chou, 2013). As such, while missionaries for the Church do experience some level of *communitas* on their missions, this does not mean that they do not struggle with their interactions with others as well as their physical and emotional selves.

### **Status**

Another way in which Church missions are akin to a pilgrimage is that they both involve self-transformation and discovery as well as a change in status. Turner and Turner (1978: 8-9) argue that pilgrimages have an initiatory or ‘rite of passage’ quality to them (see van Gennep, 1909), in that the status of many pilgrims are enhanced when they return home because they have successfully completed a pilgrimage. In some cases, the returned pilgrim will be socially and personally distinguished upon completing their journey. A clear example of this is the Hajj, where successful participants are distinguished by the title ‘hajji’ for men or ‘hajjiyya’ for women (Donnan, 1989; Gatrad and Sheikh, 2005; Jaschok and Jingjun, 2015).

Similarly, in Church culture there is an informal status derived from serving a full-time mission. Those who complete this ‘rite of passage’ (Nelson, 2003; Parry, 1994; Shepherd and Shepherd, 1998)—meaning they

complete an honourable mission and demonstrate a deep level of religious commitment—are elevated to the status of a ‘returned missionary’. While this title does not designate any official position within the church, it represents, as noted above, the completion of a ‘status sequence’ (Shepherd and Shepherd, 1998: 24; see Nelson, 2003), much like a pilgrim who performs a pilgrimage out of a sense of a religious or social obligation (Turner, 1974b: 177). Having returned with honour, the returned missionary is viewed as a model church member who lives high moral standards, is service minded, and has a strong testimony of the faith.

### ***Change and Failure***

The reasons why people participate in pilgrimage travel are complex and multi-faceted (Blackwell, 2010). These motivations can range from escaping from a home environment to the search for epiphanic experiences that cannot be had at home (Wearing, McDonald and Ankor, 2016). More specific motivations may include participating in obligatory or initiatory rites, petitioning for forgiveness or earthly miracles, having religious and/or spiritual experiences, educational enlightenment, and recreational experiences in the natural environment (Blackwell, 2010; Morinis, 1992). While pilgrims tend to mix ludic and hedonistic motivations (Blackwell, 2010; Olsen 2010), they seek experiences that are positive, faith affirming, and life-changing, and when these things occur, the pilgrimage has been deemed a success (Kaell, 2016b). As Turner and Turner (1978: 8-9) and Morinis (1992: 13) argue, pilgrimages transform pilgrims socially, physically, mentally, and spiritually, whether or not this was the intention of the pilgrim. Kim, Kim and King (2016) note that pilgrims along the Camino de Santiago route seek positive benefits in their travels, including the development of social bonds with other pilgrims and finding happiness through interaction with nature.

At the same time, recent work by Kaell (2016a, 2016b) has focused on the concept of failure in pilgrimage, which stems in part from Kaell’s suggestion that scholars should study what pilgrimage does to pilgrims rather than what it ought to do. More specifically, is failure when the experiences sought by pilgrims do not occur (i.e., a disconnect between pre- and post-trip goals)? What if the experiences of pilgrims are not faith-affirming but instead detrimental to their faith? To Kaell (2016a), while most pilgrims view their pilgrimage trips as a success, those who do not have their desired experiences tend to frame their pilgrimage a success upon reflection within a few months after

their return. However, in one extreme case, Kaell (2016b) notes an instance where a woman came back from a pilgrimage unable to feel God’s presence. For this woman, her pilgrimage experience was detrimental to her faith.

As noted above, Church missionaries face several trials on their missions. However, even in the face of these trials, most missionaries view their mission in a positive manner, with helping people through missionary work and service opportunities being the highlights of their mission (Bordelon, 2013; Chou, 2013). According to Chou’s (2013, 206) research, most of the missionaries surveyed said that ‘seeing people’s lives changed for the better’ was the most positive aspect of their mission. This was followed by personal growth, whether religious, spiritual, social, or physical, and developing friendships. As one returned missionary has noted,

*In those two years I learned more about myself, my God, and my fellow men than in any other comparable period and it is not unlikely that I will be mining these experiences for the rest of my life* (Barney, 2006, n.p.).

Additionally, negative missionary experiences are viewed by many missionaries as valuable life lessons—a sign missionaries are engaging in the Lord’s work—and therefore necessary to the building of religious faith. Thus, these negative experiences have a positive impact on missionary’s personal religiosity (Chou, 2013; Doty et al., 2015).

However, according to Drake and Drake (2014; cited in Doty et al., 2015), approximately 6% of all Church missionaries return home early from their missions. While some of the reasons for this were discussed above, it is important to note that many early returned missionaries have feelings of failure regardless of the reason they returned (Doty et al., 2015), with some feeling that they are culturally stigmatized and poorly received and reintegrated back into Church fellowship. This leads to some early returned missionaries limiting their church activity or leaving the church altogether (Chou, 2013; Doty et al., 2015).<sup>[8]</sup> This also occurs among a very small percentage of returned full-time missionaries, where the mission experience is negative

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8. Church leaders recognise the challenges Church missionaries face, and are providing various resources to support them, particularly early-returned missionaries. See Rollins, 2016. See also <https://providentliving.lds.org/lds-family-services/leader-resources/missionary-services?lang=eng>.

to the point that they leave the Church (Chou, 2013). In these cases, the Church mission fails as a vehicle for religious socialization.

### Conclusion

Tweed (2014) suggests that an important part of religion is that adherents are 'propel[ed]' across the terrestrial landscape. In most faiths, including The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, there are prescriptions and proscriptions pertaining to pilgrimage travel, whether formal or informal in nature (Olsen, 2011, 2016). However, for Tweed, within the context of the Church, missions are also an important 'crossing' (see Tweed, 2006). From the Church's beginnings, Joseph Smith emphasised evangelism among his congregants, and like other antebellum American Christians sought to fulfill Christ's great commission to 'teach all nations' (Matthew 28:19). Because Smith and his followers believed they were engaging in 'end-of-times evangelism' (Neilson, 2015; Yorgason, 2010), there was a sense of mission and urgency to the work of 'saving souls'. These missionary efforts have expanded as the Church has grown geographically, and Church missions and missionaries can today be found in most countries.

Taken on face value, one could argue that missionaries on long-term proselytizing and service assignments are not on a pilgrimage since they are not moving to a sacred site to worship or engaging in religious rituals. However, like dichotomies that segregate tourists from pilgrims, a definitional partition between missionaries and pilgrims also misses the commonalities they have between them. The image of pilgrims trudging to a remote mountain top compared with zealous missionaries knocking door-to-door ignores the subtleties of individual encounters with, and the creation of, the sacred. To accept the links between long-term proselytizing missions and pilgrimage, current theoretical lenses must be adjusted to shift the default unit of analysis or sphere of religious activity from a pilgrimage trail, shrine, city, or region to secular space and time that are sacralised through the movements of missionaries and their encounters with the 'Other'.

In the case of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, young men and women and older couples who serve proselytizing missions are socially structured and have experiences similar to pilgrims who travel towards the sacred. In the case of missionaries for the Church, they also experience liminality and *communitas*, and, like pilgrims, struggle through physical and mental hardships. They also have faith-building experiences through their interactions with others which sacralises their mission areas. However, as noted here, Church missions, like pilgrimages, can fail to provide the intended faith-building experiences, with some missionaries returning early for a variety of reasons.

An extension of this research, which has focused on the physical movement of missionaries and pilgrims, would be to examine how the Church's efforts to incorporate the use of the Internet into its missionary strategy relates to the commonalities between pilgrimage and missionary work. In this age of social media, Church leaders are beginning to place a greater emphasis on using online methods such as chat rooms and social media to spread the gospel message (Bosker 2014; Chen, 2011; Olsen and Otterstrom, 2019). This is similar in many ways to the movement of pilgrims into the virtual world (e.g., Hill-Smith, 2011; MacWilliams, 2004; Williams, 2013) and the creation of religious virtual communities (e.g., Cheong, Poon, Huang et al., 2009; Connelly, 2015; Dawson and Cowan, 2004). As such, it would be interesting to investigate the experiences of Church missionaries who serve digital or virtual missions to see if their experiences are akin to those of door-to-door proselytizing missionaries or those who seek virtual pilgrimage experiences.

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