

# Remembering our routes



In a recent BBC Radio Scotland broadcast, Martin Palmer of the Alliance for Religions and Conservation commented that 'Every major religion has seen an increase in pilgrims of between 200 and 400% in the last 20 years.' Pilgrimage in Scotland is recreating long distance walking routes that connect churches and other holy sites associated with historic shrines, bringing new life to rural communities whose local services and amenities have either disappeared or need to be sustained.

Why are we seeing such a major resurgence in pilgrimage across Europe when traditional rural church attendance is declining? What can pilgrimage tell us about rural ministry today? Today's pilgrims include people who may prefer to meet God alone, rather than in a collective environment. Walking along a path leads naturally to walking alongside others, fostering deep and surprising conversations. Pilgrimage can be an Emmaus Road experience.

As Martin Palmer explains, 'Pilgrimage takes you through sacred landscapes alive with stories about the great Christian saints and teachers. It allows you the opportunity to get under the skin of an ancient tradition in a way that regular worship rarely does.'

Perhaps pilgrims connect more with God in nature than they do inside a building. Romans 1:20 tells us that the nature of God can be seen by all in his creation. Perhaps what pilgrimage in Scotland teaches us is that the settings of our rural church buildings and what they represent appeals to us more strongly than what goes on inside them. Does pilgrimage resonate with the Scottish people because of a deep-rooted memory of the Celtic Church? The original Culdee monks travelled from place to place, with few belongings, little ritual and no fancy buildings. They communed closely with nature, in a simple and direct way.

One of the implications of the steady increase in pilgrimage travel in Scotland could be the need for churches in rural areas to become more flexible in their approach to worship and the use of public spaces. On mainland Orkney, Milestone Community Church in Dounby is a modern multi-purpose building in the heart of the community. It has no traditional church furniture and is built around a central amphitheatre which is used both for secular community events and Christian worship. Orkney's newly restored 55-mile St Magnus Way which runs from Evie to Kirkwall is providing pilgrims with 'opportunities for encounter', according to local Church of Scotland minister David McNeish. Responding to pilgrimage can and does help churches reach out to new audiences in a rural context.

The 'active travel' market in Scotland is large and growing. It is estimated that the West Highland Way has an economic impact of £5m a year suggesting that there is real opportunity for the socio-economic regeneration of remote rural communities. There is an acute shortage of budget hostel-type accommodation on the Pilgrim Way routes but a surfeit of increasingly under-used church buildings. Could Champing be the answer – camping in a church? St Peter's Kirk, Sandwick, Orkney now sleeps four, fluffy pillows and perhaps even teddy bears included. Could the provision of hospitality for pilgrims become part of Christian service, like the 'albergues' run by volunteer 'hospitaleros' along the Camino to Santiago de Compostella? If we thought about our many historic rural church buildings in Scotland more creatively, perhaps we could adapt empty churches to create a network of Christian 'heritage spaces', used for both hospitality and worship, bringing local people and pilgrims together.

The Rural Working Group of the Church of Scotland