

Pilgrimage

A Toolkit for Rural Churches



Arthur Rank
Centre

CONFIDENT RURAL CHRISTIANS

Enabling and taking part in pilgrimage

The Arthur Rank Centre has joined with the Diocese of Oxford to create this toolkit, about making the most of pilgrimage in rural Christian life. The pack includes advice on leading pilgrimages, and stories from people who had their faith uplifted on their journeys. For more packs, visit arthurrankcentre.org.uk/resources.

A pilgrimage is a spiritual journey to a holy place. It offers a way of engaging with the surrounding landscape and a space where we can reflect and pray.

A pilgrimage can be made on foot, by bike, by bus. It can be undertaken alone or in a group, with friends, family, or strangers. All a pilgrim needs is an openness to what the journey might offer, and a willingness to be changed.

The desire to journey to significant places is part of human history and pilgrimage is a feature of most of the major world religions. Christian pilgrimages have existed since the disciples first ran to see the empty tomb. These disciples were soon followed by others, with the first pilgrim's guidebook to the Holy Land appearing as early as 385AD. The spread of Christianity meant other places gained importance, with the major European sites of Santiago de Compostela and Rome being joined by many other smaller churches and shrines, built to commemorate events in the lives of saints and communities. By the Middle Ages, the practice of pilgrimage was part of everyday religious life.

Pilgrimages were taken for a number of reasons over the centuries. A particular site might become associated with physical or mental healing, either for a specific ailment or in a general way. A journey could be made as a form of penance for sins, such as the famous pilgrimage made by Henry II for his absolution after the slaying of Thomas a Beckett. Other

pilgrimages were undertaken as a prayer request and some were made in gratitude for answered prayers.

Today, many thousands of people make pilgrimages to hundreds of different sites. The destination, however, has become less important than the journey. The opportunities offered to the contemporary pilgrim to reflect on their lives, bringing to them a fresh perspective, can have a transformative effect.

Similarly, pilgrimage can help bring understanding of our spiritual progress as we find space for prayer and reflection during a journey undertaken by foot in the company of the saints who have travelled in such a way over the centuries.

Rural church communities have a huge amount to offer aspiring pilgrims. We can share our resources – beautiful buildings, wonderful countryside, welcoming people – offering space to reflect and recharge, hospitality and rest.

Pilgrimage enables rural Christians an opportunity to demonstrate that God is working His purpose out in rural contexts just as much as urban and suburban, sharing our unique local situations in ways which tell our story in new and engaging ways.

The Revd Dr Canon Sally Welch

Vicar of St Mary's Charlbury





Pilgrimage and Discipleship

Thus says the LORD: Stand at the crossroads, and look, and ask for the ancient paths, where the good way lies; and walk in it, and find rest for your souls. (Jeremiah 6:16)

Therefore walk in the way of the good, and keep to the paths of the just. (Proverbs 2:20)

And many peoples will come and say, 'Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, To the house of the God of Jacob; That He may teach us concerning His ways And that we may walk in His paths.' (Isaiah 2:3)

'It is solved by walking' (St Augustine)

Give my scallop-shell of quiet,
My staff of faith to walk upon,
My scrip of joy, immortal diet,
My bottle of salvation,
My gown of glory, hope's true gage;
And thus I'll take my pilgrimage (Walter Raleigh)

A pilgrimage is a liminal experience; where we step out of our everyday and inhabit the thresholds. Routines are replaced with freedom for our thoughts to explore how our feet roam over the journey's tracks.

Walking in the countryside, we appreciate the different moods of nature. God's grandeur 'flames out' in nature, in the words of Gerard Manley Hopkins, but we need to slow down to notice it. As the rhythm of walking captures our hearts and minds, we observe how the tiniest detail is made perfect in every object: a twig coming into leaf; a flower bud; birds swooping above us and insects scurrying out of our path.

When we walk with others the mood might change; deep conversations can take place as we walk side by side. Times of silence gain greater intensity when the group walks in peace, together but apart, as they wrestle with their thoughts.

Pilgrim Stories

The Revd Canon Dr Sarah Hills, Vicar of St Mary the Virgin on Holy Island, Lindisfarne offers advice for new pilgrims coming to the home of Saints Aidan and Cuthbert.



The past year has been really mixed, and we have been isolated, given communities on the island are vulnerable, with a lot of retired people. In a normal year, we have up to 800,000 visitors. And we usually have many pilgrim groups, so I have really missed them.

Some people come looking for something specifically spiritual, but many of our visitors just come for the day and stay in the village to see the castle. Quite a few people who come on retreat do stay, and I recommend it to get that peaceful experience when the tide is up.

Those on pilgrimage for the first time have the best experience if they pray beforehand about what they want. They need to be present with the environment around them: notice the trees, notice the path and have a spiritual discipline to say the same prayers each day. Do some reading about the places you are going and do it slowly; think about how it will build your experience of pilgrimage afterwards. If people are walking by the pilgrims' poles to Holy Island I advise checking the tide times. Bear in mind, however, that the tide times refer to the amount of time needed to drive across to the island; if you are walking the poles you have a much narrower window to allow enough time to get across.

And if you can take off your boots and walk across in bare feet I recommend it; it isn't too cold!

Pilgrimage as Mission

The practice of pilgrimage is rapidly gaining in popularity, organisations such as the British Pilgrimage Trust are promoting pilgrimage, highlighted by recent programmes and films.

Pilgrimage is a good way to create mission - it can begin or end anywhere, requires little equipment or specialised knowledge. Participants can come at all stages of their faith journey.

Young and old alike can spend time in silence, listening to the sounds of nature, relishing the movement of the body across new environments.

Pilgrimage treats all participants equally; all that is asked of pilgrims is that they journey cheerfully, share willingly and are open to whatever happens along the way!

Pilgrim Stories

Vaida Ražaitytė, a researcher living in Stockholm, was inspired to walk the Camino de Santiago in 2019. She walked the Portuguese Way and found friendship on her first pilgrimage.

The one thing I thought when looking for a route was to complete it in a couple of weeks. I really like walking, and I really like the coastal landscape. As I'd never been to Portugal I thought this route was perfect; it seemed feasible for a person who has not trained for hiking in mountains!



I went alone, flying to Lisbon and taking a train to Porto. I wanted a solo travel experience, and from a security point of view, I would be safe walking on an established road with a lot of pilgrims passing.

I went with no expectations, not even knowing where I would sleep! The first thing I needed to do in Porto was get a Camino Passport which entitles you to stay at the albergues, pilgrim hostels.

The first day I walked alone, but by the last day I had found a group of ten pilgrims to walk with.

My early companions were an old Finnish lady who had lost her husband and another woman who was recovering from cancer. I realised that they didn't want to talk so much.

Then on the fourth day I met a Czech guy called Honza. I walked to the end of Camino with him and we made a lot of our decisions together.

Then we met three Italians, some fellow Lithuanians found me in a hostel, there was a Portuguese man who just walked out of his home in Porto, and a Mexican girl who is not religious, but she said nuns would approach her and ask her to read the Bible, which gave her an urge to come to the Camino.

On our last night in Santiago de Compostela the ten of us ate dinner together. I thought I would start and finish on my own, but I was open to possibilities; I wanted just to see where this experience would go. I finished the Camino walking hand in hand with my group into the Cathedral, I could sense the spirituality of the place, with music playing, feeling such a euphoric atmosphere.



How to set up a pilgrimage

Creating your pilgrim path can bring congregations together, in villages and beyond. If you are thinking about making a path, there are a number of things you might like to consider.

How many people are interested in getting involved?

The first step should be to arrange a meeting of everyone interested and encourage each person to outline their favourite walk on a map; this is also useful for determining which routes form your first pilgrimage.

What is the purpose of the pilgrimage?

Is it to build relationships within your church community, or reach other residents? Is it for locals or tourists? Will it share the Christian faith, or encourage Christians on their journey?

The answer will shape the language you use and the places you include so it's worth taking time to consider it.

How long should each walk be?

A mix of lengths and difficulty can appeal to a wider group of people. Using two miles an hour as a rough guide, include walks up to an hour and a half, as well as some day-long walks for the more ambitious.

Where will the walk go?

If you are trying to connect communities in your group of churches, you might want to include as many churches as you can. But if you invite visitors from outside your area then you might want to include other sites of interest, such as nature, geology and heritage.

Will you provide route directions and illustrations?

Booklets detailing each route are the easiest way to do this, although other methods, such as VoiceMap or similar apps, are also useful. Be aware that Ordnance Survey material is copyright; you might like to explore OpenStreetmap, OutdoorActive and Memory Map as alternatives.

Different members of your community can be encouraged to engage with the project by offering commentaries or drawing illustrations and creating maps.

A booklet or guide can not only give route directions but offer readings and prayers, Bible passages for reflection and hymns to be sung in time to the rhythm of your footsteps.

Are you going to offer guided walks?

Guided walks can boost uptake but depend on the availability of leaders. It may be helpful to have one person to lead the walk and another to lead reflections, singing and prayers or other activities.





Some safety considerations

- Always test the route first, ideally just a few days before the walk is to take place.
- Decide whether this is an 'open' walk or whether booking is required. Open walks are harder to manage as numbers can vary, but you may also pick up last minute pilgrims.
- Be clear about beginning and finishing times and locations and decide beforehand how long you are going to wait for the person who signed up but hasn't yet arrived!
- If you are providing booklets or route descriptions, make sure you include some simple safety instructions. These should include the necessity of sensible footwear and protective clothing and the advice to bring food and plenty of water. You should also indicate whether the walk is appropriate for those with mobility issues and/or small children/buggies.
- If you are offering guided walks, safety notes should be included with the advertising and each pilgrim given a copy.
- Check that your church insurance covers your pilgrimage. Most insurers include events and activities held outside the church if led by church members, but it is worth making sure of this.
- Decide on a sensible ratio of walk leaders to pilgrims. Every pilgrimage with more than ten people should probably have two leaders. The backstop leader (who occupies a position at the rear of the group) can accompany slower walkers, or remain behind if a member of the party is injured.
- It is advisable that at least one member of the group has some knowledge of first aid, whether this is a first aid certificate or training in walkers first aid. An emergency first aid kit and an emergency blanket should be carried by the walk leader. It is helpful if the walk leaders wear distinctive clothing such as hi-vis waistcoats or bands.
- A risk assessment should be carried out for each pilgrimage. A template can be found on christian-pilgrimage.org.uk.
- At the beginning of each walk a safety briefing should be given. This should include:
 - Introducing leaders and backstops, all of whom should wear the supplied hi-vis jackets
 - Reminder that walkers should not go in front of leaders or lag behind backstops
 - Identifying the first aider
 - If walkers need to go off the route for any reason they should inform a leader or backstop
 - Reminders of any hazards along the route (see Risk Assessment)
 - Reminder to drink water.
- Provide an opportunity for gathering and reflecting at the beginning and the end of the walk. A few moments of prayer or a short service before the start will set the tone for the pilgrimage and manage expectations.
- A service of thanksgiving and perhaps some tea and cake at the end will bring the event to an appropriate close, allowing reflection and celebration.





Pilgrim Stories

Jill Baker is a pilgrimage leader based in Glasgow, and former President of Methodist Women in Britain and former vice-president of Methodist Conference. She has taken groups on pilgrimage to Lindisfarne, Jerusalem and Rome, as well as creating a new pilgrim route from Glasgow across Ayrshire.

My passion for pilgrimages began with a number of things, nudging me in the same direction. A lot of it was the loss of our son, Peter, who took his life at the age of 18 in 2012. As you imagine, that was devastating. It didn't make me question my faith, but it did make me question my spiritual practices. I needed God to be bigger and wilder. I was President of the Methodist Women in Britain at the time, my successor had just been appointed and she wanted to take the idea of pilgrimage further as her theme.

I started to think there must be more people out there who would like to take up pilgrimage. Methodist Women in Britain were able to support me, and I began to devise routes with my husband and groups of women.

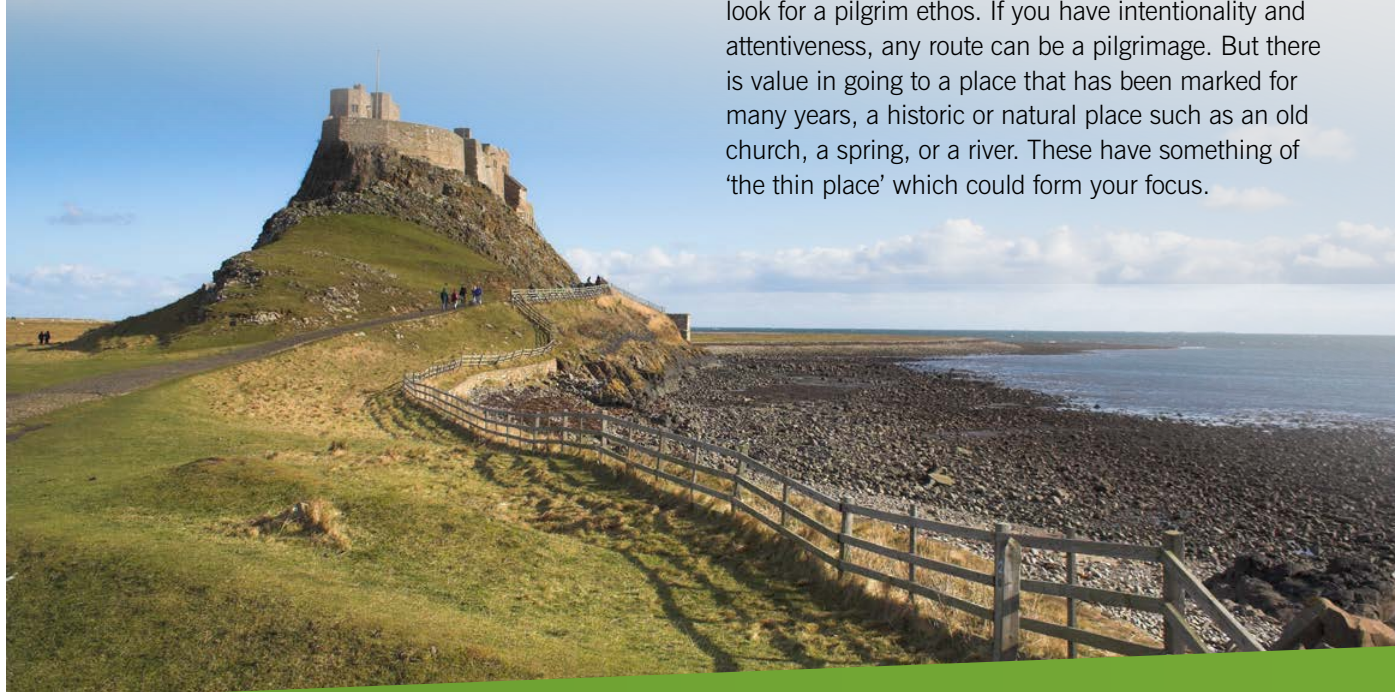
Looking back, I didn't research everything I should have. But not long after our pilgrimages began, I went for a training week in America with the Community for Spiritual Formation. As I began to take groups on

walks I wanted to know more, so I read books, and eventually wrote one myself, about pilgrimage with a Methodist angle.

I do sometimes find resistance to pilgrimage within Methodism as people have a perception it's 'a Catholic thing'. There's also an idea that it is elitist: objections in the Reformation came from a requirement to do pilgrimage to be a proper Christian, but Luther said 'our faith is everywhere'. So we name that tension.

The other main objection is that pilgrimage excludes those who aren't physically fit or who have family responsibilities. I address that concern: to capture the pilgrim spirit you can walk around your garden, around your church or down the street. It's often about exploring the local.

I would never say that every Christian should go away to a holy site. But I would say every Christian should look for a pilgrim ethos. If you have intentionality and attentiveness, any route can be a pilgrimage. But there is value in going to a place that has been marked for many years, a historic or natural place such as an old church, a spring, or a river. These have something of 'the thin place' which could form your focus.





Useful information and resources

Centre for Christian Pilgrimage (christian-pilgrimage.org.uk)

The Centre for Christian Pilgrimage has been established to support the development of pilgrimage as a tool for discipleship. It aims to share resources and offer practical training and theological reflection to deepen our understanding of the value of pilgrimage in the 21st century.

Association of English Cathedrals (englishcathedrals.co.uk)

The Year of Pilgrimage section on this website contains useful information about pilgrim activities and events associated with cathedrals.

British Pilgrimage Trust (britishpilgrimage.org)

The core goal of the BPT is to “advance British pilgrimage as a form of cultural heritage that promotes holistic wellbeing, for the public benefit.”

The website is an invaluable resource for those seeking to make pilgrimages within the British Isles, as well as containing information about setting up and guiding a pilgrimage event.

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