



Pilgrimage

A missional guide for rural churches

The practice of pilgrimage is rapidly gaining in popularity; highlighted by recent television programmes and films.

Given their location, pilgrimage is a ideal way for rural churches to engage in mission, offering peace, space and hospitality to the pilgrim.

A journey can begin or end anywhere, and 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.

A pilgrimage can be made on foot, by bike, by bus, or even virtually. 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.

We offer this guide, and the stories within for encouragement for you and your church community. Do share with us how you get on.

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'It is solved by walking...'

St Augustine



Starting Out

'We may often feel short on resources as a parish, but what we have are beautiful church buildings set in the stunning North York Moors National Park and plenty of community goodwill.' - Revd Melanie Burnside shares the of creation of the **Saint Aelred Pilgrim Trail**

Start small, even if you have an ambitious vision. Sept 2023 - Upper Ryedale parish arranged a 'ride and stride'. The route was devised as a fundraising event by local residents for walkers and cyclists, involving a stop at each of the five churches in the parish. It raised £1800, received good local press coverage and **energised a small team.**

In Nov 2023 we discussed extending the route to include Helmsley parish and our four churches for a similar event the following year. We were offered some funding through the National Park's locality fund to make the route a more permanent feature. The two pathfinders got to work and **devised a route** to connect all nine churches in the benefice. We decided to aim for a soft launch of the trail by Sept 2024.

Our USP, apart from the Moors, is Rievaulx, its Abbey and the connection with St Aelred... the St Aelred Pilgrim Trail was born. Helmsley Parish held a **community engagement** evening. We reached out to our local community, businesses and agencies for help and support. Meanwhile the pathfinders walked and re-walked and refined the route.

We got **help from friends and family** who designed a logo, wrote the guidebook, even the Archbishop of York lent a hand. We designed a **website** using Wix and used hand drawn maps and directions.



(c) Valerie Mather



(c) Valerie Mather

Two local photographers offered help. One publicised the trail with a pre-launch photo shoot with Regia Anglorum in costume. The other has taken on a blog for us. They are going to record stories of the trail and add to the website. Over the summer the **way markers** went up, **guidebooks** incorporating a **passport**, to be stamped at each of the churches and the Abbey, were printed. We got the support of the National Park publicist, The Yorkshire Post came and made a short video, and we have been featured locally and nationally.

Sept 2024 was **trail launch day**. Local artists decorated each of the churches with their artwork. A change ringing method for the bells of All Saints Helmsley was written for the trail, rung on the launch day and featured on the BBC's Bells on Sunday.

Over 100 walkers, riders and cyclists gathered along a short (12 mile) section of the route and joined with 50 or so more at Rievaulx Abbey for a moving service with the Bilsdale Silver Band. Afterwards we had a **party in the Abbey café** funded by a grant from Helmsley Town Council.

Our next steps involve a marked bridleway route for horse riders, accessible routes for use by mobility vehicles with the possibility of our own trampers to loan out, a series of circular walks from each church, as well as turning a closed church on the route into low cost hostel accommodation.

We hosted a lent ecumenical prayer walk and are exploring how to form a community of faith connected with the trail.

Exciting times!





Open & Hospitable



Everyday welcome and hospitality

Portscatho United Church (URC/Methodist) is situated on the beautiful Roseland Peninsula in Cornwall and God has been served on the site for 200 years. The congregations have been historically small, and influenced a great deal by the seasonal tourist visits. Recognising that perhaps the greatest asset to the mission was its physical location (just 10 metres from the Southwest Coast Path) a new and exciting ministry of prayer, hospitality and retreat was envisaged.

The Retreat at Portscatho offers quietness, a prayer space, and wonderful free coffee to all.

There are prayer and reflection resources – and they have recently developed a few ‘self-guided’ prayer walks from the chapel (Faith on Foot) The Chapel is open from early morning until dusk each day and is a valuable quiet space for both local and visiting folk. They have also hosted a number of weekend retreats and church events, making use of the local campsites for accommodation.

The Peak Wesley Way offers an invitation to small groups of all faiths and none to engage in the ancient practice of pilgrimage along a path connecting six rural chapels in the beautiful Peak District National Park. The vision was born from a small group of local Methodists reflecting on the future of their smaller chapels in a changing world, with a much smaller residential population and larger number of visitors.



The chapels are still needed as places of gathering, but were not individually sustainable. The team began to recognise that they and the chapels had a new mission, and a story to tell. As vision was shared, people offered to help, and it grew into the Peak Wesley Way as you see it today. Most of the work preparing the Peak Wesley Way for pilgrimage was undertaken by local volunteers and supporters, who still offer a personal welcome to pilgrims journeying through.



Champing – the practice of camping overnight in churches – offers a creative opportunity for rural festival churches to welcome visitors, make use of underused space, and generate income to support building upkeep.

Managed through **The Churches Conservation Trust** champing invites guests to stay in historic churches, often in beautiful, remote settings. It's a gentle form of tourism that values peace, heritage, and presence. For rural festival churches exploring new ways of being open and hospitable, champing offers not just practical benefit, but a chance to share sacred space with those who might not otherwise cross the threshold.





Accessible & Inclusive



Inclusive planning

Helen Hindle, initiator of the **Asland Pilgrim Ways** routes in west Lancashire & local Anna Chaplain, started rediscovering local walking routes during lockdown. She soon realized that these routes often passed by most of the village churches, so gathered an ecumenical group together to start developing the concept further. The planning group included people who provided valuable accessibility input into the practicalities often overlooked along routes – things such as pavement width, dropped kerbs, stiles & gates, ramps into buildings, accessible toilets along the route, etc. Not all parts of the Asland Way are fully accessible, but helpful and realistic information for pilgrims is provided in advance, including alternatives to parts of the route, plus the option of accessing the pilgrimage via local bus routes.

Top tips for accessibility

Sarah Callaghan (pictured above) shares her tips here:

Use your own resources. A great way to start is by asking friends & contacts for recommendations on who has been on any walks recently that are accessible.

Consider **using an existing suitable path** & developing your own reflections & spiritual journey. Canal tow paths often offer a good level off-road route (but, as with any group walk, do risk assess the route beforehand!)

- Within each national park website, there's a section offering 'miles without stiles' routes, e.g. [Miles without stiles easy accessible walking routes](#) - do double check that the walk you have found fits your specific access needs.
- These websites might also help with planning: [Wheelchair Friendly Walks all around the country with The](#)

[Outdoor Guide](#)

[Find accessible routes near you | OS GetOutside](#)

Pick routes with benches for family or friends with limited mobility to rest on if they need to. These points are also good places to ponder the journey!

Plan to have a **cafe at the mid-point** of your walk to refuel and rest up for the journey back (make sure there is an accessible bathroom though, as some cafes don't have this!)





All Ages



When **including children & families** in pilgrimage...

Preparation is key - Pack a rucksack. You don't need any special equipment, but prepare for a few eventualities.

Plan together - Children will be excited about a walk if they've had some input in deciding where to go/ what to take/ what to wear etc. Your aim is for them really to enjoy it.

Think about the distance - Make the walk doable. For younger children they need to be able to achieve it. For older children, you want them to enjoy it and be up for going again.

Schedule realistically - In the spirit of pilgrimage, and not to be nagging children to hurry up the whole way round, mentally schedule in an extra 20 minutes. It really can make all the difference to having a nice time.

Look up - What can you see? Children are naturally curious – notice what they see, ask them what they think, and share your questions and knowledge as you notice things too.

Connect - Walking together is a brilliant time for conversation. Ask your children questions and take the time to listen properly to their answers.

Respect their solitude - Children need time to think and wonder, they also need solitude and silence. If it's safe to do so, allow them time to wander and wonder – this is an essential part of their healthy development.

Distraction - At some point, a child may decide they don't want to walk any further. Distraction is your counter-move:

- Strike up a fun conversation about something totally unrelated to the walk
- Sing/chant songs, rhymes or poems, or make up silly songs and rhymes of your own
- Break up the journey – show them the journey in small steps (“we just have to get as far as that tree on the corner”)
- Stop for a snack. Children get hungry (don't we all!) Sometimes we just need to pause and refuel.

Phones - Model the behaviour you want to see. If you don't want children to be on their phone, don't be on yours. If you have children with you who will have phones in their hands, then turn them into a positive, and set a photo challenge. As a group you could each try to capture a picture on your walk that reflects a word or idea (i.e. 'colour', 'peace', 'dusk' etc.).

Enjoy! - Walking with children is likely to contain some of the special moments they will remember for the rest of their lives. Don't take yourself too seriously – just enjoy this time you have in the outdoors. Have your eyes opened by the things they see and say.

Be thankful - When you get home, say thank you to your children for a lovely walk, and verbalise one or two things you especially enjoyed. You'll find this simple act of gratitude toward one another is very powerful.





Virtual Pilgrimage



*I see pilgrimage
much more as a state
of mind than a
physical challenge.*

Jill Baker

When planning a pilgrimage route, a sensory garden space for contemplation, or a quiet comfy place to be still and listen, it is always good to consider how we include those for whom a virtual pilgrimage may be the most accessible option. Here are some of the best current creative examples for your inspiration...

The team behind the development of Orkney's **St Magnus Way** are about to launch a **virtual pilgrimage** of the 58 mile route. This includes maps, videos, audio descriptions, photographs and accompanying information that help virtual pilgrims experience the St Magnus Way from their computer or smartphone.

Chase benefice, in the diocese of Oxford, have developed virtual pilgrimages to go alongside their Deanery Pilgrim Paths. These contain reflections & images that can be experienced from the comfort of your own home.

Beyond the View website offers blogs, poems, images and reflections from pilgrim journeys that help others connect with the sacred and go deeper.

Hope for Every Home have designed a really practical guide to **virtual prayer walking**, using online maps.

The new **Try Pilgrimage** website has some creative suggestions for accessible and virtual pilgrimages, including a downloadable **finger labyrinth** and leaflet based on the Psalms of ascent.

For those wishing to journey virtually with others, the charity Through The Roof offer an annual virtual **pilgrimage via zoom**.



*Pilgrimage is a
journey to the centre
of oneself.*

Thomas Merton





Pilgrim Story

Jill Baker is a Methodist living in Scotland who has led groups on pilgrimage to Lindisfarne, Whithorn, Jerusalem and Rome and is the author of 'Bigger and Wilder: Life, loss and learning to be a pilgrim' (Sacristy Press 2023).



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. That was devastating and whilst it didn't make me question my faith as such, it did make me question my spiritual practices. I needed God to be bigger and wilder and walking on windswept coasts and trudging through boggy fields enabled me to discover God in new ways. I started to think there must be more people out there who would like to take up pilgrimage. Methodist Women in Britain encouraged and supported this venture and I began to devise routes with my husband and to lead small groups of women. Looking back, I didn't research everything I should have done, but the questions people asked led me to reading and learning more of this ancient spiritual practice.

Methodism has a rich tradition of journey, which fits well with the pilgrim spirit. Over the centuries, pilgrimage has been unhelpfully linked at times with both material and spiritual elitism, but I think now we are reclaiming the idea that any journey can be a journey of discovery, about ourselves, about the world, about God. Another objection is that pilgrimage excludes those who aren't physically fit or who have family responsibilities. I see pilgrimage much more as a state of mind than a physical challenge, the pilgrim spirit can be found in your garden, in your church hall, down the street, even in an armchair. Wherever we find ourselves drawing on qualities such as attentiveness, courage, rhythm, risk we are living as pilgrims. I would never say that every Christian should travel to a holy site. But I would say every Christian can be a pilgrim. If you have intentionality and openness to God 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 and change your life!



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Jill Baker





Pilgrim Story

Eryl Parry is a Pioneer Priest working across Bangor Archdeaconry in North Wales. She leads Worship in the Wild and is also a volunteer chaplain on Bardsey Island



My journey to starting Worship in the Wild began as I moved back to my roots in North Wales eight years ago to take up the role of Pioneer Priest. This role requires team-building skills, the ability to listen well, to encourage folk on their journey, to create and curate spaces of belonging.

Pilgrimage is becoming increasingly popular. I often meet people on pilgrimage considering change. The physicality of a pilgrimage experience in relation to our metaphorical journey helps people to step into change & become unstuck.

Worship in the Wild is a monthly gathering. It's about the journey, rather than the destination - walking alongside people we can offer gentle encouragement to 'get to the heart of the matter'. Walking alongside others with deep attentiveness to our surroundings & each other, helps people feel listened to, loved, and accepted. I find it an easy and natural way to gently share faith.

To watch a series of short pilgrimage interviews with Eryl [view here](#)



Pilgrimage is a way of opening ourselves to the mystery of life.

Henri Nouwen

Eryl's top tips:

Ponder spot - build in times along the way to stop together and encourage stillness.

Be open to mystery - there's always going to be more that God reveals to us.

Horizon-looking gives us a sense of the eternal.



We may ignore, but we can nowhere evade, the presence of God. The world is crowded with Him. He walks everywhere incognito.

C S Lewis

Thin spaces give us a sense of closeness to God & those who have gone before us.

Be attentive to God speaking through the landscape, each other & stillness/ silence.

Wherever God has set our feet, people have been before.

Ancient rhythms & stories can help with a sense of God's continuing hospitality.





Further Links

To **find out more** about some of the places, projects and routes mentioned in this resource, please check out the following links...

Asland Pilgrim Ways

<https://lancashirewest.org.uk/aslandpilgrimways/>

Beyond The View <https://beyondtheview.org.uk/>

Champing <https://champing.co.uk/>

Chase benefice virtual pilgrimage

<https://thechasebenefice.org.uk/virtual-pilgrimages/>

Peak Wesley Way <https://peakwesleyway.com/>

Portscatho Retreat

<https://portscathounitedchurch.wordpress.com/>

St Aelred's Pilgrim Trail

<https://www.saintaelredspilgrimtrail.com/>

St Magnus Way <https://www.stmagnusway.com/>

Virtual prayer walk guide

<https://www.hopeforeveryhome.org/Groups/359721/Resources.aspx>

Worship in the Wild

<https://caruconwy.com/worship/worship-in-the-wild/>



Thank You

We're really grateful for all those named below, and their teams, who have given generously and freely of their time, wisdom and beautiful images...

Eryl Parry

Helen Hindle

Jill Baker

Melanie Burnside

Peterborough Diocese CYF team

Sarah Callaghan

Sue McWhinney

Valerie Mather (St Aelred's images)





Resources

Try Pilgrimage - www.trypilgrimage.org.uk

Small Pilgrim Places Network www.smallpilgrimplaces.org

British Pilgrimage Trust - www.britishpilgrimage.org



Contact Us



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<https://arthurrankcentre.org.uk/church-life/pilgrimage/>



A Blessing for the Journey

May God go with you, may God go ahead of you to prepare the way, illuminate your path, and enfold in safekeeping and peace all that you have left behind.

May God give you eyes to see the beauty of creation, ears to hear his gentle whisper, and warmth in your heart as you make this journey.

May God walk beside you in friendly companionship, and give you many treasures along the way.

+In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.