

Being A 'Pilgrim Place'



Pilgrimage and Outreach Today

The various ways of 'being a pilgrim' in Christianity offer a unique opportunity to communicate and connect with people, both inside and outside congregations, in ways which enrich both discipleship and mission. We are seeing Christian spirituality and contemporary interest and need converging in an exciting way.

Pilgrimage is such a useful theme because it resonates with so many strands of human experience and is almost the only Christian term that doesn't need explanation today. Most people instinctively know that pilgrimage is 'a special journey to a special place with a special meaning.' People also often speak of the whole of life as a journey. And many of us recognise we are on an ongoing inner emotional or spiritual journey. All these meanings are already present in the Bible and in Christian history and spirituality.

Tens of millions of people come into our church buildings each year, intrigued by their peace, history, art, or architecture, or drawn by the huge number of activities we provide. Many begin to think about their own lives but a high proportion don't have the background to explore the meaning of what they see and feel. Words like 'Gospel,' 'Salvation,' 'Cross,' or 'Resurrection' don't exactly trip off the tongue for most people. Church buildings can seem intimidating to newcomers – and hard to navigate and understand. But if we ask communities, visitors, and schools, 'Would you like to try being a pilgrim?' and provide resources, we know that this *does* communicate and is very appealing. So how can we help people explore these key pilgrim aspects of faith?

- Coming to see the whole of life as a pilgrim-journey with God at our side
- Using prayer and meditation as an inner spiritual pilgrimage to bring us closer to God
- Resourcing our life journeys through visiting special places to learn and find forgiveness, hope, healing, or guidance

Everyone is a 'Potential Pilgrim'

Who or what is a pilgrim? Is it only the person kitted out with rucksack and walking boots who has travelled some distance through sun, rain and mud? Is it only someone whose pilgrim journey is planned and purposeful. Both are very important and we want to welcome them. But is there also room for people who (often to their own surprise) find themselves responding spontaneously to taking time out, or being in a special place? This matters because it affects the way we treat people and what we offer them. If a pilgrim is a spiritually responsive person on a journey through life, then everyone is a 'potential pilgrim' if given the opportunities to explore faith at their own speed.

Being a Pilgrim Place: Welcome

Offering an open, open-ended welcome to everyone is key. Signage, words of greeting, *and* body language, all matter. People know instinctively whether they are really welcome and wanted - or whether there is some kind of question mark hanging over their heads because of their age, their background, or the way they are dressed.

Any church, in any setting, can be a 'Pilgrim Place' – providing beautiful, peaceful, meaningful, comforting, safe spaces full of stories, in which people can take breath, reflect, and find new energy for their journeys. Our buildings can speak powerfully of God and his love but sometimes they need help! When we are very familiar with buildings and with worship, it can be very hard to see them as newcomers do, so it is worth checking what we are actually communicating.

- Does the external signage *clearly* say, 'You are welcome to come in'? Is the entrance clearly marked?
- Internal signage needs to have invitations built in to reassure and encourage engagement. There is a world of difference between a notice stating, 'This Chapel is *reserved* for *private* prayer' and one which says, 'You are welcome to use this chapel to enjoy a time of peace and quiet prayer'.
- Are resources clearly available, with signs encouraging people to use them and take them away? 'Takeaways' are vital to help people to go on exploring faith after they leave.
- If there are welcomers, are they encouraged to remember that every day, by a smile, a greeting, a helpful word, they could literally change someone's life? If someone is feeling lonely, anxious, or marginalised, our welcome, our smile, our warmth, can either *confirm* or *transform* those feelings. We don't know what those who walk through the doors of our churches are carrying in their personal lives. However, given current levels of uncertainty and anxiety, most people will have something on their minds and may well be seeking comfort and hope.

Being a Pilgrim Place: Spaces and Activities

Looking afresh at our spaces and what they offer is important. Peaceful spaces which feel safe, and offer a glimpse of beauty, comfort, and hope, are greatly valued in a busy, pressurised, and often stressful world. Churches are uniquely equipped to enhance spiritual, mental, emotional, *and* physical wellbeing. Thus, those who come to a foodbank, a Toddler group, exercise class, or social club may well also appreciate a peaceful space, with some flowers, possibly some quiet music, candles to light, or prayer cards which assure them that God cares about them and their needs.

Offering creative ways to think about God and respond to him is also key. Science shows that human beings interact with the world entirely through our (more than 30) senses, including the sensation of movement and the relationship of our bodies to the spaces around us. That's why moving through church buildings, kneeling, lighting candles, writing prayers, placing pebbles in a bowl of water or silk flower petals on the altar, all help to forge deep connections, encouraging response and creating lasting memories. Research shows clearly that these experiences can really influence people's openness to God and their future spiritual growth and wellbeing.

Being a Pilgrim Place: Some Resources

Web resources

These include guidance on developing pilgrim routes, enhancing the experience of those visiting our churches, and examples of church-based pilgrimage routes.

- [Arthur Rank Centre Pilgrimage Toolkit](#)
- [Try Pilgrimage](#)
- [Faith in the North](#)

Faith in the North resources for use in churches

See the [CPO Faith in the North](#) website.

- **Free 'Being a Pilgrim' Prayer Cards** (Journeying to Special Places; Finding Where We Belong; Inner Journey; Finding Forgiveness and New Life; Learning and Living; Enjoying the Wonders of Creation)
- **Free 'Exploring Faith' Trails for use in churches** (themes: Being a Pilgrim, Discovering the Northern Saints and Exploring the Lord's Prayer) offering simple, accessible reflections and prayers which can be used in any church
- **'Pilgrim Place' Welcome Signs** (important because many people are unsure if they are 'allowed' to enter churches or explore them)
- **Resources to help children and young people engage with your building**