

# Summer pilgrimage

## AIM

To discuss the opportunities for making pilgrimage as part of our faith journey.

## INTRODUCTION

Pilgrimage, the making of a significant journey to discover more about faith and life, is part of the spiritual tradition of many faiths. In the Christian tradition anyone can be a pilgrim and whilst there are traditional sites of pilgrimage associated with specific things about the faith you could make a pilgrimage to anywhere providing it is with prayerful intention to go with God's guidance.

There are many places linked to pilgrimage both in the UK and overseas. You may even have some local places of pilgrimage near you. These might be linked to the lives of faithful people or events in the past, but they can still act as places of vision for the future, as we travel to them and pray.

### Let me tell you about a pilgrimage from Sheffield to Iona

Our journey began at 6.15am at Meadowhall Station on Saturday August 26<sup>th</sup> 2000. Thirty people of varying ages (from 1 year old to 80ish) boarded the first of four trains to Doncaster. Three more joined our group in Doncaster and we began the longer train journey to Edinburgh.

There was lots to do on the journey. Someone had prepared some activity packs and booklets to read and before too long (3 hours) we were in Edinburgh. Changing platforms in this station had its moments! However, we managed to get thirty three people, two pushchairs, one baby carrier and luggage for England (and Scotland) across a bridge too far, down on the one lift, over the road, past a million other people rushing around and onto our third train of the day. Glasgow was but a short journey away and we all squeezed onto this train wherever we could get.

There were a few anxious moments when we weren't 100% sure all thirty three of us had actually boarded this train, but after a mildish panic we found everyone had made it – phew! Soon arriving in Glasgow our next challenge was to repeat the alighting procedure and get off this train and 'speedily' onto the Oban train – (not forgetting thirty three people, two pushchairs, one baby carrier and friends we had begun to meet who were also trying to get the Oban train) - and ... we had begun to wonder just what was in that 'pink suitcase'!

We were on this train for three hours so some of us had a bit of a sleep, some of us read, some of us just continued to eat, some of us just sapped up the beautiful scenery we were travelling through. We passed the River Clyde, Gare Loch, Loch Long, Loch Lomond and more besides - Just breathtakingly beautiful! Our pilgrimage was just beginning!

We arrived in Oban just in time for tea! Chips and fish seemed to go down well, before we boarded the first of our ferries. The luggage was lighter now – we had all eaten most of our packed meals – but it seemed a very, very, long way up the ramp with all the luggage. The 'pink suitcase' could always be used as an anchor if needed!

The Isle of Mull was soon reached and our coach was waiting to take us on the next leg of our journey. We had been travelling now for about twelve hours – so although we were all excited we were beginning to feel a little weary. The drive was along a very, very lot of winding roads and we had to stop and start very, very, very quickly! Just over one hour later we were preparing to leave the coach and board our second ferry.

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It was beginning to go dusk by now and we could see the lights of Iona in the distance and our excitement was refuelled.

We had arrived!!!

Everyday in Iona Abbey we were welcome to worship and there were two services – one in the morning and one in the evening. The Saturday evening one began outside the Abbey in the near dark with a sung with invitation to worship. Once inside the Abbey the glow from so many candles lighting this beautiful place was something truly unforgettable.

We met again in the Abbey for Sunday morning worship and communion. One of our young people helped to serve this and take the offertory. Drinks were enjoyed after the service in the cloisters when we began to meet many more people who we would get to know during our stay on Iona.

Some of us had prepared for West Coast of Scotland weather but Sunday was the first of six beautiful days of sunshine. Wednesday straight after the morning worship we gathered together for the Island Pilgrimage. Around 70 people began this walk on yet another very hot day!



We stopped off at various places of interest and for some of the journey we shared and 'listened' to silence and peace together.



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We stopped at the Nunnery which is now in ruins but is surrounded by a very peaceful garden.

The question – “What did the nuns do in the nunnery”? gave us opportunity to reflect on this.

At St Columba’s Bay we left our mark – as we would - the pebbles around the fish say who we are!



In a quiet moment we were encouraged to throw a pebble back into the sea to help us leave behind all that troubled us. We collected pebbles as a reminder of our time here – some of us were weighted down with them – perhaps even causing some unbalance on the climb back from here?

Halfway round our seven mile walk we enjoyed our picnic and a much earned mug of tea!

Our first hint of rain was on Thursday morning when we were eagerly preparing for Bob Warwicker to arrive on the island, after his 460 mile bike ride to Iona.



It was obvious ‘one or two’ people were extremely excited and somewhat relieved when

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the ferry arrived with Bob and his cycle. We had 'sent' Bob off on the previous Tuesday from Shiregreen URC. Over a cup of tea and some squash and looking decidedly slimmer Bob entertained us with stories about some bits of the cycle ride and descriptions of some of the scenery only seen by the cyclist. Bob was no sooner there than gone! We waved Bob on his way – and sang as he left. He now had to set off to Craignure on the other side of Mull to be there in time to meet us the following morning for the second of our ferries home.

Thankfully the weather had once again cleared and we had blue skies and glorious sunshine.

The Baptisms on the beach for some of us was a new experience. No matter how many times we read about John The Baptist and of Jesus being baptised we might never imagine the baptisms we witness being done anywhere other than in church – with water from the font! At the edge of the sea, we joined together to bless the water. Three of our young people were then baptised in the sea at Marty's Bay with some sixty or seventy people joining together to witness and worship to make this a truly meaningful and memorable day not only for these young people and their families but for all of us who were able to share in the celebration. Sharing Communion together on the beach during this service was also an experience which some of us will never forget.



Our new friends from Wales offered the final prayers in English and Welsh. Sometimes it's just too hard to put these reflective moments into words.

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Friday and we prepared to leave and even now, we still don't know what could possibly have been in the pink suitcase. What did all the commuters in Glasgow make of us on the train taking up their train with all our luggage?

Clearly, on reflection, much happened during this week. The time on Iona gave us opportunity to explore our spirituality and share our creativity by collecting pebbles (even seaweed), in prayer, in conversation, by painting and in seeing for ourselves. Having this time together helped us to listen and talk to each other. We've asked people what they thought about our visit to Iona. Here's what some said:

It is a peaceful place, different from the place where we usually live!

The peace and isolation of island life struck many of the group and was appreciated, at least for a week.

It is a rural place with animals and scenery and things we don't often see and hear. Living in a city like we do we forget that these are common experiences to some people. We enjoyed them all the more because we don't get them so often. Sheep outside the front door for a week was different, as was the clear night sky which meant we could see the stars very well.

It is an island; that means it has sea and beaches all the way around.

Most of the group enjoyed the sea. It seemed even clearer and bluer, the sand was very soft and none of the beaches were crowded, except when we were all on one at once! Some members of the group went in the sea nearly every day, other just looked at it. One evening in the Abbey the service was about the sea, a source of life for an island community.

It is a relaxing place. We felt right away from all the things we usually think about. This is something we all need to do from time to time, especially as we are all involved in doing so much during the year. It was good to have other people look after us and no one mentioned having to clean the toilets or cut up vegetables. We did do jobs, at least in the McLeod Centre, to make our contribution to the running of the centre, but as these were shared no one had to do a lot. Generally we were all well fed even if sometimes it was a bit of a guessing game trying to decide what it was!

It is a friendly place. We all got to know each other better and we met and got to know lots of other people from all over the place. We talked with each other at length, something we don't always have as much time for as we would like and we played together, which was fun.

It is something we are all thankful for. Words cannot adequately express how grateful we all are to those who made the trip possible, including all the fund raisers and those who gave contributions. It was wonderful; what had seemed a large task had actually really happened through team work. Where to next time and when: these questions have not yet been answered. All we know is, next time we're taking EVERYBODY!

*Thanks be to God,  
for all the fun and all the love and everything.*

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### SO YOU WANT TO MAKE A PILGRIMAGE?

The first time you do this it can be a good idea to go with a group of other people so that you can share wisdom and experience. Your Synod may be planning such a thing or your local churches together or some other group. However, you may also know other folks who'd like to embark on a pilgrimage and then you could plan something together.

There may be one a place of pilgrimage near you or one you have heard of. But there's no need to restrict yourself to such places. You could make a pilgrimage to another local church for an away day for example or to a local place of interest like Whitby Abbey or similar.

A small group might help with planning and any fund raising you might need to do. Spend some time reflecting on what you hope to gain from the pilgrimage and in preparing people to take part by providing information about what you intend to do and time to pray together as a group before you set off.

### Prayer for starting a pilgrimage

At last we are on our way!

Travel with us, Jesus,

As we, your friends and followers,

Travel together to find fun and faith.

### EVALUATION

Please try to answer these questions for yourself and for others who will use this material:

1. What was the most helpful thing?
2. What was the least helpful thing?
3. What would you like to try now?

### THE NEXT STEP

If you want more summer materials please revisit the website. Please send in your pilgrimage stories and pictures.

### Acknowledgements

Thanks to Gwen Smithies for her account of the Shiregreen URC pilgrimage to Iona. This material has been prepared by Janet Lees, the Vision4life co-ordinator.

### HOW TO FEEDBACK TO VISION4LIFE?

If you wish to offer any feedback – brickbats and bouquets are equally welcome! – you can do so in various ways.

You can email the Vision4Life steering group about general or website V4L issues via the website or at [admin@vision4life.org.uk](mailto:admin@vision4life.org.uk)

If you have comments and particularly contributions to the prayer year, you can email the V4L prayer year coordinator via [prayer@vision4life.org.uk](mailto:prayer@vision4life.org.uk)

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If you want to make contributions or ask questions about other V4L years you can email:

Year 3 – Transformed for Evangelism: [evangelism@vision4life.org.uk](mailto:evangelism@vision4life.org.uk)

