

# **An Experience of Pilgrimage**

## ***In a congregational setting***

### **Pilgrimage: preparing for the experience**

#### **Ahead of time:**

1. Make enough copies of the “Experiencing Pilgrimage” handout page that is the final page of this document.
2. Gather enough pencils/pens to have one for each expected participant, plus a few more.
3. Read through the following document to prepare thoughts, presentation, ideas, considerations, context -- as necessary.

## Pilgrimage: what is it

People often think of a pilgrimage in terms of making a literal journey to some exotic place in the world. But, a pilgrimage is not simply, mostly, or only about traveling from one place in the world to another, and back again. Pilgrimage is different than a vacation.

As pilgrimage expert, Phil Cousineau, notes, “[pilgrimage] is an ancient tradition of the transformative journey to a sacred place.” Cousineau also notes that “such journeys tend to happen at life’s crossroads.” As such, pilgrimage is something that is more about the internal aspects of the journey, rather than the external conditions. Pilgrimage involves ritual, risk and renewal. It is about intention; about making the most of one’s time rather than stumbling through time. Pilgrimage may, indeed, involve going to a certain sacred geographical place far from home, in order to allow something holy to happen, in that place, that can’t happen anywhere else; to be healed in some way, or reconciled, forgiven or to find the means to forgive, or to understand. But spiritual guide and story-teller, Vivienne Hull, has noted that, “Unlike mere travel, a pilgrimage is a journey into the landscape of the soul.”

In this sense, then, pilgrimage doesn’t necessarily have to involve planes, trains, boats or automobiles. Such can happen very close to home; in a worship service, a walk in the woods, at an art gallery, reading a book, and traveling to be with a loved one during their final days of physical life. And yet, there is something to the power of a pilgrimage in unfamiliar territory, while far from one’s geographical home.

During one person’s initial pilgrimage to the land of their ancestors, they were utterly surprised by a deep new and empowering sense of peace. Such came in knowing, for the first time in their life, what it meant to come home; to be most most truly “home.” So transformative was this new wisdom the pilgrimage offered, that the person now had the gifts to be “at home” wherever they happened to be from that point forward along their life’s journey.

Pilgrimage has the ability to help prodigals of all shapes and situations find their way home in spiritual, relational, personal and other ways. Another way to say this is, to paraphrase Phil Cousineau’s thoughts, “pilgrimage is one answer to the question, ‘Do you know where I can find God?’” And, in “finding” God along the way, we can go home realizing God has been, and will be, with us forevermore. We come, finally, to know – “home” is less a place and more a relationship with the Divine.

## **Pilgrimage: a way to practice it**

Before handing out a copy of the next page to each participant, share, in your own words, how coming to church each Sunday (or whenever your regular weekly gatherings are) is like a pilgrimage. You may need to think about this ahead of time and prepare, but share conversationally from your heart, rather than just reading from something written beforehand.

Talk briefly about how you “find God” in this place called “the church;” how the place that is the church helps reminds you of something more. Share how this place moves you beyond the mere physicality of the location and structure, more deeply into the realm of Spirit, into holy connection with community and relationship with God. Reflect on how such is part of what is meant by “the landscape of the soul.”

Share quickly how one specific location within the church (or on church property), or a physical item in the building, holds (for you) an especially holy/sacred reminder/manifestation of God’s intimate presence in your life and relationship with you. *(ie.- baptistry, a certain stained glass window, sanctuary, but also perhaps an out of the way nook, the parking lot, a certain door, the coffee pot, etc.)*

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Now, pass out the handout (next page), and invite them to take a few minutes to consider the questions and write down brief answers, thoughts, or notes to each question. At this time they should keep their answers to themselves. You, also should fill out this form, but use an object or location not likely to be chosen by someone else.

After enough time for them to complete their handouts without overthinking the issue, tell them your group is about to take a pilgrimage through the building, not simply to travel the hallways, but to journey into an awareness of God’s presence through this place.

Invite them to join you as a group. Encourage them to travel quietly and/or in silence. Then, all get up and you lead them to the location or object you wrote on your handout.

When the group gathers there, briefly share your answers on your hand out: what you chose, what makes it holy, etc. Then, invite them to join you in prayer and you pray the short prayer you wrote at the bottom of your handout.

After praying, ask for a volunteer to go next, to lead the group to the place or item they wrote on their handout. Repeat the process at that location with that volunteer leading. Then, have each person take a turn, leading to their place and sharing their answers and prayer.

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When everyone has taken a turn leading the group to the location of their “thin place”, return to the room in which you first gathered. Briefly summarize how just about anything can hold meaning to empower their faith and life. Invite them to try a project in

the next week: to each day choose a different ordinary place or thing that regularly shows up in their life; invite them to answer the same questions for that thing that are on their handout. Then, invite them to consider at the end of the week:

1. How God's presence and empowering holy realm abides all around them all the time?
2. How might they move more intentionally through life, in a way to stay more in touch with such Presence?
3. How can their whole life experience be more like a holy pilgrimage, rather than just a tourist passing through?

Close the time with a short prayer consecrating them to the holy presence of God that is with them in all places and times.

# *Experiencing Pilgrimage*

• *Thin Places along the Pilgrim's Path* •

Location or object:

What makes this a holy, or “thin place”, in your understanding:

For you, how is God present, manifest, incarnated in this particular place or by this object:

A prayer for this location: