

## Walking backwards through Scotland's history



Gathered in the sacristy of St. Mungo's Cathedral, Glasgow, a group of men and women, all wearing rucksacks, examined the 5 bible texts in the floor with interest. Each text mentioned walking, highly appropriate as the ten folk were about to set off on pilgrimage, journeying by foot, train and bus the 150 miles to Whithorn in Galloway. St. Mungo, also known as St. Kentigern, is recognised as the founder of Glasgow around 558AD,

before his missionary zeal took him into Cumbria, where many churches are dedicated to him, and on into Wales where he founded the city of St. Asaph, returning to Glasgow later in life and dying there around 613 AD. The pilgrimage set out to link Glasgow with the earlier settlement of Whithorn and the pilgrimage sites associated with St. Ninian's arrival there in 397AD. The adventure was supported by the Discipleship and Ministries Learning Network (DMLN) to further pilgrimage as a means of grace and to offer experience to a mixture of lay people, deacons and presbyters who hope to find ways to incorporate pilgrimage and the pilgrim ethos into their vocations.

Ex-Vice-President of Conference, Jill Baker, along with Andrew her husband, had devised the route, and they led the pilgrims – physically and spiritually – throughout the week. Each morning we read of the pilgrim people in the book of Exodus, and around midday each day stopped to reflect on verses from Luke, picking up on the strong sense of travel in that gospel. Our evening reflections included words from Psalm 104 as we rejoiced in a week of open-air living, feeling connected to all of God's creation as we travelled through cities, along coasts, across rolling hills and into villages, walking around 50 miles over the 5 days.

One of the aims of the venture had also been to connect with contemporary Methodism in Scotland; not such an easy task in a country where Methodists form a tiny minority (fewer than 2,000 throughout Scotland) and vast areas have no Methodist churches. Those who gathered at Andrew and Jill's manse in Glasgow on Sunday night were able to share in conversation with Gary Williams, Scotland's DMLN Co-ordinator, about how Methodism works (or doesn't work) north of the border. Monday's walking, mainly along the Clyde and the White Cart Rivers, ended at Paisley Central Hall, one of the iconic buildings of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, where a wonderful Methodist tea was provided to refresh thirsty, weary walkers and more insights into the challenges and glories of Scottish Methodism could be gleaned.

After time in Paisley Abbey on Tuesday morning, the pilgrims travelled by train to Troon and walked the coastal path south to Ayr – delighted with the sight of a sea otter running across the beach as they paused for bible reflection on the way. The Methodist Church in Ayr closed in 1929, but a faithful group of Methodists from a wide area who now worship in other denominations have met together every quarter for the past 30 years for fellowship. The pilgrims enjoyed an evening with members of this group in the home of Sheila and Nazim Merchant, and were additionally blessed by the company of Roger and Marion Walton, also in Scotland at that time.



A longer (and very early) train journey down to Stranraer launched us into Wednesday, which, after a short bus ride to Castle Kennedy, proved a long walking day through the beautiful, varied, Galloway landscape to Glenluce, pausing to sing and pray at the ruined Abbey just before arriving in the village. Here we were fed and watered by Rev. Clare Burl, supernumerary Methodist minister now working with the Church of Scotland in Stranraer. As the hotel in Glenluce had not re-opened on schedule, Clare and her

friends had also offered bed & breakfast, for which we were most grateful, and it was good to spend an evening in sharing and prayer with them.

Some stunning coastal walking on Thursday, combined with another bus journey, took us onto the Isle of Whithorn where we explored Ninian's chapel and the little landing bay where earlier pilgrims would have arrived to honour Ninian, before walking several miles inland to his burial site in Whithorn itself. That was our destination on Friday – we spent the morning in the little town of Whithorn, site of “Candida Casa”, the 4<sup>th</sup> Century monastery and missionary training ground established by Ninian, so named for its shining white walls. Whithorn now appears to be a sleepy, forgotten town, but, as we discovered, there is more there than meets the eye. The museum explained much of the history and we were delighted to attend the “Ninian Moment” at noon in the Roman Catholic church and meet the “living stones” of the area. This short act of worship is held daily throughout the summer and we were so very warmly welcomed as “real” pilgrims!



Friday afternoon offered the “sacred centre” of the pilgrimage – time on the beach in and around Ninian's Cave. The sea was sparkling in bright sunshine, the huge variety of stones and pebbles on the beach all seemed to have their own stories to tell, the shadows of the cave seemed alive with the whispers of centuries of prayer. We shared together in our own prayers and hymns, in reflecting on the long chain of

witness which linked us to Moses and Elijah and their cave experiences, to Jesus and Paul and their encounters on beaches, and to Ninian who is believed to have used the cave to pray. We remembered other links in that chain of witness – individuals whom we have loved and see no more – we laughed and lamented together, as we had done on so much of the journey.

“Learning to walk together” is perhaps the simplest definition of pilgrimage and one to which we aspired during the week; very soon this handful of people – not all of whom knew each other beforehand – became a formational, caring, supportive band. There is so much wisdom within the pilgrim ethos which can speak to our church life today – as it has done for centuries. We discovered such timeless spirituality in the prayers

and blessings from Donald Smith's very helpful "Pilgrim Guide to Scotland" along our way; each day began with these evocative words:

Following the rivers, walking ancient paths,  
Kentigern our guide, Ninian our destination,  
glimmer of hidden light on sacred ground.  
May peace be in our steps, meditation in our rest  
as all creation breathes the mystery.

Jill Baker August 2018

Pilgrims by St. Mungo's tomb in Glasgow Cathedral: L to R: Ms. Lynne Bradley, Rev. Helen Penfold, Rev. Peter Barber, Mrs. Jill Baker, Rev. Andrew Baker, Deacon Gail Morgan, Rev. Julian Penfold, Mrs. Gillian Womersley; kneeling: Deacon Anita Shaw, Deacon Marlene Skuce.