

Karen Salmon – Abstract

St Patrick's Pilgrimages: Journey to Place – Journey to God

My research examines nine facilitators' and nine pilgrims' experiences of the physicality, locality and spirituality of pilgrimage to three geographically diverse places associated with St Patrick – St Patrick's Way, Lough Derg and Croagh Patrick. To collect data I utilised semi-structured interviews within a qualitative, interpretive design. Research questions focus on what specific events, experiences, and/or relational dynamics trigger a sense of journeying to God for pilgrims, how times of prayer or devotional structures contribute to their experience and how pilgrims describe their sense of holy place. Findings indicate that the rhythm of walking, climbing, fasting, vigils and prayer slowed pilgrims down, gave them space to consider the present and the past, and promoted their personal and spiritual growth. Interviewees reported experiencing divine presence and protection. Interviewees attest that certain places enabled a depth of prayer and connection that was transformative. Comments suggest that it is the accretion of prayer and worship, deep spirituality, patterns of prayers and the intermingling of isolated, beautiful landscape with story that give a sense of holy place. Interviewees said pilgrimage facilitates fellowship with past and present pilgrims and ecumenical unity. Implications for mission and ministry include the importance of space, prayer and nature to facilitate divine encounters. The embodied experience of pilgrimage is pastorally therapeutic, promoting a sense of well-being, changed perspective and the ability to persevere. Pilgrimage and Patrick are unifying forces, enabling Christians to create a visible witness of unity in the body of Christ. Sharing our stories offers missional opportunities for Gospel witness. In conclusion, a theology of pilgrimage needs to incorporate contemporary pilgrimage within the biblical concept of life as a journey to God's presence in the New Jerusalem. Contemporary pilgrimage facilitates this dynamic journey of faith, because pilgrimage is more than geography, it is a landscape of memory and tradition accessed by lived experience.