

The background of the page features a photograph of a person walking away on a sandy beach towards the ocean. In the foreground, several surfboards are lying on the sand. The top left corner has a green textured area with the title 'The Way of Pilgrimage' in white and orange text.

The Way of Pilgrimage

Planning a Pilgrimage

by Ciona Rouse

Once you've decided your group is ready for a walking pilgrimage experience, you should first consider a few things:

Length

Theme

Location

Length. How much time do you have to spend with your group on pilgrimage? Are you limited to only a couple of hours? Are you hoping to have several days on pilgrimage? Determining the amount of time you have for pilgrimage will help you select a location and theme for your pilgrimage. If you have only 2-3 hours, you will want to stay in your local community. In a full day, you may have time to drive from one part of your city to another in addition to walking. A full day may give you more flexibility and more encounter stops. Of course, if you have several days, you can lead your group to another town, state or even country depending on your needs.

Theme. What has your group been studying that leads you to desire pilgrimage? Did they just complete *The Way of Pilgrimage*? In this case, you may want to host a pilgrimage according to the theme of the book you completed. For example, if you completed the *Companions on the Pilgrimage* volume, you may want to focus your pilgrimage on people in the pilgrimage location who have made an impact on the community or the church. So if you take a pilgrimage to England, you may want to focus on seeing God through the Wesley family.

If you completed the *Prayer: Heart of the Pilgrimage* volume, then you may want create a theme on the sacred quiet spaces in your location. For example, in Washington, D.C. you may want to visit the National Cathedral and pray there. But you may also want to have an encounter moment at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial on Constitution Avenue and talk about how it has become a sacred space for prayer for those who lost someone in the war or in other wars. Or you may also want to have an encounter moment right in the middle of the busy DuPont Circle and talk about how we can create sacred spaces for ourselves even in the least likely of places and in the midst of a fast-paced world.

Of course, your desired theme may not be directly related to *The Way of Pilgrimage* series. Maybe your group has been studying social justice issues, so you want to do a pilgrimage to explore God's calling in the midst of economic disparity in your community. Or maybe you want to encounter God's presence in history by taking a civil rights pilgrimage. Maybe you desire to create a pilgrimage theme about caring for the earth and want your pilgrimage to focus on nature. If your group has been discussing forgiveness, then your pilgrimage may have encounter moments focusing on forgiveness and grace. Your theme will help you narrow down your location. Or maybe you know where you want to go, so your location may help you determine your theme.

Location. Depending on your group's experience, you may want to select your pilgrimage length and theme before determining your location. Of course, if you start with a location in mind, it will likely help you create a theme. We'll consider both options.

If you know you have a couple of weeks to focus on forgiveness, then maybe you decide to take a pilgrimage to South Africa and explore the Truth & Reconciliation Movement that ushered in incredulous forgiveness after the fall of apartheid. Or if you have only a few hours to focus on the same theme, then you know you must stay in your hometown. So, then, discover your community's history. Are there places in the town where there was once great pain but forgiveness has led to healing?

If you don't know the theme but know that you want to stay in your community, then you can get to work studying your community's ancient and recent history. Walk the streets. What interesting places do you see? Is there a clock in the midst of a busy street? Maybe your encounter moment can talk about God's timing as opposed to our timing.

Is there a wall with graffiti on it? Maybe your encounter moment can focus on the messy parts of our lives we wish to cover up like some wish to cover up the graffiti on the wall.

Is there a unique church sanctuary? Is your community famous for something like Motor City (Detroit), Music City (Nashville) or Bean Town (Boston)? For example, in Seattle, Washington—famous for their many coffee shops—one encounter moment may focus on decaffeinated Christianity—the kind of watered-down faith that does not get us excited about serving God—versus caffeinated living for Christ.

Or maybe there's a seemingly odd place in your community that can usher in a special moment with God. For example, if you're in Portland, Oregon, you may want to stop at Mill Ends Park—the smallest park in the world (two feet in diameter)—and have an encounter moment addressing the way God works through the small things as well as the big things of the world.

Once you've determined the length, theme, and location of your pilgrimage, half of the journey to pilgrimage is complete. Now you want to plan the encounter moments on the pilgrimage. What are these encounter moments? Well, you hope your group will understand pilgrimage enough to keep their eyes peeled for God all along the way. These encounter moments, however, are pauses on the journey where the entire group is intentionally looking for God in the midst of a specific stop on the pilgrimage site. These moments will tie together your theme and pilgrimage objective to seek and discover God wherever you journey.

Encounter moments can be quiet moments where your group is asked to observe the space while journaling. Maybe your encounter moment will highlight a scripture text that comes to life in the space. Or maybe you leave the group with a question that will help them seek God in that space. Depending on the length of your trip, you may want to pack several (3-5) encounter moments in a few hours or spread out the encounter moments (7-8) over several days. Be creative! God is present in so many ways. The possibilities for encounter moments are endless!

Sample Encounter Moments:

In a local park where several people without homes sleep and congregate, pass out photographs of homes and meals featured in popular home and garden magazines. Then invite the group to journal about how God calls us to serve. Read Matthew 25:36-41 in the park.

In New York City, visit Ground Zero where the old World Trade Center towers once stood. Invite the group to be silent in this place after you read a passage from Lamentations. Invite the group to each write a lament in their journals reflecting on the tragedy on 9/11/2001.

At a riverfront, invite the group to consider the many uses of water. Share specific history of the specific river, if known (for example, if it was once a major source for trade or if it ever caused a flood). Reflect on how water cleanses and destroys, is life giving and takes life away. Talk with the youth about how we experience the baptismal waters of God in both the ups and downs of our lives.

On a civil rights pilgrimage in Greensboro, NC, invite one of the surviving members of the Greensboro Four, who started the lunch counter sit-in movement, to speak to your group.

LOGISTICS

After planning each encounter moment carefully, you must shape the logistics as you would shape any other excursion with your group. The logistics, however, should fit with the total pilgrimage experience if possible.

Transportation. Can you walk the entire pilgrimage? Will you need to drive to a starting destination or from the final destination? Will you need to fly?

Food. Will your group need to make food arrangements? How can this best fit with the pilgrimage experience? If your pilgrimage is focused on a theme about poverty, it's probably not a good idea to host a big feast at your church unless you're going to host a feast in the spirit of Luke 14:13 and invite the poor to feast with you.

Lodging. If you're staying overnight, what is the most cost-efficient place to stay that fits your pilgrimage style? If you're focusing on sacred spaces, then you may want to lodge at a convent, monastery, or church. If you are focusing on companions on the pilgrimage, then you may want to organize with a local church in the area and stay in people's homes for a night. This way, your group can make new companions on the journey.

Chaperones. If your group is underage, then you will want to arrange to have enough chaperones with you, as you would on any youth trip.

Spiritual Director. Determine who will lead each encounter moment. Will it be you as the leader or one of the chaperones? Make sure whomever leads each moment is fully prepared to serve as a spiritual guide on this pilgrimage.

Journals. Will your group need journals for the pilgrimage encounter moments? If you're doing a nature pilgrimage, maybe you'll want to make sure your journals are made of recycled materials.

Permission. If you are taking youth, you will need to go through whatever permission process is in place for your group. You will also want to inform the parents of every detail of the pilgrimage.

Finally, you are ready for pilgrimage! Make sure your group understands pilgrimage. We strongly recommend preparing them for pilgrimage by leading them through one of *The Way of Pilgrimage* volumes before taking a pilgrimage.

Invite each participant to be present to one another and to God on each step of the journey. Most importantly, as the spiritual director of the pilgrimage, you must also be present to God and the movement of the Spirit along the journey. Maybe your plans change because of road construction or a sick participant. This is OK! Allow each step along the pilgrim's way to be new even for you!