

Minutes of the Cross-Party Group on Faith meeting
Faith journeys: Pilgrimage and its impact in Wales

Wednesday 1 February 2023 from 12.00 – 13.15

Present:

1. Ainsley Griffiths – Church in Wales
2. Altaf Hussain MS
3. Caroline Plant – Replenished Life
4. Christine Abbas – Baha'i Council of Wales
5. Colin Heyman – Jewish Community
6. Darren Millar MS (Chair)
7. Elliott Vanstone – Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales
8. Gareth Edwards – Christian Institute
9. Gethin Rhys – Cytun
10. Jaeyeon Choe (Speaker)
11. Jim Stewart (Secretary & note-taker)
12. Jonathan Isaac
13. Lee Gonzalez – Member Support Staff (Joel James MS)
14. Mark Isherwood MS
15. Molly Conrad – Catholic Church
16. Nathan Sadler – Evangelical Alliance
17. Phil McCarthy – Catholic Church
18. Richard Parry – Coleridge Cymru
19. Russell George MS
20. Sam Rowlands MS
21. Sarah Jones
22. Simon Plant – Replenished Life
23. Siva Sivapalan – Hindu Council of Wales
24. Tara Moorcroft – Member Support Staff (Darren Millar MS)
25. Tom Giffard MS

Apologies:

1. Aled Edwards, Cytun
2. Andrew Misell, Alcohol Change
3. Bonnie Williams, Housing Justice Cymru
4. Fr Sebastian Jones, Catholic Church
5. Kate McColgan, Interfaith council of Wales
6. Llyr Gruffydd AS
7. Stephen Lodwick, British Army

1. Darren welcomed everyone and reminded people of the purpose of the group – to celebrate the contribution of Wales' faith communities across Wales to Welsh civic society

We have looked at faith tourism previously but it was an opportune time to have a fresh look at this important matter.

Darren introduced the speaker, Dr Jaeyeon Choe, currently with Glasgow Caledonian University but formerly a faculty member of Swansea University. She is a tourism researcher and an Associate Editor of the Tourism Geographies Journal.

2. Jaeyeon gave a presentation in which she emphasised:

- That pilgrimage is the oldest form of travel in history and has increased in popularity during the pandemic
- What are the reasons for the recent renaissance? Spiritual wellbeing, social aspect and coming out of pandemic where people have lost loved ones
- The community regeneration aspects of faith tourism: Kumanokodo in Japan was affected by the tsunami but has now opened a new route. The town had been depressed but this has been welcomed by locals as it brings tourists into the area.

3. Discussion time chaired by Darren

Darren Millar MS

Darren stresses the positive benefits she highlighted and mentioned that Wales was one of the first countries in the world outside of Israel to develop a faith tourism action plan

Christine Abbas

Highlighted the [Green Pilgrimage Network](#)

Ainsley Griffiths

Spoke about the medieval churches and St David's. 2023 marks 900 years since Pope Calixtus II declared that 2 pilgrimages to St David's was equivalent to one to Rome. There are lots of activities going on in St David's this year. Although St David's seems inaccessible to modern pilgrims, this wasn't the case in medieval times as people often travelled by sea and it was on shipping routes between the Bristol Channel and Ireland as well as routes going from Scotland to Cornwall and Brittany.

How can we make a greater connection with the Wales Coastal Path? How can we entice walkers to the sites?

Jaeyeon Choe

There needs to be conversations between representatives from walkers' groups, local businesses and local authorities or else nothing will happen. The first step would be to access funding to develop this

Lee Gonzales (office of Joel James MS)

Lee is an ordinand for the Church in Wales placed in the Glamorgan Heritage Coast. As part of his work he is looking at pilgrimage out of Llantwit Major, the first monastery in Britain and the oldest place of pilgrimage in the UK

Highlighted that all the components are there to get this project up and running (e.g. bus routes, toilets nearby) but there is a capacity issue and sometimes a lack of expertise (e.g. website design, where to get signage)

Darren Millar MS

Is there any country that does faith tourism and pilgrimage particularly well?

Jaeyeon Choe

Japan has done excellent work.

Simon Plant

Simon was on pilgrimage the previous week. Raised the issue of access to less able-bodied people as the coastal path is not easy to navigate. On February 26, Songs of Praise is on St David's Day on pilgrimage

Note – here is the link - <https://www.bbc.co.uk/iplayer/episode/m001ip1c/songs-of-praise-st-davids-pilgrimages>

Jaeyeon Choe

Wonders if there is funding and support from the government (UK/Wales?)

She feels that pilgrimages are being promoted in England and wonders if there is a bit more support and care in England. She was shocked when she came to Wales and saw how rich its faith history was and was surprised at the lack of support, investment and attention.

Richard Parry

Works for the Cultural Facilitation Company, Coleridge Cymru

What research has been done, or might be done, about the benefits of knowing that you live in a place which is receiving people who are interested in the big questions of life?

Jaeyeon Choe

Highlighted Japan and studies on community impact

Tom Giffard, Shadow Tourism Minister

Asked how to effectively raise awareness of pilgrimage sites, not only on one's own doorstep but on the other side of the country, or internationally. How can that be effectively marketed?

With regards to people who come to Wales to visit pilgrimage sites from abroad, and the impact that has on businesses, how can we get more local businesses engaged in that process?

Darren Millar MS

The reason why faith tourism spend per visitor is higher than some other types of visitor is that because, if someone is coming on a pilgrimage, they're staying overnight. So local businesses do need to get involved in promoting pilgrimage and faith tourism. Is that happening elsewhere in the world?

Jaeyeon Choe

Often pilgrimage visits are for a number of days and so tourists will spend money on accommodation, transportation and food and in local cafes etc. So yes, local businesses should get more involved so that a package-type of pilgrimage tourism can be developed. The sites are already being promoted but if more of a package-type approach was developed, it would make the sites more accessible and make it easier for people to join up.

Sam Rowlands MS, Chair of the Cross-Party Group on Tourism

This isn't a topic that we've discussed in the 18 months in which I've been chair of the Cross-Party group on Tourism, although it may have been discussed in a previous Senedd. It is certainly something that we should consider for the agenda and in particular the role of Visit Wales in promoting and supporting the relevant pilgrimages. Happy for an action from this meeting to be for faith tourism to be a topic for a future meeting of the Cross-Party Group on Tourism.

There is a role not only for Welsh Government to play in marketing and promoting this but also local authorities, in terms of access and more localised promotion of signage and footpaths etc. These steps are not expensive but can make a huge difference in terms of people's awareness and ability to access sites.

When I was leading Conwy Council for a few years before coming here, we created a Culture Strategy and we ensured that culture was a central part of what the local authority did and that this was seen as really important. I wonder, in the context of pilgrimage, if we could hook into some councils that focus on culture?

In terms of pilgrimage, it is the ancient medieval examples that have been discussed so far, but there are also more modern aspects of faith in Wales, such as the 1904 revival. Is there

anybody who can speak to the opportunities there around some of the modern movements that Wales has birthed and in keeping those memories alive?

Darren Millar MS

We've touched on some of the non-conformist routes in previous meetings but no-one seems to have seized that opportunity. Jaeyeon, the route in Japan that you described is a modern one isn't it, that also provides opportunities for reflection?

Jaeyeon Choe

Yes, the route that I referred to in Japan is called a pilgrimage route but it isn't really religious at all. It has always been popular but during Covid became even more so. People just want somewhere where they can have peace of mind and recover. This is the case all over though and that's why the coastal paths and natural walks in Wales can be even more popular if they can be further developed. This is not just for the faith tourists but also the local people as well and their quality of life.

Darren Millar MS

The Jewish community has been developing some South Wales Jewish Heritage Trails and there is a big project currently underway to develop Jewish history trails in North Wales. Other faiths' heritage, such as Hindus' and Muslims', are often underappreciated. And of course there are also strong links between South Korea and Wales through Robert Germaine Thomas.

Gethin Rhys

Although faith tourists do spend money, they often want to stay in very simple accommodation. There are a number of churches around Wales that make themselves available for what is effectively wild camping but with the great advantage of being out of the wind and the rain by being inside a church building.

There is a consultation out at the moment from Welsh Government who want to oblige registration for overnight accommodation and impose minimum standards – this is likely to be a threat to the type of pilgrimage accommodation that I just mentioned.

Jaeyeon Choe

I have heard about this and the British Pilgrimage Trust is also working on a pilgrimage Airbnb. It's great that churches are providing this form of accommodation but there will always be people who want to stay in hotels.

Sam Rowlands MS

Gethin has raised a very important point. Tom Gifford and I met with Airbnb yesterday and they are also concerned about Welsh Government proposals. Similar legislation is coming into Scotland, which is very prescriptive and even says that you need to have carpeted floors which is obviously going to be an issue for some churches.

Darren Millar MS

We'll pick this up as an action point and I'm glad you raised it, Gethin, because I think it is an opportune time, given the consultation.

Phil McCarthy

I'm leading a project in the Catholic Church in England and Wales to revitalise our walking pilgrimage tradition – to create a new pilgrimage walking route for each cathedral and a shrine within the diocese. There are 3 dioceses in Wales and we have some exciting routes planned out. In Cardiff from the cathedral east to the shrine of St David Lewis in Usk; in Wrexham from the cathedral north to Holywell, St Winifride's shrine and potentially two in Minevia.

Do you have any advice as to how we might measure impact?

Jaeyeon Choe

I don't think there is any monitoring system whatsoever in Welsh pilgrimage tourism. I have talked to stakeholders who say how much money they are making, referring to the numbers of visitors that they have received in a year but no-one is keeping a tab on the numbers. There ought to be a system as well as investment from government and local authorities. Maybe local universities can also help as well with collecting and analysing data.

Darren Millar MS

Welsh Government does monitor tourism to a certain extent, for example the number of overnight stays, average spend per day visitor and overnight visitor but they ought to break it down into the type of visitor and reasons for visiting.

Nathan Sadler

Are there any negative examples to highlight?

Jaeyeon Choe

I have heard that local farmers are against pilgrimage tourism but I'd like to talk to them to see if this is true. I don't think there has been much research on local farmers' voices or managers for example, that is people who live in the community and how they see the benefits of such tourism.

Darren Millar MS

There have been examples of some communities that have felt overwhelmed by too much tourism but I was interested to see, Jaeyeon, how your research has shown that faith tourism in Wales has benefited the Welsh language. This is something that can help persuade communities to remain welcoming to faith tourists.

Altaf Hussain MS

In Wales, we are very close to nature, we have a huge coastal path and our countryside is one of the safest in the world. Coming back to pilgrimage, I have visited Saudi Arabia many times on pilgrimage to Mecca, Medina and many other sites.

We need to have a booklet that contains information on all of the pilgrimage sites in Wales. The sites should also be registered and there should be a registration office. I visited Llantwit Major and there is such a wealth of history there, but many people are not aware of it.

Molly Conrad

When we talk about tourism, it can often sound quite secular but how can we keep faith at the heart of pilgrimage? It is often people of faith involved in pilgrimage although we want to welcome others as well.

Jaeyeon Choe

Not everyone has the same faith and it is becoming very diversified but I don't know the answer to your question.

Darren Millar MS

It's interesting that there is an increasing interest from people of no faith who want to walk these routes. People are attracted by different factors such as the history or natural beauty but people also sometimes have a spiritual experience and find faith. I often pray that people will have a faith encounter of their own because I know the personal benefits of my faith to me.

4. Actions

The following actions were agreed by those present:

a) The following links to be circulated to the group:

- British Pilgrimage Trust - <https://britishpilgrimage.org/>
- Landscapes of Faith project - <https://www.landscapesoffaith.org/>
- Green Pilgrimage Network - <https://www.greenpilgrimageeurope.net/>

b) To write to the Welsh Government and:

- ask them to look at their Faith Tourism Action Plan to see if it needs refreshing.
- ask about the opportunities for investment in infrastructure to help connect people with these sites, in particular the transport routes and what they might be doing to help businesses set up tours
- ask them to develop a catalogue of all the pilgrimage opportunities which we have in Wales. The sites already exist but many people are not aware of them there is no central repository. It can be an online resource, not expensive and include maps, links and places of interest. This can be built up over time.

c) For Sam Rowlands to include faith tourism in a future meeting of the Cross-Party Group on Tourism.

d) Darren suggested that Jaeyeon could organise a Welsh Pilgrimage Summit. She said that she would be delighted to organise one and Darren said that he would be happy to host it in the Senedd.

5. Darren advised everyone that the date of the next meeting would be Thursday 4 May in person with Archbishop Andy John. Arrangements would also be made for those who could not attend in person but who could do so online.

He thanked everyone for attending and for their contributions and closed the meeting.