

NICK COOKE

Pilgrimage Routes across Scotland - new developments

Just over a year ago, members of the ACTS Scottish Churches Rural Group joined MSPs and others in the Holyrood Parliament to launch a 'Pilgrimage Routes Across Scotland' manifesto. Since then, we have made real progress in taking forward the vision of a national network of largely off-road routes for the use of walkers, cyclists, horse riders and canoeists, linking Scotland's historic centres of Christian pilgrimage. The successful ACTS Scottish Churches Rural Group conference held last March at 121, George Street, Edinburgh on 'Pilgrimage Today'; the signing of a Statement of Intent by Scotland's Church leaders and the Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs and Environment at the 2011 Royal Highland Show; and now the establishment of a Scottish

Pilgrim Routes Forum (SPRF), which met for the first time at Culross last month, have been important milestones.

What will a Scottish Pilgrim Routes Forum do? Such is the scale of the current revival of public interest in pilgrimage travel, there is a real need to create a structure and process for co-ordinating the various new pilgrim route initiatives that are now emerging across Scotland. These range from Fife and the Borders in the east to Ayrshire and the isle of Mull in the west, and from Tain in the north to Whithorn in the south. Our aim is to link these individual projects and sites into a coherent and visibly branded network of routes with appropriate infrastructure services to offer the pilgrim traveller a distinctive experience.

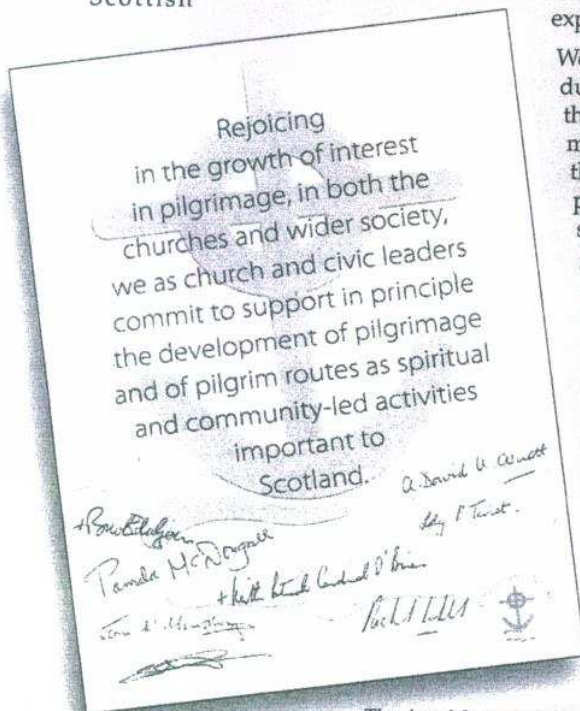
We seek to avoid duplication of effort through collaboration and mutual support among the wide range of public, private and voluntary sector bodies and groups involved in the establishment of pilgrim routes. Scotland has a huge and largely unused resource of existing rights of way that can be incorporated into these routes, and developing close working links with the Longer Distance Routes Forum led by Scottish Natural Heritage and local

authority countryside access officers is one of our key priorities. Through the SPRF, private businesses and social and educational enterprises associated with the new 'faith tourism' market can be directly involved in this process.

The new Forum has a practical, long term task ahead of it. We are not seeking to impose a blueprint 'master plan' to be rigidly followed, but rather provide a flexible and mutually supportive network to enable and encourage local partnerships of member bodies to learn from others. Critically, we want communities and individual churches of all denominations and sizes to be actively involved in a process of rural regeneration with important social, environmental and economic - not to mention spiritual - benefits. We only have to look to Europe, and Scandinavia in particular, to see inspiring examples of this in the many pilgrimage trails created over the last 20 years.

Development of SPRF's activities will be led by a new Steering Group and I will be reporting regularly on this to the SCRG. For more information, please contact me in the first instance.

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The signed Statement of Intent.