



Diocese of Carlisle are taking full advantage of it, meeting monthly to

Paul Rose

Up to 130 people now take to the hills in and around the Lake District to meet and worship, as part of a network dubbed 'Mountain Pilgrims'.

The initiative was set up by Paul Rose, a "Pioneer Enabler" for the Diocese as a way of engaging people who might not relate to a traditional church setting.

Paul explained that the outdoor church services are more like pilgrimages, where every outing is an opportunity for revelation and to "create a space for both conversation and silence without awkwardness."

The idea was first developed in 2015. "We'd found that simply taking church practices and words into the outdoors felt inauthentic to our experiences," he explained.

"So we began the process of exploring how we could understand the experience of being in the mountains through the lens of the Christian story.

"We appreciated the space and silence that freed us from the distractions which often limit how we hear God's voice in our soul.

"We journeyed, spoke, prayed and shared, shoulder to shoulder with a community – and then we called ourselves Mountain Pilgrims."

The group has a core of around 90 regulars who attend monthly and around 40 others who join less often. Paul is currently working on expanding Mountain Pilgrims across Cumbria and the North of England, and into Wales and Scotland and is also taking the approach into schools.

The Pilgrims have developed a routine of walking the mountains on the Winter and Summer Solstices, using those days as an opportunity to reflect on the place of both light and darkness in the balance of life.

Paul recalled: "At a Winter Solstice gathering, a friend was standing as we slowly turned off our torches, leaving us in darkness.

"His mother had died earlier that year and he described a feeling of being held in that place of darkness by the rest of the natural world, creating space for him to recognise his grief.

"In that place of brokenness, he felt ministered to by creation – he encountered God beginning the healing process."

He said that while for some people Mountain Pilgrims' approach has become an alternative to an indoor church, others see it as an addition.

"Some settings use it as an outreach opportunity and hope to draw people back into the established church setting rather than creating a church out on the hills," he added.

The groups are open to those of all ages and fitness levels, and there is an increasing number of wheelchair and pushchair-accessible routes, enabling those with disabilities and young children to take part.

“Participants certainly don’t need to be mountain goats,” he said.

There are three planned retreats between in March, April and May, and on Saturday 10 June there will be a Mountain Pilgrims festival, bringing together all the groups and anyone interested in learning more. Details will be on the [website](#).

Email mountainpilgrims@gmail.com to find a group near you.

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