

# St. Christopher's Episcopal Church

## Sojourners 2016 pilgrimage reflections



## Paul Goyette



Many thanks to Paul who generously provided all the beautiful photographs in this booklet and was a source of guidance and support throughout our pilgrimage.

## Alyssa Monti



Personally, I was never big on feeling God's presence. I thought it only happened when something really bad happened. Then some family stuff happened before the trip and I can honestly say I felt it. I could tell it was him because it was different. I felt like someone was listening

to me. Whenever I write poetry, I can feel someone listening to me. On this trip, I was able to go climb mountains and find a place to write and let God listen to what I had to say. Poetry is the key that God uses to open my thoughts. On this trip, God's presence became clear more than ever before. The trip to Iona Scotland made me see a different side to me. Prayers occurred on my own and not just in our group discussions. I felt like going to this trip made me see myself a tiny bit clearer. Now I can't promise I'm going to pray every day now I'm off of Iona or that I'm only going to pray on a pretty remote island in a different country. I believe that the main point of a pilgrimage is to find yourself. Even if you think you know what you're going to do with your life, you will still discover at least one thing about yourself. There may be tons of church and tons of talking to people. It makes you step out of your comfort zone for the better. To see yourself in a different way. I can say that going on this pilgrimage has made me see myself in a more positive way.

## Edward Clissold



I honestly didn't know what to suspect from this travel. I was actually a bit worried to leave my family. I had not traveled with a group not related to me, but I experienced it and it was the most fun experience I had had in a while. The first part, on the plane, as you'd imagine, was not really the

best. The flight was not first class, but we got down safely, and some of the movies we watched kept us occupied. We then made our way from Glasgow to the holy Island in England. Personally I didn't experience much of God on that Island because I was trying to battle my jetlag, but it did look nice, along with an artsy cat that went well with the island. When we went to Iona it was different from my everyday life because the island wasn't as busy as the town I live in. It was a very small village with some jobs (like a fire department) only doing part time because it wasn't that big. Also, there were more places that were silent, where I could explore, or get more connected with God, and feel more at peace.

Also, the names and food were different (fries were chips, chips were crisps, cookies were biscuits, and some scones tasted like biscuits here.)

The biggest lesson I took from this experience was not to make people feel alienated. For example, when I first got to Iona I felt different from this town, from the different environment, and the food I wasn't use to. But the people treated me kindly as if I was a regular citizen here. Another example was at customs. The people working there didn't have any prejudice against me; they just treated me like a normal traveler going to any old place. The closest I ever felt to God was during the silence and solitude, where I could find a quiet and relaxing place to be (not counting noisy places, or when it was rainy). What I did was pray for people in need and for those I loved, and sat in silence to notice my surroundings. This changed the way I thought about prayer because I now think that prayer can be helpful in any troubling situation, and could emotionally heal you.

## Nina Cancellare



I'd like to start off with some advice for all the future pilgrims, don't go into this trip expecting that it'll be a vacation. It's a fun trip don't get me wrong, but it's a trip with a much deeper purpose than to sunbathe and swim. Some people did swim, but I chose not to jump into the freezing cold water off the shore of Iona. This is a trip where you find yourself creating a deeper

connection with God, yourself, and your fellow pilgrims. I know that now that the trip is over I'm going to find the time to attend church more even if it means getting up earlier than I could want to. When we went to church at the Abbey I noticed how everyone seemed to know who each other were and realized I wanted to know everyone here better than I do already, and I believe that one of the ways to do this is to simply start attending church more.

Returning from this trip I found that I had become closer to God, and I learned that you don't necessarily have to be praying to feel god's presence, you could be doing something as simple as journaling or sitting alone. I personally felt closest to God when I was simply being silent and alone thinking about the trip so far and what it held for the future. Near the end of our time on the island of Iona we began to have blocks of silent time during which I would go find a small corner of beach to walk around, pray, journal, and become consumed by my thoughts. When asked the question "When did you feel God's presence today?" during our group meetings I felt my answers became repetitive, the answer was always during the silent time. Maybe it was because there was no one around and it allowed me to think without the distraction the others brought, possibly this allowed me to feel more focused. I can't be sure, however one thing I can be sure of is that now that the trip is over I know that not every moment of our lives has to be consumed with finding something to do to stay busy and being preoccupied in our technology all the time. Maybe every once in a while, I can sit back and think about my day and how I can use my spare time to pray, think, and even just write down my feelings. We live in a world where we are always trying to keep busy and

I've realized that sometimes we need to take a step back from that to help us connect with ourselves, each other, and God.

**Caitlin Kenoian**



## Tommy Sage

This year's youth pilgrimage to Iona was a very meaningful experience that changed my life forever.

Throughout history, there have been many people who were very committed to the Christian faith and other religions. Many people gave up life as they knew it to become monks who would live in monasteries, following strict rules for many



years. What we did was a watered down version of what monks have done in the past. We travelled halfway across the world and stayed on the now modernized isle of Iona. On most of the days we were there, we went to two church services at the abbey each day, one in the morning and one in the evening, and we had our own prayer service in the morning. We were exposed to many new types of prayer throughout the trip. We had long periods of silence in which we reflected on the trip and our lives alone. We also had two youth led Eucharist services. In addition to the services, we ate a lot of seafood, climbed mountains, went on a boat trip, and got all our clothes soaked. Some of us even plunged into the freezing cold ocean. We also had our own scavenger hunt, which was very competitive, but I knew my team was doomed when we got lost in the mountains. When our time on Iona was up, we were disappointed that we didn't have more time there, but we were excited to see Glasgow and Edinburgh. In Glasgow, we visited the Kelvingrove museum, which had a lot of Scottish history. In Edinburgh, we walked around the city and got last minute souvenirs and gifts the day before we left. Throughout the trip, I felt God's presence more often than usual, whether it was a service, prayer, or doing or seeing something amazing.

## Thomas Johnson

Over our 10-day pilgrimage, I learned not only a lot about the Scottish culture, but also about the culture and bond we've created throughout our SOJO group and St. Christopher's. Being with a small group for a long period of time forces you to really get to know each other and to keep an open mind. I learned that keeping an open mind allowed me to enjoy the trip more when I was out of my comfort zone.



This allowed me to experience many joyful times on our pilgrimage. There was laughing, dancing, and even a bit of rapping. One of my favorite experiences was taking a very rocky boat ride to the island of Staffa. This was one of the most beautiful places I have even been to. There were caves, cliffs, and best of all, puffins. I also enjoyed the scavenger hunt and adding up all the points! Our group also shared serious times when praying, reflecting, and having moments of solitude. I especially enjoyed soaking in the scenery of Iona and hiking alone with no distractions. I will also never forget the amount of love and support felt when I opened the letters sent from my family, and members of this church. It amazed me that people who I don't even know that well, or at all, took time out of their day to write personal letters supporting me throughout our journey. I read these letters more than once and so appreciated them.

Going into the trip, I had a few small worries, the biggest of having little to no alone time, but thankfully this wasn't a problem. I enjoyed my alone time to take walks, journal, and think about my life. The respect our group had for each other was amazing and our pilgrimage left an image of St. Christopher's in my head that leaves me more comfortable and happy within the St Christopher's community.

## Natalie Greene



Reflecting on our pilgrimage to Scotland, I can honestly say that this trip was one of the most spiritually challenging and fulfilling experiences of my life. Travelling is very different as a group leader, and I think the biggest lesson for me from the pilgrimage was to keep trusting in God's goodness and presence even when the way is not clear. Many times during the trip, I relied on prayer to keep me centered and focused on the often elusive goal of connecting with God. We spent a lot of time on Iona practicing different methods of prayer,

and I'm grateful to my fellow pilgrims for their patience and willingness to practice prayer together.

One of the biggest perks of my job here at St. Chris is getting the opportunity to learn from the youth members of our community. During our trip I learned so much from my fellow pilgrims about doing ministry together in daily life. Small actions like making sure everyone is included in the conversation or listening with compassion to another person's experience are the foundation of our life together as a faith community. I experienced God's presence working through this group of pilgrims, and I can't wait to see how God moves us now that we're back.

## Rev. Eric Biddy



I had hoped for great personal spiritual enlightenment on this trip, but the truth is that it became very apparent very quickly that even my personal experience of this pilgrimage wasn't going to be about me. All of my effort was going towards perfecting my ability to do head counts, to the point that 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6 (for the

six teenage pilgrims) became almost a prayerful mantra. Instead, the whole pilgrimage became for me an exercise in the spiritual skill of trusting. We adult leaders were desperate for the pilgrimage to be about encounters with God, rather than religious-themed tourism. And this desire easily slides into trying to make other people have experiences with God, which is a profoundly barren and treacherous field to hoe. And so in our first days on Iona, I got a hard lesson in learning to trust God to be God and to love these young people in a way that they would notice. We took them to prayer services at the Abbey, we gave them leadership roles in private prayer services, and taught them methods of individual prayer.

And then we had to let go and trust God and them to be open to each other in the space we had carved out. It was humbling and, indeed, edifying to find the limits of my abilities and responsibilities. I also had no choice but to come to trust my fellow pilgrims, teen and adult, with myself. It is simply impossible to maintain a professional priestly disposition for 10 days of international travel with six minors and two adults who are very different from me. These eight holy people have seen me sleepy, irritable, hungry, confused, and raw with wonder and joy in a way that is outside of my usual work persona. They saw me and, I think, accepted and forgave me in a way I wouldn't usually ask parishioners to do. This is the strangest gift of the pilgrimage to me. I wanted some blazing light of mystical illumination. Instead, I learned better how to trust God and friends. It wasn't a bad bargain, in the end.





