WHEN FAITH HITS THE ROAD:
STEPS IN A
PILGRIMAGE OF SERVICE

Reverend Dr. L. Lang Brownlee
The Journey of a Lifetime

If you were told that there is a Christian practice that has the potential to shake the very foundations of your life, challenge your presuppositions as well as your aspirations, and offer you an awakening that may have momentous implications for your personal and vocational trajectory, how would you feel?

How would you feel about such a practice? Maybe a little bit curious. Perhaps somewhat intrigued. Just a wee bit intimidated. And downright scared. Yes?

Pilgrimage is such a practice—full of possibility and promise. But add a dash of uncertainty and a smidgeon of trepidation, just for good measure. Serve with an attitude of humility and concern for others, and open arms to God’s leading, and voilà! We stand in wonder at what has taken place.

But what has taken place? I invite you to explore with me how a particular journey—what some authors call a “place pilgrimage”—can radically influence your formation in faith, values, and commitments. A place pilgrimage is actually picking up and going someplace to grow in faith, self-understanding, and connection with others.

Sister Jennifer Horner, my former colleague in campus ministry here at UIndy, has written about pilgrimage as a spiritual practice. I encourage you to find this very helpful resource at http://vocations.uindy.edu.¹ What you will read here, though, offers a different emphasis; it lifts up a place pilgrimage with a clear focus on service. The narrative you’ll find here evolved from a pilgrimage that was a journey of a lifetime for 10 of us from the University of Indianapolis in May 2008.

We traveled from Indianapolis halfway around the globe to Sierra Leone, Africa. We stepped out in faith with all the emotions and dimensions of the experience I just mentioned. This little booklet shares with you the steps of such a service pilgrimage. I hope that these thoughts might be of value to you as you contemplate and act on your own desires to be of service to others as a part of your own journey of faith.
However, as Sister Jennifer reminds us in her booklet, the place pilgrimage is part of a larger narrative, a greater pilgrimage for every person of faith.

“With significance for us all,” she writes, “the intentional practice of pilgrimage is a call never to forget that our hearts must be set on pilgrimage every day of our life.” The place pilgrimage is a step within the larger journey of our lives.

Join us in the following pages as we move through the adventure of a place pilgrimage. See how each step of the way is, in itself, a moment for reflection, for considering your personal and vocational direction, for listening to God.

Imagine how you might be empowered in such a journey to serve others, and as you tell the story to others afterward. Consider the questions and the prayers as springboards to deeper analysis. Appreciate the practice of pilgrimage as a means to hear the call of God in your life as you extend your hands to offer yourself in service for others.

Pilgrimage. Step-by-step. Such a concept, such a practice, gets under your skin, and then—too late—there’s no turning back! You understand you can never again stand still against the gentle lure of God into your life journey, calling you deeper and deeper into relationship and service.

May that gracious call bring you joy and meaning, as you serve in myriad ways, all the days of your life.

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INTRODUCTION: STEP BY STEP TO SIERRA LEONE

On May 6–22, 2008, 10 of us from the University of Indianapolis came together for a Spring Term travel course, Experiencing Service: Pilgrimage to Koidu, Sierra Leone, for the Sharing of Christian Compassion. In this text, we’ll explore the ideas and practice of the service pilgrimage and share about the steps involved.

Eight students, along with a recent UIIndy graduate and I, had embarked on this journey in faith with the United Methodist Church’s Operation Classroom mission program. Our task was to help rehabilitate and expand a library for the UMC Koidu Secondary School, whose 1,500 students had been without a library and its resources for more than a decade.

Students usually love to sing. That has been my experience, at least, of Christian students at the University of Indianapolis. Singing their faith seems to come naturally, and it allows the full use of what God has given us—mind, body, and real soul. The joy of the Good News jumps out as we hear the students—joy and faith and community shine a light for others to see.

As our students prepared in the winter and spring of 2008 for our pilgrimage of service in Africa, they sang often. One song in particular, “Step by Step,” speaks to the concept of walking with God. Its lyrics go as follows:

God, you are my God, and I will ever praise you
God, you are my God, and I will ever praise you
And I will seek you in the morning
And I will learn to walk in your ways;
Step by step you lead me
And I will follow you all of my days.

—Jean-Ann & Joe Hand

What did this song convey and mean for the students who sang it? Perhaps it connects them with an active, fluid view of the life of faith, connoting process and movement, change and challenge. “Walking” and singing both are exciting dimensions of living the faith—each expressive and enhancing the journey that is offered us.

The service pilgrimage serves as a distinctive practice that gets right to our perception and experience of faith. Stepping out in faith in this way permits us to get to the heart of the journey—here represented as the “walk”—that is part and parcel of Christian discipleship.
Christian pilgrimage as a concept and practice connects us to a deeper sense of the walk of faith. Not only does it help form stronger disciples; it offers a global perspective on faith and life issues, and instills a recognition of service as a central commitment of that walk.

Edward Hayes offers a way to conceive of this spiritual significance. “As a form of prayer, the pilgrimage is an incarnational prayer, a prayer of the body. The pilgrim is a person who prays with his feet.”

Imagine the possibilities of exploring our spirituality by considering this form of prayer!

**PILGRIMAGE IS ABOUT BEING PRESENT IN THE PRESENT**

“Pilgrimage is about waking up and paying attention to our lives. As we learn to live our days in ceaseless prayer, we will be more and more present to God and to all of life.”

Pilgrimage is a rich practice, as a prayer that connects us with our God in a holistic way and as a means to call us to awareness and focus—to be fully present in our here and now. This art of presence is fundamentally attention to God: “to be present to the One who is present to us is the goal of pilgrimage.”

Add to this valuable notion the dimension of stepping forth to serve others where they are, and we have the full characteristic of the service pilgrimage. The physical journey takes you, as a pilgrim in service, to the place where the human need is present, and the journey in faith connects you as a pilgrim with the people in that specific and unique context.

At UIndy, the service pilgrimage is a journey to a sacred place where connections of faith are made. What makes the pilgrimage sacred has to do with our hope that, through the journey, we have the opportunity to be shaped and changed as disciples of Christ. There is also the real desire to be used by God in ways that are helpful to others.

Going on a service pilgrimage is not a vacation; it is a sacred journey. There is the sacred nature of our destination, by virtue of God’s people to be found there. There is the sacred character of the purposes for which we made the trip. And there is a sacredness in the people with whom we interact, including our fellow pilgrims.
Christ has no body but yours,
No hands, no feet on earth but yours,
Yours are the eyes with which he looks
Compassion on this world,
Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good,
Yours are the hands, with which he blesses all the world.
Yours are the hands, yours are the feet,
Yours are the eyes, you are his body.
Christ has no body now but yours,
No hands, no feet on earth but yours,
Yours are the eyes with which he looks with compassion on this world.
Christ has no body now on earth but yours.

—Teresa of Avila (1515–1582)
How does the service pilgrimage unfold? For those of us who made the pilgrimage to Sierra Leone in May 2008, there were at least seven steps. The complete experience involves the travel and time at the site of the service, but it also includes the tasks and challenges before and after the journey. What follows is a brief description of each of the steps of the service pilgrimage, so you’ll know what to expect as you contemplate embarking on a pilgrimage yourself.

1. Preparing

Remember that you’ll need time for informational meetings, the application process, and establishing the team. That may mean team meetings; getting-to-know-you sessions; prayer and study; group-building; and practical information meetings. You’ll want to talk through the appropriate and most helpful attitude for pilgrimage, how to be more in touch with yourself during the preparation process, and how to contribute to the overall good for all.

Group building is essential. Getting to know one another is valuable on many levels, but establishing an identity seems vital to the positive nature of the experience. Some students simply need to psych up for the pilgrimage when there are lingering doubts or worries. Recognizing that we are a team, and that we are in this spiritual journey together, supports the important task of caring for and being accountable to one another as part of the journey.

Our team met a number of times during the semester to prepare for our experience in Africa. We had reading assignments from a pretty hefty reading list and discussed the material. We also had guest speakers to help us understand the context of our service pilgrimage, our mission, and the dynamics of going to another culture. We were able to ask questions of these guest experts, who gave us insight and encouragement. One day, we all traveled to a local doctor’s office for a briefing about tropical diseases and health care while overseas, then got immunizations to help us stay healthy as we traveled.

We also considered what to bring to offer as gifts (reflecting who we are—our school, our nationality, our region, our religious affiliation). For Sierra Leone, we stocked up on basketball shoes, pencils, and other school supplies, UIndy items, stickers, fingernail polish, gifts for key leaders in the Koidu community, and more. All were collected, divided for transport, and then given away during the pilgrimage. E-mail addresses, postal addresses, and sometimes phone numbers were exchanged in hopes of keeping relationships alive after our return home.
2. Going Forth

Mid-morning on May 6, our group gathered at Indianapolis International Airport to do some last-minute packing of supplies, to distribute plane tickets, and to check in. Parents and friends were with us as we went slowly through the line to show passports, get seat assignments, and have our bags checked. There was time for some pictures of the group, and then Joe Wagner, U.S. Coordinator for Operation Classroom, led us in prayer. It was a moving moment, followed by many hugs, kisses, and good wishes. Soon, we were going through security and heading for the gate to await boarding the jet.

Our itinerary took us to O’Hare Airport, Chicago, and from there to Heathrow Airport, England. There was real excitement to be on the way to Africa. Finally, after approximately 16 hours and 7,158 miles, we landed at Lungi Airport, Sierra Leone. After some hours waiting at the airport, and then an arduous van ride to the Operation Classroom House in Freetown, we were able to settle down for a short night’s sleep around 4 a.m. on Thursday, May 8.

We learned that the journey itself makes a difference. We are in this together! We’re a group for real! Sure, there are detours and the risk of being sidetracked at every turn. The anxieties and excitement of traveling to a new and different location are met with the reality of that newness. How do you remain open to the experience in all its complexity? How do you respond positively?

In Sierra Leone, for instance, time itself took on a new meaning for us, as our team often had to wait for the next task on the schedule—sometimes for quite a lengthy time. Learning to “let go and let God” lead in those moments proved difficult for some of us. We had to ask ourselves, what can we learn when there has to be a change in plans? When the pilgrimage (read: life) doesn’t turn out as anticipated, what happens? How do we respond? These are hard questions to be pondered by a young pilgrim, but the search for answers can offer a kind of grace. On our service pilgrimage, we had the opportunity to bounce answers to such questions off one another, learning from each other even as we learned from the experiences themselves.

This is part of pilgrimage—coming to understand that we are not in control of everything, and yet appreciating that we do shape how we respond to the detours of life. There is a song lyric that says, “Life is what happens while you’re busy making other plans.” This is never truer than it is on a pilgrimage.

Then there is the exhaustion factor. Traveling wears people out (even students), and novelty can be tiresome, even when accompanied by great excitement. We had to figure out how to engage other people as we were adjusting to the time change even as we negotiated all the other aspects of newness. Sometimes sheer crankiness can pull a group down. We learned a bit about one another’s personalities and rhythms—for instance, one of us was definitely not a morning person!
Meeting fellow pilgrims and other interesting persons along the way is an incredible source of grace. In our flights and on the ground, we had interesting conversations with Americans and Europeans who were very much concerned about Africa and its peoples. Moreover, the Africans we befriended were incredible teachers for us, as we were filled with questions and sought to grow in understanding. We were constantly amazed by the hospitality and the generosity of the Africans we met.

In Koidu, Sierra Leone, we were thrilled to meet people connected with World Vision in Africa. Earlier in the year, Compassionate Acts (a campus ministry group offering service opportunities through our office), had organized and carried out a very successful “30-Hour Famine” using World Vision materials and raised money for that Christian aid organization. For us to have a firsthand encounter with members of World Vision was an exciting, if brief, moment of connection between the campus and the larger Christian effort across the globe.

The “going forth” of the service pilgrimage can be a rite of passage in ways that are mundane but significant nonetheless. Such rites of passage for our students included a first trip on an airplane, a first trip out of Indiana, a first trip to another country, and a first trip without parents. These are markers in the lives of these fledging adults, and the memories of these having been connected to pilgrimage make an even greater impression.

Speaking of markers, we saw many ways to mark the beginnings of the pilgrimage experience: prayer not only at the airport, but also before our long land journey, through our first night in Sierra Leone to the O.C. House in Freetown, and then late that same day from Freetown to Koidu, were especially touching. Other kinds of markers occurred, too. At the airport, we experienced the tangible support of loved ones seeing their students off, which sometimes can evoke feelings signifying a transition in the relationship between parent and offspring. And then there is the crossing of familiar thresholds when we came back to our loved ones. What will we pilgrims be like when we return? This was a question in the back of our minds, and surely on the minds of our family members and friends as well.

Getting there is a major thing! “The important thing is the journey, not the destination,” is an aphorism I have heard all my life. To the airport; through the airport; being on time; having all our belongings; staying together; beginning to trust each other during mini-crises—all this is part of the journey. And, pedestrian as they were, they, too, were important. The journey on our service pilgrimage must be paid attention to, as in life.
Reflection: Preparing & Going Forth

Here you go! It is important to have a sense of your own understanding of service, as well as the context in which you are about to embark. Committing to be a part of a service pilgrimage requires openness to the experience ahead and a willingness to learn about the history, culture, and peoples with whom you will be involved. Consider how this learning will be integrated with your heartfelt faith and compassion for others.

One more step along the world I go,
One more step along the world I go;
From the old things to the new
Keep me travelling along with you:
And it’s from the old I travel to the new;
Keep me travelling along with you.

—Sydney Carter®
3. Enduring

On a pilgrimage, we cannot be rid of the baggage we carry. We all have preconceptions, assumptions, and prejudices that are a part of us. We can benefit from, at the very least, recognizing these in ourselves.

Keeping this baggage in mind, it may be harder than you first imagined to settle in once you arrive at the pilgrimage site. Comparisons are inevitable, but we sometimes begin to acknowledge differences, not merely descriptively but in a way that smacks of a critical and even judgmental spirit. The initial euphoria of arrival can be replaced with an attitude that taints the remainder of the time as only a time of enduring.

Some writers label this element of the pilgrimage experience as mere culture shock. Sometimes the differences between cultures can be a struggle for us. Almost as a defense mechanism, some will disparage differences, large or small, and lift up their own way of living as superior to that at the pilgrimage site. This ethnocentric attitude can lead to self-absorption and cultural insensitivity, and first exposure to difference in faith expressions and practices was definitely a challenge to some of our participants.

There is often a tendency to rate “what we do” versus “what they do” to deal with the reality about us. But one of the teachings of the place pilgrimage experience is that a faithful journey cannot support this attitude. Reflecting on such feelings with love and patience may not move a student to another place in attitude, but no movement at all is possible without attempting to think and talk these feelings through.

I once came across this interesting quote: “sacred journeys do not have to be all misery and mosquitoes.” Even where ethnocentrism is not an issue, there certainly can be misery in eating new foods that cause a gastrointestinal mini-crisis. And mosquitoes and malaria are real concerns in Sierra Leone and in many other locales. So, it is important to determine how to approach and deal with everything that will be faced. For it is surely not suffering but expectation and joy that keep the pilgrim going.

Of course there are adventures and difficulties on the journey; in fact, adventures and difficulties are often one and the same thing. We’ve all met vacationers newly returned from abroad whose account of the trip is a litany of woe. But listen to their voices; watch their faces. As often as not, these horrific sagas are told with humor and animation. Living to tell the tale is the headiest thing there is.

Attitude is everything, and it is a cause for joy when we work through the attitude of “enduring” and see a marked movement in the direction of “embracing.”
4. Embracing

Relationships matter in all of life. That is true in a pilgrimage situation as well. We enjoyed seeing some of our students fall in love with the experience, the people, and the place. We were struck by the intensity and fervor of the students who were soaking it all in. Such a response is a far cry from merely enduring and reflects an attitude of appreciation and gratitude for what they’ve learned through their pilgrimage.

During our service pilgrimage in Sierra Leone, we recognized that our work on the library was as “tolerated coworkers” alongside African laborers who could get the work done much faster if it weren’t for having to instruct those pesky Americans! But the real work (and the lasting efforts) involved the building of relationships and the ways that our lives, American and African, were enhanced by being together, praying together, laughing together, sharing our stories with one another, and smiling together.

And our students embraced it all—the work under the harsh African sun, the respite found in the occasional rain—but especially being with the people and getting to know them. Our students took seriously and reflected on the gift of this chance to work and worship in Koidu. As a result, Principal Yamba, of the Koidu Secondary School in which we labored, had this to say about the team:

“Your few weeks stay with us have been remarkable and pleasurable. We admired your welcoming and cheerful smiles. There was no sign that you were strangers. When at work you people were always gay and vivacious and always made untiring effort. Our pupils’ interaction with you did not go by without learning some moral lessons such as—commitment to duty, spirit of working together, and humility.” 12
Reflection: Enduring & Embracing

Here you are! You have arrived and begun your acts of service in the community to which you have committed. What are some of the lessons you are learning about yourself and your culture as you are immersed in a sea of differences? Note your feelings as well as your responses to the experiences you are having. At what places do you sense your “comfort zone” being pushed? And then, what are you drawing close to you from the different persons and the different context of your pilgrimage?

Guide me, O thou great Jehovah,
Pilgrim through this barren land;
I am weak, but thou art mighty;
Hold me with thy powerful hand:
Bread of heaven, Feed me now and evermore.

—William Williams\textsuperscript{13}
5. Empathizing
Because we have journeyed from the struggles of merely enduring differences to the joy of embracing other cultures and values on our pilgrimage, we have greater potential to truly empathize with the situation of fellow human beings in life. Our team at Sierra Leone found itself singing with our African friends in their Krio language, both in church and on the road: “When my enemies try to put me down in shame, He lifted me higher!”

Life is difficult for the society we saw and for those who are attempting to rebuild after a long and devastating rebel war. In the process of getting to know them and hear their stories, we found ourselves receptive to both their pain and their hope.

As we had contemplated going forth on a pilgrimage, we asked ourselves what it means to be about mission, or to go on a mission trip? “Serving” seems to be a fundamentally different concept from a notion of “fixing” (for example, one week to fix decades, even centuries, of chronic issues for a people) or “helping,” an idea that is formed in a condescending, often arrogant or prideful way.

On the pilgrimage, our students looked at these ways of approaching their gifts of service, what it meant for their own identity, faith, and solidarity with others, and how the reality of Christian service has a kind of mutuality built into it. Following Teresa of Avila’s insight that “Christ has no hands but ours,” our students are often very enthusiastic about serving others, but we see in the pilgrimage a means to bring deepened reflection about what it truly means for people of faith to seek to assist one another in a chronically hurting world.

6. Returning
It’s inevitable: at some point in the short-term pilgrimage experience, there are fewer days ahead in the experience than those that have passed by. And, before you know it, you’re packing your belongings and becoming more aware that it’s time to return home. You recall vividly the sheer exhaustion of the journey and begin to gear up for your departure from the pilgrimage site, facing good-byes to new friends made on the pilgrimage.

And then it is homeward bound—with energy spent, with new relationships established, and with the knowledge that you are not the same person as the one who began the pilgrimage.

After having been together as a group sharing an intense experience, we now part at the airport, saying goodbye to each other for now. The pilgrimage has come to an end, though its implications still are not fully known. There is, too, the anticipation of reunion—of seeing and being with family and friends once again. And now, there is the continuation of the pilgrimage of our lives of faith.
Reflection—Empathizing & Returning

Things begin to click! There comes a time in your experience when the work you are doing, the people you are growing close to, and the perspective of “walking the walk” of faith connect in new and exciting ways. The learning in your head and the love in your heart take a leap forward in surprising ways, and your care for the people with whom you have spent this time in service pilgrimage profoundly deepens.

Take in all of this. What has been given to you by the people who have welcomed you into their lives and into their plight? Consider all that has been added to your head and heart as you begin that journey home.

So, for tomorrow’s sake,
Teach us new skills today,
To do your perfect will
In our imperfect way,
And live as those whom you have called
To be your work-force in the world.

—F. Pratt Green

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7. Reflecting

On the front end of the pilgrimage experience, there are the preparations. But study is not experience, and the pilgrims are now wiser than they were before the pilgrimage, contenting themselves with reading books and hearing the stories of others. They now have their own story to tell.

During the pilgrimage there were the seemingly endless conversations and journaling and listening and sharing. There were the regular “checking in” sessions, when the group members took account of what was taking place about and within them. And then there was the journey home, the return to the accustomed and familiar.

We encourage our students on their return to continue their intentional reflections of their pilgrimage, reporting back to families, congregations, other groups, and the campus. We provide ways that this can happen on campus through a program called *Sharing Our Story*. Here, the students offer their testimony to the pilgrimage experience for any student, faculty member, or staff person willing to come and hear.

It is not uncommon to feel “reverse culture shock”—the shock at rediscovering what one now knows is not “normal” everywhere, at aspects of life at home that may be in conflict with the values acquired on the pilgrimage. Upon “re-entry,” many of us must reassess what this means for us, as normalcy takes on a new and tenuous character after the broadening experience of pilgrimage.

We often see, too, a new and greater appreciation for the gifts that surround us as a result of what has taken place in the short time away that was experienced.

Students returning from Koidu, as they were accepted back and reintegrated into their communities, had to face hard questions in their reverse culture shock experience, including assessing the consumerism and wastefulness of much of American society; the busyness that gets in the way of relationships and of a rich sense of community; and the lack of true joy and hospitality found in the Christian communities of which they are a part.

We create opportunities to reunite as a team, and the celebration of what has been is often tempered by the assessment of where we are now. Group reflections usually center on a central theme: Now that you’ve been back for a time, what has the pilgrimage meant for you?

After pilgrimage, you are a changed person. What those changes mean is part of the quest, which doesn’t end with the program. Indeed, it is now internalized as part of the larger journey in life.
Reflecting

Tell the story! You have returned to the familiar, but things are not at all as they were. More accurately, you are not at all exactly as you were! Because you have been on a pilgrimage of service for others, and in a context that was dissimilar to your own, you have a lot of sorting through to do to understand exactly what has been offered from this experience.

Once you’re home, reread your journal as you attempt to tell the story of the people you have worked with and of the various steps of your pilgrimage. Be comfortable with any uncertainty in your evolving conclusions. But, above all else, reflect with gratitude about your story and the story of those you served, which are now intertwined. What will you do with this?

Where in life’s common ways
With cheerful feet we go,
Where in his steps we tread
Who trod the way of woe,
Where he is in the heart,
City of God, thou art.

—Francis Turner Palgrave15
Pilgrimage has the potential to bring lasting light to those who take part. This light can be seen in three ways. The holistic nature of the experience, the expansive potential that is inherent in pilgrimage, and the transformative power of pilgrimage, express the heart of the service pilgrimage experience. I’ll explain below.

**Holistic**
Pilgrimages accentuate the holistic character of our faith experience as embodied creatures. We are not souls unencumbered by our flesh and blood. As the stages above attest, we are a complex blend of physical, mental, and spiritual elements that somehow function together. The act of traveling to another location for such a sacred purpose needs to take account of all dimensions of our humanity, and we must keep in mind the communal dimension of such experiences.

The Christian faith is not just “talking the talk,” but also involves “walking the walk.” It involves all that we are. There is a holistic character in pilgrimage that reminds us that the journey itself is a movement through and with God, from fragmentation and disunity to wholeness and healing.

**Expansive**
I want to think there is the potential for every pilgrim to reach out and connect in expansive ways because of the service pilgrimage. To take in and conceive of the world in a more profound way, to develop greater respect and tolerance for differences of faith, and to have the opportunity to know and experience a greater world—one where difference now is known, respected, appreciated, even relished, firsthand—are all expansive gifts of the God of all creation.

**Transformative**
Because pilgrimage involves all that we are and calls us to see more profoundly the horizons of creation about us, everything’s changed. This is another illustration of St. Paul’s affirmation to the Corinthian church. “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new” (2 Corinthians 5:18).

We considered, in self-reflection and in group discussions, the idea of vocation as “servant” (not “fixer” and not “helper,” which indicate condescension and pride. Solidarity—with those who have struggled for themselves and for their people, who have walked a way of “blood, sweat, and tears,” who have drawn their support from the Gospel—was made known to us pilgrims in a profound way as we listened to the stories of the people and saw their world firsthand.
This was apparent to us over and over again as we experienced Sierra Leone. The conversations we had with young and old revealed the tragedies and the devastation of the decade-long rebel war. But we saw it in a vivid way when we were taken to the Kamaa War Memorial, where the bones of victims of the rebels were on display. There, we gathered in a circle and said a prayer, truly moved by the realities of the suffering that the war had brought every family.

In that experience, and in many moments of honest, heartfelt sharing, our hearts were transformed. Because of this dimension of our service pilgrimage, we all knew that we had grown and been made new.

**THE JOURNEY CONTINUES, STEP BY STEP**

Pilgrimage as a concept and practice of our whole lives of faith—what it means for each of us as individuals, as individuals in our campus community, and as members of our faith community, seem to me to be immense. The real challenge, of course, is how we integrate any short-term pilgrimage experience into this greater life-pilgrimage that we are on. Step by step, we seek to follow God in all of our days. As Sr. Jennifer Horner, author of *Keep Walking*, has written,

“Each moment of every day, our God is calling us to set out on a pilgrimage, a journey that will lead us into the life of the One who calls. We can never lose sight of the One who beckons. Our loving God is the end of all our searching, all our longing. When we keep our eyes on the God who calls us into life, we will faithfully make the pilgrimage of life—a pilgrimage that will lead us into the heart of God.”

We come full circle as we close, returning to the song that still is in the heart of these UIndy pilgrims to Sierra Leone, even as we began this exploration there. The commitment to “follow [God] all of my days” is heard as a pilgrim song in the hearts of UIndy students.

Going on a service pilgrimage is the journey of a lifetime! Rarely does life afford us such chances as rich and as full of potential as these short-term ventures into Christian service. Stepping forward in this way touches the lives of many—your fellow pilgrims, those whom you work with and for in your particular service project, and, of course, yourself.

For some, the experience reinforces the values of our faith. For others, though, it changes things completely, and as things are turned topsy-turvy, there is new insight into their vocation, even the hopes for their life. Sometimes the result is a commitment to make short-term pilgrimages a part of one’s life, even to bring the practice into the life of one’s family or congregation. Other times the pilgrimage releases the energy and enthusiasm needed to pursue a calling into some field of service, whether it be for the sake of “the other”—nearby or far, far away.
Remember: the practice of pilgrimage, whether a spiritual pilgrimage, service pilgrimage, or one that emphasizes learning for purposes of social justice, is situated within the notion that each of our lives is a pilgrimage. We are invited forward in relationship to the creating, redeeming, and sustaining reality of God by God’s very own call. God welcomes us to step forward in this lifetime journey in the assurance that God walks with us on the way.

So, let your faith hit the road! And blessings on the journey!

_While I am a pilgrim here,_
_Let thy love my spirit cheer;_
_As my guide, my guard, my friend,_
_Lead me to my journey’s end._

—John Newton

A Note to Campus Ministers:
Pilgrimage as a Bridge-Concept/Practice for the Christian Community

Pilgrimage is a bridge-concept, by which I mean that the act of pilgrimage brings with it the possibility of a deepening of the identification of the individual pilgrim with the Christian community as the Body of Christ. It bonds people to one another through the pilgrimage stories of community members.

This connection between the practice of pilgrimage and the campus ministry programming reflect the value-laden and eye-opening nature of all Christian ministry at its best, but it can be focused through the stories of the pilgrims who offer the reflections upon their lives, their faith, and their hopes to the Christian campus community (and to non-Christians, as well!). Our entire ministry can be magnified as a ministry of following Christ because of the new energy and excitement that the returning pilgrims bring to our campus setting. And that “magnification” is light—light that illumines the aspects of the Christian way (self- and-vocational identity, service commitments, and social justice awareness) as it enables persons to holistically, expansively, and with transformation walk the Way of Christ.

As you lead service pilgrimages as part of your ministry, you may have other insights about the experience and the consequences of such a practice. I invite you to contact me at lbrownlee@uindy.edu to continue the conversation about the meaning and value of service pilgrimages in the lives of your students.
Endnotes

2 *ibid.*, 2.
6 St. Teresa of Avila.
9 Westwood, *op.cit.*, 60.
10 *ibid.*, 65.
11 *ibid.*, 91.
13 William Williams, #437 in *Hymns and Psalms, op.cit.*
14 F. Pratt Green, #384 in *Hymns and Psalms, ibid.*
15 Francis Turner Palgrave, #656 in *Hymns and Psalms, ibid.*
17 Horner, Sr. Jennifer, *op.cit.*, no page number.
18 John Newton, #546 in *Hymns and Psalms, op.cit.*