

*'It was magical': intersections of pilgrimage, nature, gender and enchantment as a potential bridge to environmental action in the Anthropocene*

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## Article

# 'It Was Magical': Intersections of Pilgrimage, Nature, Gender and Enchantment as a Potential Bridge to Environmental Action in the Anthropocene

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**Abstract:** Centring on embodiment, gendered eco-spiritual responses to nature, enchantment and environmental crises in the Anthropocene, this paper explores engagement with nature as a spiritual experience and resource through 'Celtic' Christian prayer walks in the Isle of Man. Web-based and printed materials for the walks are analysed for references to nature and environmental responsibility, and the complexities of personal, gendered and theological relation to nature and the environment are explored through participants' accounts. The analysis is attentive to participants professing Christian faith and institutional affiliation as well as those without affiliation or faith and to their gendered experience. Themes identified include nature-inspired 'Celtic' spirituality; personal relation to the non-human (the divine, nature and nature-as-divine); the landscape as a liminal 'thin place'; and social and environmental responsibility. The paper concludes by signalling the potential for bridging between pilgrimage-centred enchantment and eco-spirituality in order to mobilise engagement with and for the environment in the Anthropocene, including environmental conservation activities, lobbying or protest. Whilst eschewing gendered stereotypes, empirical findings evidence gendered patterns of engagement and responses to different expressions of spirituality. Attention to these differences could facilitate the engaging and mobilising of different cohorts of pilgrims with environmental agendas, inspiring personal and collective environmental action.

**Keywords:** nature; landscape; pilgrimage; gender; eco-spirituality; environmental consciousness; Anthropocene; Celtic; enchantment; Isle of Man



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## 1. Introduction

'Loving God, we give thanks for your awesome gift of creation, of which we are a humble part. Through it you provide us with every need. Forgive us when we have abused your abundance through our greed, selfishness and disregard for our fellow species. Inspired by your generosity and the story of this oakwood, may we seek to preserve rather than destroy; to enjoy rather than accumulate; and to respect rather than exploit. Amen'

(Prayer at the Millennium Oakwood, PTK, May 2021, reproduced with the kind permission of PTK).

This paper explores an annual week of prayer walks as a form of contemporary pilgrimage organised by the Praying the Keeills (PTK) ecumenical Christian group in the Isle of Man. The island, located in the centre of the Irish Sea, has a population of circa 83,000 and is both a microstate and a UK Crown Dependency. English and Manx Gaelic are its official languages, and while the latter, revived in recent years, remains very much a minority language, Celtic artefacts, music and aesthetics are central to the cultural identity of the island. 'Keeill' is a Manx Gaelic term for the Christian chapels founded on the island during the medieval period, initially by missionaries from other Celtic lands, notably Ireland, as is evident in chapels dedicated to saints Patrick and Bridget, with later chapels

dedicated to saints preferred by Christianised Viking settlers, e.g., St Michael. These chapels, now mostly ruins, are the main destinations for the annual week of daily prayer walks organised by the voluntary clergy and lay members of local churches who make up the Praying the Keeills committee. In keeping with their ethos, the volunteer PTK organising group has adopted a welcoming and open approach to participation in these short local pilgrimages. The walks centre on the remaining keeills, which are typically located in rural areas and are reached using the island's dense network of footpaths (see Figure 1). The programme for the annual PTK week typically includes church services, accessible and more challenging prayer walks, a public lecture, and an evening coach trip with a buffet. The daily prayer walks and associated events typically attract between 20 and 100 participants, with numbers peaking at weekend and evening walks/events. As is common with other forms of Christian pilgrimage (Gemzöe 2009; Jansen 2009), approximately two-thirds of participants were women. In contrast to many institutionalised pilgrimages, women, both clergy and laity, also regularly led prayers and reflections. The social construction of gender and religion are co-constitutive (Gemzöe and Keinänen 2016; Werbner 2015; Maddrell 2021a); likewise, studies of environmental consciousness and action have shown gendered patterns (Costa Pinto et al. 2014; Fukukawa et al. 2007). Gender is therefore a significant analytical category in the following discussion but is limited here to cis male and female, as these were the only gender categories with which participants in this study self-identified. Elsewhere, researchers are beginning to explore transgender experiences of pilgrimage (Maddrell 2021a). Drawing on the concepts of embodiment and sacred mobilities (Maddrell 2011, 2021a, 2021b; Maddrell et al. 2015b), enchantment (Woodyer and Geoghegan 2013) and the environment in the Anthropocene (Head 2016), analysis focuses firstly on an appreciation of non- or more-than-human relations, i.e., between pilgrims and God or the divine, other species, nature, landscape and the broader environment. Secondly, discussion reflects on how that experience and engagement with nature through embodied pilgrimage and associated experiences of 'enchantment' may prompt new understanding of environmental responsibility, action and even politically engaged activism in the current era of environmental crisis described as the Anthropocene. The adoption of ethnographic participant-centred accounts (Frey 1998), attention to translocative practiced religion (Tweed 2006), mobilities associated with 'liturgically charged pathways' (Coleman and Eade 2004, p. 19), and the spiritual-emotional experience of being 'moved' by faith (Hermkens et al. 2009), landscape and nature (Maddrell et al. 2015a) coalesce in the practice and study of 'sacred mobilities' (Maddrell 2011, 2021b; Maddrell et al. 2015b). These conceptual developments assist interrogation of the interplay of embodied movement, nature and spiritual experience through varied forms of pilgrimage.



**Figure 1.** Praying the Keeills evening walk from Niarbyl to White Beach, West coast, Isle of Man (Source: author's photograph).



## 2. Methodology

The research on which this paper draws is participant-centred and was one of three case studies in a wider international study of the significance of landscape in European Christian pilgrimage<sup>1</sup>. In addition to several periods of researcher participant observation (amounting to circa 30 days 2010–2016), participant accounts collected in 2010–2011 included eight interviews with PTK committee members and worship leaders, seven photo diaries recorded by anonymized volunteer participants who were asked to photograph things and events which were significant to them during their pilgrimage, as well as some 40 ‘research postcards’. The research postcards were designed as an inclusive methodology which would garner wider views and experiences of pilgrimage participants and took the form of pre-stamped postcards with two short questions inviting participants to share a brief account of the significance of the landscape to their experience, plus a few demographic details (age, gender and if they had any religious affiliation) in order to contextualise their comments. Seeking to maximise participation, the postcards were distributed on three separate occasions within the original study 2010–2011, and approximately two thirds were returned, yielding surprisingly rich material (see [Maddrell 2021b](#) for a fuller account). Interview transcripts, postcard responses and both images and text from photo diaries were coded to identify broad themes and analysed in relation to gendered identities and how these variously intersect with age and any religious affiliation. Primary data were complemented by an analysis of related secondary sources, including annual PTK programmes, prayer sheets, and text and images from the PTK and related websites 2006–2021. Relationship to the environment is a core theme to this paper, and the following section outlines the concepts of embodiment, enchantment and the Anthropocene, which are central to the following discussion of the nexus of encounters with nature, spiritual experience, and awareness of, and response to, the current environmental crisis.

## 3. Embodiment, Enchantment and the Anthropocene

Embodiment is a key theme in feminist scholarship of spatial practices, lived experience and politics ([Longhurst 2005](#)) and of critical studies of religion ([Gökariksel 2009](#); [Klingorová 2020](#); [Werbner 2015](#)). This approach also affords attention to somatic experience, culminating in a polysensory approach which allows for the complexities of overlapping, intertextual and ambiguous stimuli, embodied experience and culturally mediated ‘diverse interpretative schemas for such’ ([Sather-Wagstaff 2017](#), p. 17). Attending to bodies, their inscriptions, embodied practices and experiences, and the embodiment of faith, identity and social relations serves to counterbalance any overemphasis on religious texts, institutionalised doctrine, and material artifacts within studies of religion–spirituality, as well as giving attention to the ways in which bodies and lives are gendered in varying ways in different settings and contexts ([Maddrell 2021a](#)).

Embodiment is also a key element of enchantment, which constitutes an embodied ‘state of wonder’, which is often represented as an experience of being captivated or even captured by something, which is expressed in terms of being transfixed or ‘spell-bound’, i.e., being utterly present in the moment ([Bennett 2001](#), p. 5). This clearly relates to ideas of ‘flow’, being in love, entranced, or in a creative, emotional or spiritual ‘high’. Such enchanting encounters can be catalysed in a variety of ways, prompted by material objects, memories and/or captivating, inspirational and sensory stimuli; they may be anticipated or unexpected, tapping and channelling interwoven emotional-affective, social, political and spiritual responses. Traditionally associated with the experience of the divine, exemplified by experience of spiritual rapture, in recent decades, the concept of enchantment has been applied to pre-monotheistic spiritual roots and contemporary emotional-affective experiences including cross-species encounters ([Bennett 2001](#)). Indeed, Bennett goes so far as to suggest that ‘crossings’ of various forms, large and small, can engender enchantment, not least because, by its nature, ‘crossing’ into new relationality with people, places and other species can transport one into new ‘territory’, which can in turn yield surprising unscripted and heightened experiences. This sense of ‘crossing’ boundaries is a central element of


much religious experience (Tweed 2006) and wider accounts of enchantment. The powerful experience of being enchanted is often unpredictable and is described as something beyond the norms of day-to-day experience, expectations and expression: ‘delight, wonder or that which cannot be simply explained’ (Woodyer and Geoghegan 2013, p. 195). Yet, at the same time, powerful and sometimes uncanny experiences of enchantment can be prompted by *everyday* phenomena and transient moments, such as a shaft of sunlight or the flight of a bird, highlighting the potential significance of the fleeting and barely perceived (Woodyer and Geoghegan 2013). Here, enchantment is deployed as a framework for understanding and analysing participants’ varied heightened experiences of the nexus of spiritual–secular–embodied–emotional encounter of, and through, faith heritage and the environment via local pilgrimage walks. Crucially, this attends to the role of movement in experiences of enchantment. While Bennett describes the experience of being enchanted as a ‘temporary suspension of chronological time and bodily movement’ and a ‘momentarily immobilizing encounter’ (Bennett 2001, p. 5), this does not limit enchantment to sedentary activities; forms of mobility and immobility can be both complementary and co-producing. The kinetic act of walking, cycling or dancing, or the mobility of a bus ride, may literally move one to a place where one is also metaphorically transported or immobilized by a sensory, emotional and/or spiritual experience. In the context of pilgrimage (and other forms of intentional mobility), movement and the emotional–affective–spiritual experience of ‘being moved’ by spiritually charged places, artefacts and landscape frequently go hand in hand (Hermkens et al. 2009; Maddrell 2011).

The experience of being transfixed and/or energised through enchantment is transformative of the lived experience of the moment, which, in turn, can potentially carry through to future understanding, experiences and actions. Consequently, being enchanted can prompt emotional responses and changes in attitudes or behaviour (Woodyer and Geoghegan 2013). Further, intense experience, or an accumulation of enchantment through repeated experience, can variously inspire hope, prompt caring responses and energise motivation *to act* in response to that experience of enchantment (Woodyer and Geoghegan 2013). Arguably, these energising qualities of enchantment and enchantment-inspired action are sorely needed in the face of the current social and environmental challenges associated with the twenty-first century, part of the era which has been dubbed the Anthropocene.

The Anthropocene is defined as a new geological era and/or social discourse which recognises the ways in which human activity has become a ‘global geophysical force’ (Steffen et al. 2007) and consequently affects—dominates—all aspects of the processes and wildlife on the earth’s surface (Lorimer 2015). An Anthropocene perspective of the world illuminates human impact on the natural world, evident in the human-induced environmental ravages of biodiversity loss, land and water degradation and climate change. These impacts are growing in terms of the climate and extinction crises, which reveal the complex co-dependence of the human and non-human: ‘We are the generations that are overseeing the loss of so much of the diversity of living forms on this planet, the generations that are perhaps yet to fully understand and respect the significance of the intimately entangled, co-evolved, forms of life with which we share this planet’ (van Dooren 2014, p. 5). The socially and species-uneven impacts of the Anthropocene are creating ‘a distinct unravelling of ways of life’ (van Dooren 2014, p. 7). The destruction of species, habitats and homes, as well as an undermining of a wider sense of ‘security’ for life as we know it, prompts grief; but this sense of loss and hurt can be a necessary prerequisite for undertaking the ‘work’ of mourning, including making necessary, even painful, changes required in order to move forward responsibly (Head 2016). Conceptually and metaphorically, rejecting and making reparations for environmental degradation clearly links to rhetorical and ritual elements of Christian and other religious–spiritual discourses, especially in relation to repentance, stewardship of the earth, mutual responsibility and the possibility of renewal.

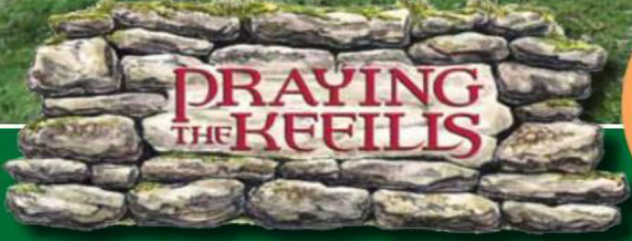
The paper now turns to a discussion of enchantment through analysis of local pilgrimage walks in the Isle of Man, which were framed by the narratives and ethos of both

medieval and contemporary nature-centred expressions of Celtic spirituality, exemplified by the use of prayers and poems attributed to Celtic saints such as St Patrick and St Columba (see the extract from *The Deer's Cry* in Figure 2) and those of the present-day Scottish Iona Community and Irish writer John Donohue.



## Praying the Keeills Week

### 18th - 25th May 2019



*'Come,' my heart says, 'seek his face!'*

*Your face, Lord, do I seek. Do not hide your face from me.*

*Psalm 27 v 8,9*

To both Islanders and those from further afield, we extend a warm welcome to **Praying the Keeills 2019 – our 14th year.**


Our week-long schedule of events offers opportunities to visit our tiny but well-loved ancient chapels known as keeills. These are scattered across the Manx countryside as witnesses to our rich Celtic heritage, and today offer a chance to meet with friends old and new... to drop down a gear or two... and perhaps in the beauty of nature to encounter God.

This year's theme draws on St Patrick, whose legacy can be found not only in our place-names but also in Archibald Knox's fine work of calligraphic art based on 'The Deer's Cry'.

We hope our programme offers something for everyone – a wide range of walks, a coach tour, and an evening lecture. Apart from the coach trip, all are free and there's no need to book. We look forward to meeting you!

Bannaghtyn (Blessings)


***Praying the Keeills Team***



**[www.prayingthekeeills.org](http://www.prayingthekeeills.org)**

Figure 2. Cont.





**Christ in me...**

**St Patrick's Breastplate – or the Deer's Cry** – is an old Irish prayer of protection attributed to St Patrick. The Manx-born and world-renowned artist Archibald Knox took lines of the prayer and created them into individual illuminated pages which together might be described as the modern Manx 'Book of Kells' such is the skill and inspiration of the work. He worked on it over a period of about 20 years but it was not completed at the time of his death in 1933.

*Images courtesy of Manx National Heritage, 1958-0202*

**Prayer**

*I arise today  
Through God's strength to pilot me;  
God's might to uphold me,  
God's wisdom to guide me,  
God's hand to guard me,  
God's way to lie before me.*

**From 'The Deer's Cry',  
attributed to St Patrick**

**What is a Keeill?**

Keeills are the Christian chapels built on the Isle of Man between the 8th and 12th centuries.

The earliest keeills were built of sods of earth and rarely larger than 3 metres by 5 metres internally.

Some of the keeills were more substantial – bigger, and built of stone. There may have been almost 200 of them, of which about 35 now have remains that can be seen.

Keeills served a variety of purposes - family chapels, wayside shrines, places of retreat and hermitage.

A walled graveyard surrounded some of the keeills and a well may be nearby.

Memorial crosses and other decorated stones which were found at some of the keeills have been moved to the present parish churches.

Our Celtic forebears would have described the keeills as "thin places" where we can draw close to God.

Prayer and meditation were important to those who worshipped in or around the keeills, as they can be to us.

Praying the Keeills Week, organised by local churches, is an opportunity to step aside from the busy-ness of life, and rediscover what we may have lost.

For information, events, pictures and contact go to: [www.prayingthekeeills.org](http://www.prayingthekeeills.org)

**Figure 2.** Extract from Praying the Keeills Programme 2019, including an excerpt from 'The Deer's Cry' and art work by Archibald Knox (reproduced by kind permission of PTK).

#### 4. Enchantment through Celtic Pilgrimage

The subjective turn within religion, which favours spirituality over religious observance (Heelas and Woodhead 2005), brings together a holistic understanding of body, mind and spirit, as well as 'seeking a harmonious connection to nature and the environment' (Walton 2015). Whilst this enchantment with nature has been associated with the discursive repertoire of European Romanticism, it may also be argued that Romanticism, at least in Anglophone contexts, was rooted in part in historic Celtic cultural-spiritual appreciation of the sublime (Maddrell and Scriven 2016). Celtic Christianity is an assemblage of regionally and historically grounded beliefs and practices inspired by the teachings of early desert mystics, which centres on the encircling and immanent nature of divine presence in nature

and everyday activities, which were common invocations in early Celtic Christian prayers (see PTK programme extracts in Figure 2). Organisationally, Celtic Christianity is typically seen as less hierarchical and patriarchal than other Christian traditions, and many Western Christians and spiritual seekers find Celtic prayers and theology relevant to the present day (Bradley 2003), despite some very rule-focused traditions, e.g., repentance-centred pilgrimage at Lough Dergh, Ireland (see Maddrell and Scriven 2016). The centrality of nature in these beliefs and practices has the potential to act as a bridge between spiritual experience, including pilgrimage, and contemporary environmental concerns.

Praying the Keeills (PTK) (often referred to more informally as ‘Keeills Week’) grew out of a bishop-led Anglican initiative in 2006 but quickly became ecumenical, led by a voluntary group of clergy and laity. An intermeshing of spiritual heritage, nature and landscape were placed at the heart of the ‘Praying the Keeills’ annual week of walks and associated events since its inception. This in turn was presented as inherently in the tradition and spirit of Celtic Christian practice, as stated in the public invitation to join the prayer walks to the remains of the medieval keeills represented as ‘thin places’. The notion of ‘thin places’ is a recurring theme in Celtic Christian narratives and is associated with places deemed to have numinous qualities and to act as a spiritual threshold between the material-human world and the divine. As Walton (2015, p. 35) notes, ‘It is interesting that the concept of thin spaces, whilst evidently just as much a theology of sacred place as any other, appears much less embarrassing to Protestants than other devices linking landscape and revelation. Perhaps this may be because the idea of nature as a second holy book communicating knowledge of God has been a marginal but acceptable part of the tradition since its inception. It is also the case that the concept is held to originate within Celtic Christianity which provides a sense of roots’.

The PTK website and annual programmes describe the liminoid quality of the keeill ruins in relation to their heritage as sites of faith practice, as well as the beauty and tranquillity of their settings: ‘... the ancient keeill sites are often found in areas of particular natural beauty and in such surroundings it is a common experience to sense something of the presence of God’ (PTK 2019). This recurring theme is evident in the 2019 PTK programme, which invites all to join the keeills walks, offering a ‘chance to meet with friends old and new ... to drop down a gear or two ... and perhaps in the beauty of nature to encounter God’. It also stresses what might be described as the spiritual magnetism (Preston 1992) of the keeills in terms of their liminoid qualities: ‘Our Celtic forbears would have described the keeills as “thin places” where we can draw close to God’ (PTK 2019 (see Figure 2)). Similar themes are evident on the related Pilgrimage Isle of Man (2016) website, which offers information and resources for the Triskelion Way pilgrimage and other faith heritage trails established in 2016<sup>2</sup> (Pilgrimage Isle of Man 2016). The British Pilgrimage Trust website describes the Triskelion Way as an opportunity to ‘engage with some of the remotest forms of spirituality’, describes the island’s faith heritage sites as ‘magical’, ‘top-grade natural holy places’ and characterizes the landscape as ‘ravishing’ and ‘cleansing’:

This is the Isle of Man’s only pilgrimage route, and links the historic holy places of Rushen Abbey, Peel Cathedral and the magical, remote Maughold Church, the site of an extensive ninth century monastery. The route moves through ravishing coastal and hill scenery, with a particularly wild and remote section over the hills and moorland. The clifftop views are breathtaking as you approach Peel and also Maughold. Seals, cormorants and (in summer) basking sharks, may make appearances too. There are top-grade natural holy places, such as the two dramatic waterfalls at Glen Maye and Spooyt Vane (‘White Spout’ in the local endangered language of Manx Gaelic)—their crashing white noise will cleanse your senses. You will find carved Celtic and Scandinavian stone crosses, and, unique to the Isle of Man, many examples of a new category of ‘holy place’—‘keeills’—which are semi-ruined C6th–12th chapels. (<https://britishpilgrimage.org/portfolio/triskelion-way/>) (accessed on 4 August 2021).

This engagement with nature, including enchantment with and through the landscape, which is so strongly expressed in relation to the Isle of Man and other sites of ‘Celtic’ pilgrimage, such as Iona (Scotland) and Croagh Patrick (Ireland), can also be found in other pilgrimage contexts such as the Camino de Santiago de Compostela, as well as being central to practices of non-institutionalised self-spirituality (see [Frey 1998](#); [Gemzöe 2020](#); [Heelas and Woodhead 2005](#); [Timothy and Conover 2006](#)). Engagement with nature is further identified as pivotal to neo-pagan spirituality ([Butler 2020](#); [Thurgill 2015](#)), including women’s neo-pagan goddess-centred spirituality ([Rountree 2006](#)).

#### 4.1. *The Enchantment of the Past*

Enchantment with Celtic aesthetics was evident in the Anglo-European Arts and Crafts movement of the early twentieth century, notably through the work of Manx artist and teacher Archibald Knox. He was captivated by the rich collection of Celtic–Norse slab carvings found in the Isle of Man, and these inspired his own designs for numerous items in the Tudric range for Liberty of London, memorial crosses and his illuminated manuscript of the *Deer’s Cry* (see artwork in [Figure 2](#)) attributed to St Patrick. Faith and heritage are deeply entwined on the Isle of Man. The rich spiritual past of the island was an inspiration to those who co-founded *Praying the Keeills* in 2006, including Graeme Knowles, the island’s Anglican bishop at the time; and this focus on faith heritage was underpinned the role of Manx National Heritage as a founding partner in the subsequent 2016 Pilgrimage Isle of Man initiative. Relationship to the past was also reported as at the heart of the enchanted experience for pilgrimage participants. This connection to the past through the material keeill sites, and the pathways to them, was expressed in various ways. For some participants, the sense of a bond between past, present and future believers and the continuity of faith practices was central: ‘It was a profound experience to touch with Christians from centuries ago and with Christians of a variety of denominations from the Island and afar as we prayed together’ (Postcard 1, woman, 66–75 years old, Roman Catholic); ‘Time for prayer and reflection at Maughold keeill site, and remember all those Christians who have prayed and worshipped here before us and those who will come in the future’ (Photo Diary, Anne, 26–35 years old, Methodist); ‘Now I know the location of some keeills, on future visits I will be able to add my prayers to those of previous ages.’ (PTK Postcard 16, woman, 66–75 years old, Evangelical). For others, participation facilitated a blending of past and present believers, national–cultural and faith heritage mediated by nature, as expressed by one couple in their sixties, who were Methodists: ‘Praying the keeills is a wonderful way of celebrating our national Celtic religious and cultural heritage. Landscape, countryside and sound of birds make it feel like a real link with the past’ (Postcard 21). One Methodist man in the 66–75 years age group articulated a vivid imaginary of the past centring on the early medieval hermitic or evangelist monks, which ‘heightened’ his experience of the landscape: ‘... the green hills and seascapes across the Irish Sea make it all come together for me. The sense of the old monks wandering about these British Isles is so very real to me and it makes my experience heightened’ (Postcard 7). These quotes capture striking expressions of enchantment and evidence what [Macdonald \(2013, p. 79\)](#) describes as ‘feeling the past’ and ‘past presencing’. This ‘heritagization of pilgrimage’ ([Bowman et al. 2020](#)) is explored in more detail in *Pilgrimage, Landscape and Heritage* ([Maddrell et al. 2015b](#)).



Enchantment can also be identified in participants' accounts of engagement with the materiality of the ruins of the keeills or the carved Celtic–Norse crosses and slabs originating in the keeills and their burial grounds and now largely curated in succeeding parish churches and the Manx Museum. This was captured in the photo diary of Dave, a Methodist participant who occasionally led or helped his cleric wife lead the worship during the prayer walks. Dave photographed the carved stones to represent a significant part of his experience. 'Touching the stones and sitting on the walls gives me a sense of connectedness to Christianity, to our ancestors and to this beautiful Island . . . The Celtic crosses here are reminders again of from whence we have come. I love to come and to just be in their presence.' He went on to describe the carved stones, which featured strongly in his photo diary and written account, as ' . . . tangible & tactile evidence that this story we have learned from our Celtic ancestors is real. For me, such a remnant from the old keeill is important, it humbles me to think about all who have touched and utilized it before me' (Photo diary 2010). Participants commonly used touch as a means of literal and metaphorical contact with the past and to more fully experience the spiritual significance of the keeills and their artefacts. Here, through sight, touch and imagination, the haptic encounter with these sacred objects was experienced as numinous and as a connection across the centuries (Maddrell and Dora 2013a).

Interest in and 'feeling the past' was also evident in two explicitly secular accounts from respondents. For example, a woman in her late sixties, an historian who self-identified as 'Anglican [by birth] but non-believing', described visiting a remote hillside keeill associated in records with a priest called Juan (a common Manx name) and her secular sense of connection to him through occupying the same landscape he had, centuries earlier: ' . . . I ponder the sense of continuity of standing with others in a place where generations of people have stood for centuries past.' She also testified to the power of a rare moment of silence during a period of reflection and the almost irresistibly moving—enchancing—poetics of traditional Celtic prayers: 'Though I don't, can't, respond to the religious elements of the prayers, I often respond to the sheer poetry of the words, especially the old Celtic prayers . . . .' (Postcard 26).

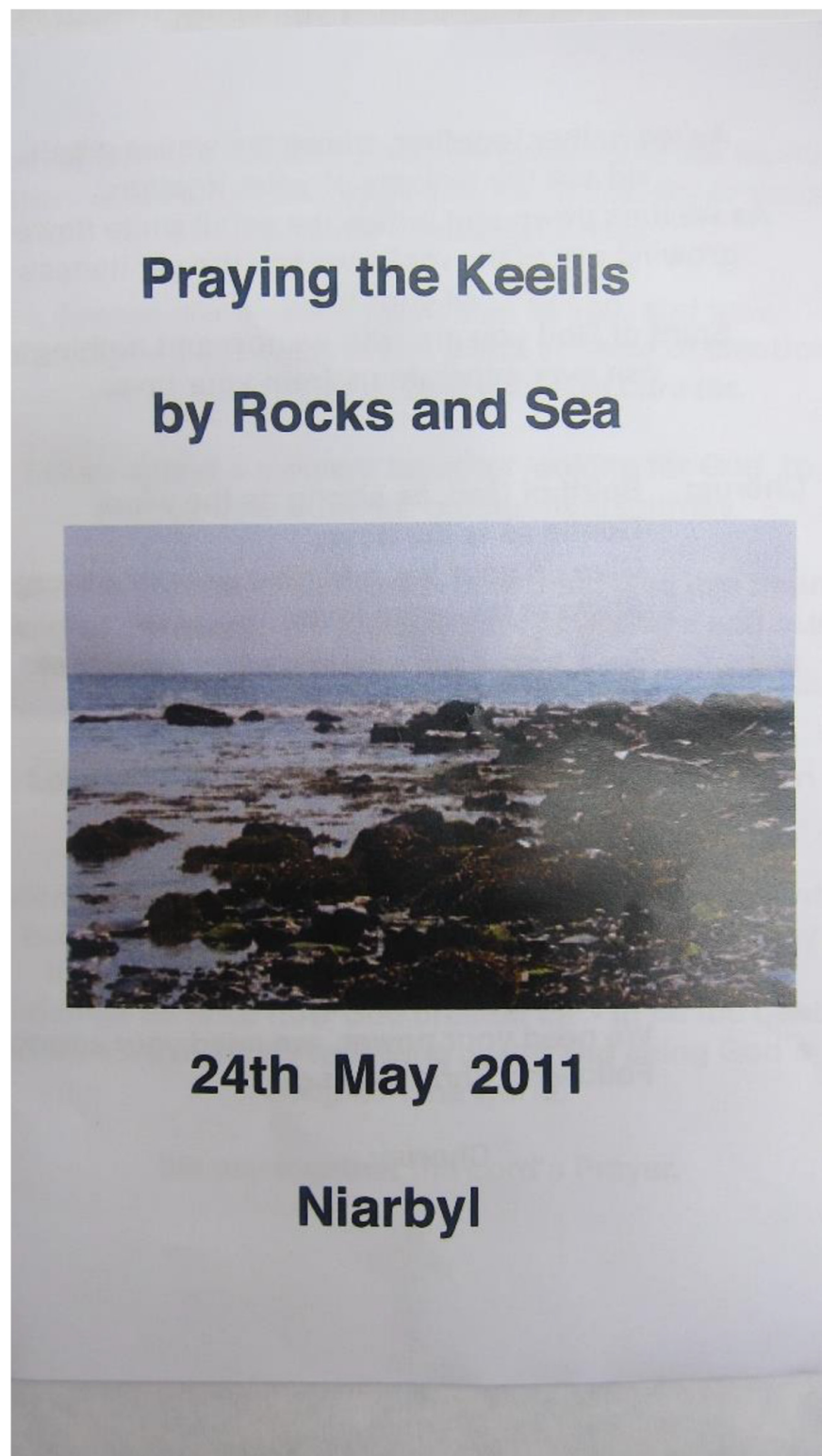
#### 4.2. Enchanting Nature and Landscape

While some participants reported their ability to worship and connect with God wherever they were, nature-landscape, often framed as 'creation', was identified as a spiritual catalyst by many respondents of different genders, ages and religious affiliation. A young Methodist woman described the pilgrimage as an opportunity to 'remind ourselves of the marvellous works of God's creation. From huge mountain and hills to the tiny delicate flower' (Postcard 4, 26–35 years old); and a retired man, who identified simply as a 'Christian', wrote, ' . . . good to be up there [on the mountain] worshipping the Creator. The landscape was central to the experience' (Postcard 15, 66–75 years old). Embodied experience was a crucial part to this sense of nature and environment, incorporating 'somatic modes of attention' (Rountree 2006, p. 98) through embodied practices such as walking, sensory encounter and sharing food, as well as particular faith practices and the performance of rituals such as circle prayers and, on one occasion, communion.

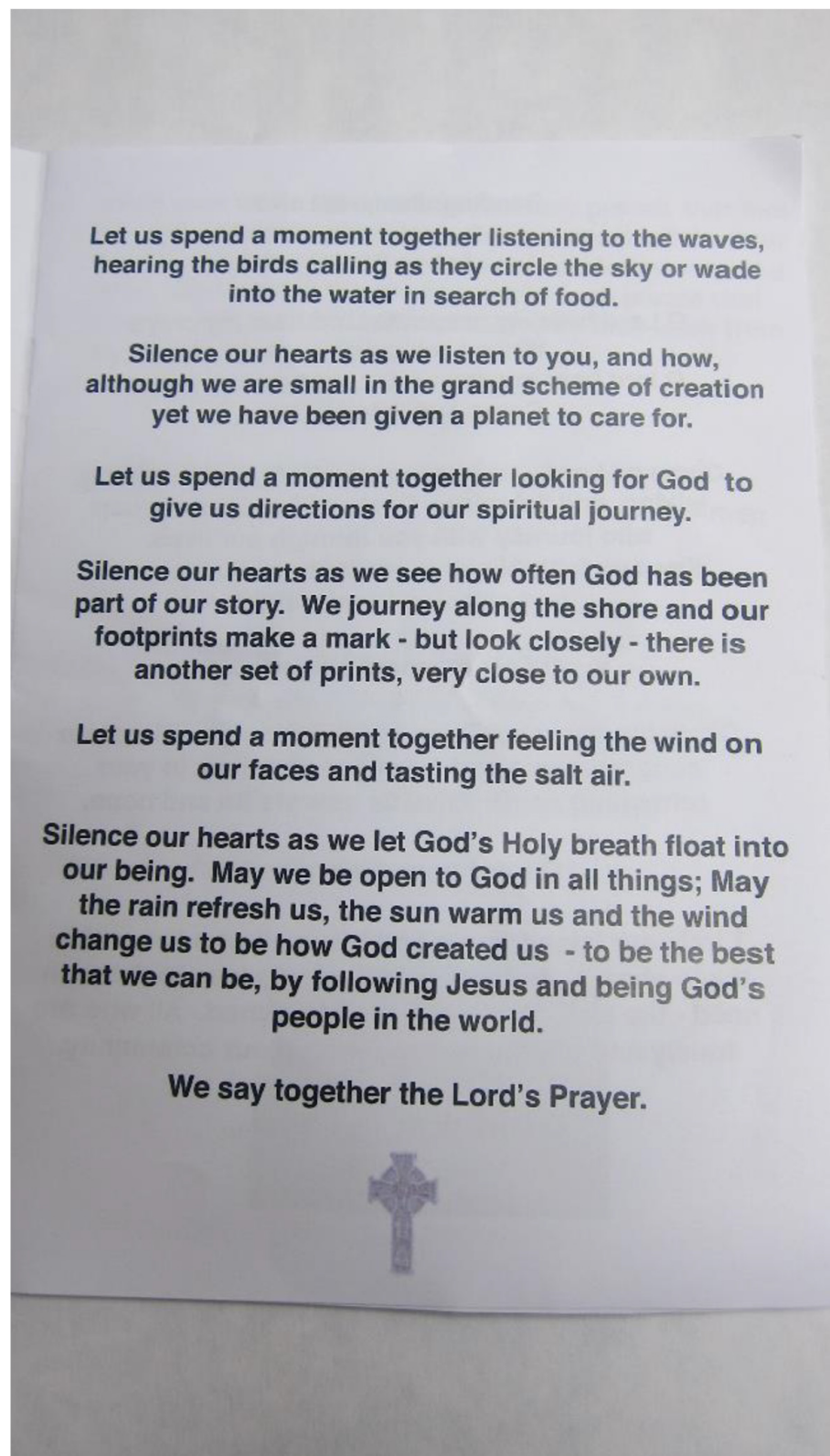
One Roman Catholic PTK committee member described her sense of divine immanence in nature, encapsulating a clear example of the arresting powers of enchantment, including the absorption of the moment: 'Down in a glen, close to water . . . there I would feel a much stronger sense of the presence of God, without almost having to think about it, you might say, and suddenly be overcome by an awareness and just want to stop and be present in that moment' (Interview PTK committee member 6, 2010). Another Catholic woman participant's account underscores the role of visiting unknown places—even within one's own locality—and having new experiences can contribute to enchantment. She also articulated the role of nature, including the weather and wild flowers in triggering that embodied–emotional–affective–spiritual experience: 'The keeills week took me to beautiful previously unexplored parts of Isle of Man. Sitting in a place of prayer surrounded by

beautiful woodland and carpets of spring flowers was sheer delight. An awe-filled mystic experience each day being a new landscape, vista, and different type of weather. To have the mists surrounding Saint Runius surrounded by ancient graves, the dappled sunshine as we prayed at Glen Mooar up above Spooyt Vane, then down to the wild beach below. From hilltop and Viking burial grounds and grassy fields to the woodlands and waterfalls to the beaches, all enveloped in the glorious May splendour of new green and wildflowers. Magic.’ (Postcard 18, 66–75 years old). As [Foley \(2010\)](#) notes, medieval Celtic cosmologies around nature and landscape centred on a belief in God’s ability to communicate through nature and were predicated on the spiritual and physical healing dimensions of place ([Foley 2010](#)). The therapeutic qualities of landscapes and environments have been identified as significant elements of pilgrimage experience in a number of contexts (see, for example, [Bell et al. 2018](#); [Gemzöe 2020](#); [Maddrell and Dora 2013b](#)).

Other participants noted fleeting moments of nature-encounter which capture a sense of enchantment, exemplified by Kim, an Evangelical Baptist, in her pilgrimage photo diary: ‘... en route—glimpses of glory—3 hares bounding over the bilberries’. For other participants, embodied and sensory experiences of the environment were affective, the experience evoking memories of relational attachment to people and other places. This was expressed by one Roman Catholic woman as the landscape ‘speaking’ to her: ‘The landscape spoke because it was so like my home county of Dorset and a miniature Cornwall where my family spent many happy holidays. The flowers, especially bluebells and primroses, also brought my family and friends with me’ (Postcard 1, 66–75 years old). For another woman, an Anglican who had deep-seated family connections to a particular keeill site, the very familiar landscape delivered fresh experience in the context of the prayer walk which prompted her to (re)read this landscape as a spiritual text: ‘A rock in the bay that kept disappearing with the waves, then appearing again reminded me that faith may be lost to me at times but is always there’ (Postcard 9, 66–75 years old). Others, again notably women, reported a sense of spiritual experience heightened during an evening coastal prayer walk, including a service at Niarbyl beach (see order of service extract, Figure 3), in which the setting and role of nature was pivotal to experience: ‘The worship on the beach was especially poignant as it interacted with the landscape’ (Postcard 30, woman, 46–55 years old, Methodist); ‘Niarbyl beach stood out as the most spiritual & moving, although St Luke’s came a pretty close 2nd. The music on both those occasions was really uplifting ... . The waves lapping and the birds circling really contributed to the atmosphere at Niarbyl ... ’ (Postcard 27, woman, 66–75, Anglican). The dual influences of aesthetically pleasing nature and music in this transcendent experience are notable here. My research diary and photographs of this evening prayer walk also captured the beauty of the setting, but the recording of the unaccompanied singing is a reminder that it was not particularly tuneful, but was, nonetheless, experienced by participants as moving. This is a reminder of Joy [Sather-Wagstaff’s \(2017\)](#) notion of the polysensory, which moves beyond the multisensory to encompass the somatic, kinaesthetic and embodied autonomic responses. In this case, polysensory experience shaped participants’ varied discourses of personal and collective beliefs, meaning-making, emotional-affective experience and spiritual enchantment. The following section reflects on gender and pilgrimage-nature enchantment, leading to reflections on potential links between such spiritual enchantment and environmental awareness and action.



**Figure 3.** *Cont.*



**Figure 3.** Praying the Keeills service sheet, Niarbyl 2011, cover and page 3 (courtesy of Praying the Keeills).

### **5. Gender, Eco-Spirituality and Environmental Sustainability**

Gender has been used to good effect as an analytical theme in recent scholarship on pilgrimage, principally in identifying and unpacking the gendered aspects of pilgrimage



practice, power relations and agency. See, for example, [Caidi et al. \(2018\)](#) on gendered representations of Muslim pilgrimage on social media; [Dubisch \(1995\)](#) and [Gemzöe and Keinänen \(2016\)](#) ([Notermans 2012](#); [Notermans et al. 2016](#)) on gendered motivations and experiences of Christian pilgrimage; [Gemzöe \(2012\)](#) on men's desire to 'protect' women and women's reimagining of their femininity on the Camino; and women's agency in neo-paganism ([Rountree 2002](#)). For the purposes of this paper, insights from this body of scholarship need to be in dialogue with studies of gender and environmental attitudes—and actions. Numerous studies from varied international settings indicate broad-brush socially constructed gendered trends, with women generally being attributed with greater levels of self-transcendence, including connection to social justice issues and environmental protection ([Costa Pinto et al. 2014](#)), and scoring more highly in response to environmental protocols ([Fukukawa et al. 2007](#); [Schwartz and Rubel 2005](#)) and practising sustainable consumption ([Costa Pinto et al. 2014](#)), while men are deemed to seek defined outcomes and be more responsive to collective rather than personal environmental imperatives ([Costa Pinto et al. 2014](#)).

The predominance of women's accounts identified in this study under the thematic code of nature-inspired spirituality, can be seen as indicative of a gender-skewed desire for experiences of spiritual enchantment, as seen in [Utriainen's \(2016\)](#) study of angel spirituality, or more simply, a greater openness to and expression of sensory-experiential spirituality. For those in this study who reported experiences of spiritual-environmental enchantment, both the practice of pilgrimage and certain numinous places were identified as having spiritual 'therapeutic' qualities which act as spaces or environments of renewal ([Maddrell and Dora 2013b](#)). In relation to this sense of spiritual renewal, the Celtic concept of 'thin places', a term frequently occurring in PTK materials, was cited across genders, by numerous leaders and participants, ranging from an Anglican bishop, to walk and prayer leaders and lay participants. While not all participants used the terminology of 'thin places', specific keeills were identified as having the numinous qualities associated with thin places, notably the remote west-coast keeill at Lag na Killey, a few miles along the coast from Niarbyl discussed above. These emotional-affective-spiritual responses to specific sites, whether explicit or implicit, might be described as a form of eco-spirituality or spiritual enchantment with sites deemed to possess what [Preston \(1992\)](#) terms as 'spiritual magnetism', cut across denominations and age groups, and as above, meshed with faith heritage. This point is illustrated by the quotes below from two women, one a Methodist and the other an Anglican: 'When going alone to other keeills in beautiful surroundings (Lag na Killey and Balladoole) there seemed to be the feeling of God's nearness, and a tangible link with those pilgrims of past years who had worshipped there' (Postcard 19, 66–75 years old, Methodist); 'Breath-taking beauty gave the feel of the "thin" places on earth closer to God. [...] participation] has a lasting impact, the peace, physical exhaustion, understanding we are such small specs on this earth' (Postcard 14, 46–55 years of age, Anglican).

The timing of the annual Praying the Keeills programme of events is significant, as mid-to late-May coincides with fresh foliage in the tree-lined glens and the seasonal proliferation of late spring/early summer wildflowers, which were repeatedly cited by several women as important to the aesthetic experience of the prayer walks, and which prompted the evocation of memories and connection to significant others. This echoes previous studies e.g., ([Costa Pinto et al. 2014](#); [Schwartz and Rubel 2005](#)) which suggest that women seek and express unity with nature. The varying weather was another environmental factor which played a direct role in spiritual experience. Poor weather inevitably reduced levels of participation in this largely local week of daily prayer walks, but for those who participated regardless of the weather, the general sense of enchantment tended to compensate for and override the impact of poor weather on their experience. This was illustrated by a Methodist woman in her fifties who reported 'To be able to see, touch, smell, taste (rain) be at one with nature (even in bad weather). Beautiful. So refreshing spiritually too ... '.

The island's hills, sea and rivers were repeatedly cited as spiritually uplifting and inspirational for participants, exemplified by the use of the Celtic blessing 'Deep peace of the running waves to you . . . '. Landscape features and the environment were invoked as an explicit spiritual resource in worship, as exemplified by the service sheet from Niarbyl. The text of the service sheet (see extract in Figure 3), prepared by a male cleric, evidences that standing together in silence on the beach in the evening light was intended to engender awe and spiritual reflection, but also note its call to conjoined environmental and spiritual obligations, which link to Christian discourses of environmental stewardship:

Let us spend a moment together listening to the waves,  
Hearing the birds calling as they circle the sky or wade  
Into the water in search of food.  
Silence our hearts as we listen to you, and how,  
Although we are small in the grand scheme of creation  
Yet, we have been given a planet to care for.  
Let us spend a moment together looking for God to  
Give us directions for our spiritual journey . . . .

The salience of this approach is captured by an Anglican woman who extolled the uplifting qualities of the landscape and the virtues and energizing qualities of prayer outside of the confines of a church building at this service: 'As I stood on the beach at Niarbyl on Tuesday evening—gazing in awe at the towering cliffs and bubbling sea—our prayers seemed so much more meaningful than in a church building—surrounded by the restraints of man [*sic*]!' (Postcard 7, woman, 56–65 years old).

One Anglican woman's description of participating in three of PTK week's events, including a coach trip, illustrates a thirst for 'time out' from the busy everyday commitments as a working parent in her late forties, the value of prayer in nature, and the connections she made to Scripture thorough the environment: 'Three very different events with much in common—taking "time out", knowing the peace all around us; making prayer more meaningful and real; the fellowship. Historical facts help to take us out of the present rush. We can see the diverse wildlife of the glens, both plants and animals, and the beauty of the streams, the mighty mountains which remind us of the psalm "I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills". We couldn't see much of the landscape on the coach trip because of the mist, which added to the mystery'. She went on to conclude that she was conscious that the local pilgrimage experience had '[made] me feel thankful to God for the environment into which He has placed us'. Another Roman Catholic woman described how the pilgrimage she participated in over several days was 'awesome and connected me to the earth and creation as a part of something much bigger than me'. This prompt to witness and engage others was exemplified by a woman from an Evangelical church, who recorded a PTK photo diary with her sister. Feeling moved by a mountain-top service '[ . . . ] I felt urged to ask others who were not with the group to join us but they declined . . . Although we were sad the week had come to an end [ . . . ] We felt more peaceful, less hassled and more confident to share our faith with others' (Sally, Photo Diary, 2010).

While female respondents overwhelmingly referenced nature and the landscape as spiritually inspiring and engaging, as noted above, a few male participants also referenced the birds and the hills, etc. Interestingly, it is notable that the few respondents in this study who did not credit the landscape and nature as a direct spiritual catalyst were men. One Anglican man, in his forties, explained that while he valued space-time to reflect during the pilgrimage and, in the spirit of John (Bunyan [1678] 1967) allegorical *Pilgrim's Progress*, acknowledged insights of landscape experience as a metaphor for life, but that ultimately, 'The "beauty" of the landscape was immaterial' to his faith experience (Postcard 38). However, the participant cited above who considered landscape to be central to his experience of 'the Creator', also positively repudiated what he described as the 'touchy feely'—arguably feminine—nature of participatory prayers and reflections



during the mountain-top service led by a female cleric, which involved passing stones around the circle (Postcard 15, 66–75 years old), i.e., the same service which had so moved Sally, as described in the previous paragraph. These individual accounts of experience are a reminder of the need for nuanced gendered analysis of spiritual experience, which is attentive to the intersection of gender with age and denomination, for example. In the case of postcard respondent 15, this allows the recognition of his personal spiritual enchantment through engagement with the environment, whilst eschewing more explicitly emotionally engaged approaches to worship and the landscape, which was precisely the experience encouraged and valued by many female participants, including those of a similar age. Thematic analysis of research postcards and photo diaries indicate that women participants were highly responsive to nature and spiritual experience through nature, as well as being attuned to personal relationships, past and present, while male respondents were more responsive to liturgy, faith heritage, the wider landscape and the social network of participants. These insights are pertinent to identifying potential connections between pilgrimage and environmental action as considered in the next section.

## 6. Pilgrimage as Mechanism for Environmental Lobbying or Activism?

Reflecting increasing engagement by Christians in Britain and elsewhere with green agendas (Nita 2016), greater awareness of environmental crises and the UK's hosting of the 2021 UN Climate Change Conference (COP26), nature and environmental agendas were explicitly addressed through the 2021 PTK theme of 'Creation'. The programme incorporated both encountering the divine through nature and human responsibility for failure to protect the environment: 'This year's theme centres on creation, encouraging us to appreciate the splendour of God's gifts in nature, as well as to reflect on how we can sometimes mess things up' (PTK Programme 2021). These concerns were expressed through prayers addressing questions of environmental exploitation and sustainable living, such as the prayer at the Millennium Oakwood cited at the outset of this paper, written by a male lay PTK worship leader, and a prayer adapted from Bob Kelsey, Diocesan Environmental Officer for Newcastle (England) and author of *Praying for the Earth. Remembering the environment in our prayers of intercession* (Kelsey 2021), which is couched in collective terms:

We give thanks for the land which sustains us, in all its beauty, variety and complexity.

We give thanks for an earth endowed with a bounty of flora and fauna, and with useful resources—for oil, for metals.

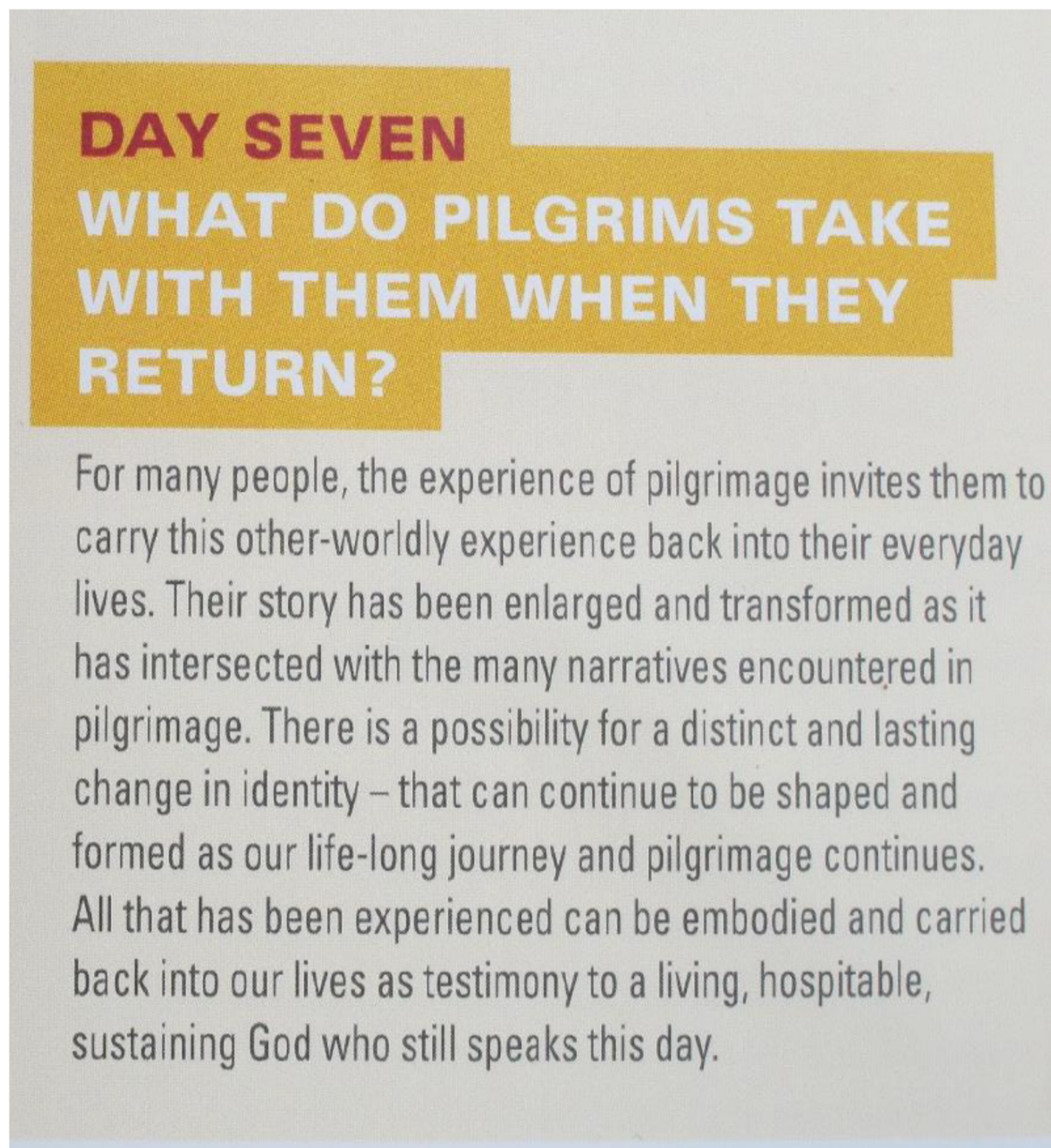
But we confess our greed as we have abused our environment, wiped out species, polluted our atmosphere, denuded our hillsides.

Forgive us.

Show us how to take care of the land on which we all depend.

Show us the meaning of enough.

Pilgrims are encouraged to apply their experience and lessons from pilgrimage to everyday life and practice (see the final day's reflection from the 2011 Praying the Keeills programme in Figure 4), and a sense of changed priorities is frequently recorded by pilgrims (Frey 1998; Gemzöe 2012). Although pilgrim responses to the 2021 PTK Creation theme were not recorded for this study, it can be argued that awareness of the larger environment, and gratitude for it, can constitute a bridge between personal experiences of spiritual enchantment and a sense of responsibility for that environment.



**Figure 4.** What do pilgrims take home with them? Praying the Keeills 2011 programme extract (courtesy of Praying the Keeills).

For environmentally conscious Christians, their faith, prayers and environmental action are interwoven and relational (Nita 2016). Therefore, where pilgrimage inspires reflection on environmental responsibilities, environmental action may follow in post-pilgrimage life, including personal consumption choices, environmental lobbying and activism. Collective walking, usually in the form of marches, has long been deployed as a form of activism, for example, Gandhi's Salt march in India, 1930, protesting colonial rule and taxes; the Jarrow March to London, England, 1936, when hundreds of unemployed men carried a petition to the government; as well as Civil Rights, CND and anti-apartheid protests of the 1960s–1980s. For some, their faith inspired participation in these marches and related political activism. This was exemplified by the Methodist Women's Network [Over The Rainbow](#) (1990) anti-apartheid vigil, June 1990, when thousands gathered opposite

parliament with hundreds of sewn panels, made by network groups, which were joined together in a ‘ribbon of solidarity’ with the repressed majority in South Africa. Combining evidence of pilgrimage as collective statement and faith groups acting as conduits for political solidarity and protest, the possibilities of pilgrimage serving as an environmental and social lobby become apparent. This was evident in the numerous ‘pilgrimages’ to COP26, including the UK Young Christian Climate Movement’s (YCCM) #RelaytoCOP26. Participants relayed a pennant between the location of the 2021 G7 meeting in Cornwall to the UN Climate Conference (COP26) meeting in Glasgow, walking as allies for fellow Christians and others around the world who are already experiencing or under threat of untenable risk, debt and even death as a result of climate change (<https://www.yccn.uk/rise-to-the-moment>) (accessed on 16 August 2021). Echoing the ‘die-in’ enactments of Extinction Rebellion, RelayToCop26 included a boat called ‘The Pilgrim’, symbolically made from a wicker coffin and sails emblazoned with the message to themselves, others, and to world leaders at COP26 to ‘Rise to the Moment’. Cohorts of pilgrim participants, regardless of gender or age, can contribute to local–international collaborative environmental practices and activism, potentially contributing ‘to the remaking of worlds in which plural life forms can co-exist—even in the face of transversal world-breaking’ (Theriault et al. 2020, p. 893). However, if male participation is low, Costa Pinto et al. (2014, p. 545) found that groupthink was a significant motivating factor: ‘When social identity was salient, male participation increased their levels of sustainable behaviour to the same level as female participants due to mechanisms of social comparison and recognition’.

## 7. Conclusions

This paper evidences several points regarding the intertwining of nature, pilgrimage, gender and the environmental agenda, through a study of low-carbon-footprint local ecumenical pilgrimage walks in the Isle of Man. Whilst Anthropocene-driven concern for the environment was not the original focus of Praying the Keeills or the main study of PTK reported here, these concerns have been evident in the underlying discourses of nature-based ‘Celtic’ spiritual practices and made more explicit in the programme by PTK organisers and worship leaders as the environmental crisis accelerates. Women participants’ accounts particularly capture their experience of the spiritually refreshing qualities of pilgrimage in the Manx landscape, and their consequent attachment to, and value of, that landscape–environment. Although these largely Christian participants might not choose to describe their spiritual experience as ‘enchantment’ per se (in the same way that some, for theological reasons, resist the labelling of the prayer walks as ‘pilgrimage’), their accounts amply evidence attributes associated with enchantment as defined by Bennett (2001) and Woodyer and Geoghegan (2013). Analysis of PTK programmes and worship materials, etc., evidence direct use of nature and landscape as a spiritual resource for worship, a form of eco-spirituality grounded in the Celtic tradition. In 2021, the year of COP26, the PTK programme particularly made the connection between the beautiful and awe-inspiring Manx landscape and environment and what might be termed *eco-conscious* spirituality, a nature-inspired spiritually charged sense of environmental and cross-species responsibility. This serves to challenge participants’ economic and environmental privileges, but also channels experiences of enchantment, which have been identified as means of creating and energizing optimism and activism in the face of environmental challenges. Just as landscape and nature can be read as hermeneutic spiritual texts, the non-human can also offer secular insight and hope, as attested by non-believing participants. As Rachel Carson noted in her seminal environmental text *Silent Spring*: ‘Those who contemplate the beauty of the earth find reserves of strength that will endure as long as life lasts. There is something infinitely healing in the repeated refrains of nature—the assurance that dawn comes after night, and spring after winter’ (Carson 1962, p. 9). Additionally, the focus, in Christian and other monotheistic pilgrimage discourses, on repenting shortcomings and mistakes and applying what has been experienced and learned on pilgrimage—and the spiritual energy gained—to the return to everyday life is also significant. This dialogic practice links a



need for environmental witness ([van Dooren 2014](#)) with the practice of spiritual witnessing, which can, as evident in the case of #RelaytoCop26, inspire environmental witness, action and activism through faith-based solidarity.

In this way, environmentally attuned pilgrimage has the potential to both enhance understanding of human–environment relations and ecological–social responsibilities, and inspire the mitigation of environmental crises. Environmentally informed pilgrimages can contribute to longer-term ‘calm and hopeful ways to think and talk about these painful issues’ associated with the crises of the Anthropocene ([Head 2016](#), p. 4). Whilst eschewing essentialist gendered stereotypes, some gendered patterns of engagement and responses to particular forms of worship were evident in this study, which could be helpful for those seeking to use local pilgrimage as a means of catalysing environmental awareness and action. Women’s high levels of participation in pilgrimage, their openness to being inspired by a faith–nature–environment nexus, and previous adoption of political protest by women’s faith groups against injustices such as apartheid suggest that pilgrimage could be an effective vehicle for exploring and developing collective faith-based environmental action amongst women, amplifying their voices and impact through collective action. That is, women’s increased reporting of eco-spirituality and existing self-transcendent environmental awareness could be channelled through environmentally conscious pilgrimage towards environmental action. Male worship leaders have contributed significantly to the PTK and wider eco-conscious spiritual agenda, and this is likely to prompt male participants to engage with environmental agenda, given studies evidencing increased uptake of sustainability behaviours by men as a result of groupthink ([Costa Pinto et al. 2014](#)). Purposively targeting men’s participation in environmentally informed pilgrimage could be a means of increasing their environmental education and motivation to adopt sustainable behaviours such as recycling and sustainable consumption. Combined, this suggests tailoring modes of pilgrimage to target groups reflecting these socialised gendered norms in order to maximise participation and outcomes. For example, higher rates of men’s participation was evident in the longer and more challenging weekend PTK walks, and these could be a vehicle for environment-focused pilgrimage. In recent years, an annual three-day pilgrimage on the island’s new Triskelion Way has incorporated checking and renewing signage for the route; in a similar vein, the medieval Celtic tradition of pilgrimage-as-service could be combined with environmental conservation in weekend pilgrimage-as-litter-picking/beach-cleaning or pilgrimage-as-footpath-repair or habitat-restoration-working-parties, which will attract and engage different participants, especially those who respond to collective encouragement, recognition of contribution and tangible outcomes, typically associated with masculine norms in previous studies.

Ultimately, in the face of the uneven negative impacts of the Anthropocene, pilgrimage can be an educative tool, a way of exploring environmental repentance and expressing faith-based solidarity with other humans or for other species or ecosystems, and a means of witnessing the need for, and committing to, personal and collective change. Gendered environmental responses, including eco-spirituality, personal consumption, project work and lobbying/activism, can be catalysed and channelled through pilgrimage; pilgrimage-as-service can engage pilgrims in direct environmental conservation; and activist-pilgrimages can play a political role in raising environmental awareness and calling on communities, businesses and legislators to act.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Landscape aesthetics, meaning and experience in Christian pilgrimage (AHRC-ESRC H009868/1).

<sup>2</sup> [Pilgrimage Isle of Man \(2016\)](#) was established by an umbrella group of interested parties, including Cathedral IoM, Manx National Heritage, Praying the Keeills and myself, as a UKRI follow-on project with funding from the AHRC. The website for

[Pilgrimage Isle of Man \(2016\)](#) has not been analysed here as I contributed images and text for the website in my role as project leader from 2015 to the initiative's launch in 2016.

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