



SUMMARY OF SPPN NATIONAL GATHERING BY ZOOM 23 OCTOBER 2021

18 members present, of whom 11 were hospitallers or contact people for Places, 4 were regional links, and 5 were members of the Core Group (some people with more than one role).

Annual Reports – The Core Group Annual report and Financial report were received.

Understanding the Network

Currently almost 200 members and 70+ Places. The Core Group has been working in lockdown - produced the Celebration book, finances are healthy. The Understanding the Network paper had been previously circulated, having consulted about it by workshop, questionnaire, and involving people from across the Network.

What SPPN is trying to promote was listed in the paper (see Note 1 at end of this report).

The way the Network operates:

Aim to function through relationships and communication.

Don't have a blueprint, but have some common characteristics

Networking takes place between members, hospitallers, visitors.

It is about listening and inclusiveness.

Value on keeping emphasis on Network, opportunity to share, ask questions, explore.

Meeting paper points (Note 2 at end) – offering vision, support, providing base line, sharing resources ideas & experiences.

Vision – worked out in many different contexts

Opportunity to link in with other people and places

There was discussion about this and about what people value. Comments included:

Inspiration – There is much that is inspiring e.g. the handbook, (old handbooks can be shared with other people) and also Facebook. This helps by motivating those working with a Place.

The word 'network' has changed in meaning but SPPN is now widely known, and it is a network. Some valued the network concept – Places like a rosary of beads with links and groupings. Involvement and encouragement from other places is inspiring and valuable. Places are networked, it is not just about members. One Place leads to another. SPPN is about Places and how they relate in their context to landscape and how people find them through that landscape. People connect the Places. Some areas may have a lot of Places within short geographical distance. Sometimes contacts come to something several years later. Each little network pathway is on its own individual course.

Strengthening the Network? Are there things that would strengthen the network? Do we want to strengthen the network concept that we already have?

Publicity - SPPN does not do much in the way of actively seeking to gain members or Places. Should more effort be put in to publicising the purpose of the network? (*There will be a small SPPN advert in the Association for Promoting Retreats handbook in 2022 as their theme for the year is Sacred Spaces.*) There are few Places which are not mainstream churches while many people value other quiet places. One member had commented that too much publicity can destroy the quiet and stillness. Need to tread the middle road, perhaps try and increase the range of places by encouraging the membership to think about potential Places including places other than churches so that growth comes from the network itself.

Spiritual dimension – really important. How do we get people to feel that something comes alive within in them - spirituality – when they go into a church or other sacred space? 'Spirit' is in the vocabulary of atheists who can also believe in the power of prayer. Suggestions putting things in front of people without putting any pressure on but giving them the right to pray with complete freedom, and the freedom to imagine. How do we encourage people to think about spirituality more broadly? Perhaps a Newsletter on this topic?

Regional structure - we use Government regions and have had some regional links and regional happenings but with limited success. **Clusters** of Places becoming apparent – we could positively encourage communication and links between them. Sense that finding local links and contacts and visiting places, maybe with a few other people, is something worth pursuing.

Discussion on putting suggestions into practice

After these interesting and inspiring ideas about what people are doing and the role of the network, what should we be doing about it and if so what, and if so who? There is a limit to what Core Group can do but do want to take this forward.

Suggestions:

SPPN could provide structure – getting hospitallers together in local group and having discussion about what doing now, how to provide information about Places and keeping them special, possible links or paths between. This links with cluster idea - draw attention to Places that there is a cluster around them. Direction to other Places. Need to be explicit about this to the membership. (In some places lots of SPPs together and in other places spread out.)

Network could help with setting up pilgrimage walking between local churches. Thin places not necessarily in the churches - places between can give the silence and spiritual refreshment - natural places where you can gather together or be in peace and quiet on your own. Re stopping places en route, one member instanced the walk from Durham City to her SPP, using prayers for different time of day (Newsletter Inspiration Supplement 2018) the beginning of the day to start, a middle of day prayer in the middle of the walk etc. Urban pilgrimage in Peterborough – started in grounds of Cathedral, visited eco garden, finished up at meeting house SPP, adding in other faiths and other dimensions of the community.

Guidance for people to explore for themselves. Not only about physical pilgrimage but it can be an internal pilgrimage as well. Could SPPN produce more reflective pilgrim material which people could use for themselves to explore their internal spiritual journey as well as physical one - not everyone can walk? People come to a Place for many reasons. Perhaps information describing what a church building is to someone who has just come through the door and why it is the way it is. (St Pancras Exeter had a similar guide.) Some Places have an 'Inside meditation' focussed on the spirituality of a few selected items to make people think about why they had been put there - come to realisation that is more than just old stone.

SPPN is about places and the experience of the place rather than moving from place to another. It is about the small place off the beaten track in literal and as well as spiritual and emotional terms. Part of vision was the serendipity of coming across places, and the value of the place in itself. A Place's part in pilgrimage is what is going on inside the church and inside you as well and the relationship between these two things. Somewhere where people can go in and just sit and 'be' and experience whatever they need to experience - a place of safety, a sanctuary, a haven. Need to be careful not to lose that – that is what makes SPPN different.

Do we need regional structure, not working very well at moment across the country. Are we looking rather more locally? Clusters of places and members might be a better way of using resources than trying to maintain a regional structure. CG has not expanded in line with the workload that increasing membership brings let alone development work. CG to come back with proposals and jobs that need to be done and share with the wider membership.

Immediate feedback

Those present then shared one thing they were going to take away from this meeting:

The search for ways of connecting to both network and to wider people is really important.

Quiet mornings idea from Peterborough - all faiths leading and participating - encourage all faith involvement

Resolve to make a point of visiting more Places locally, and explore possibilities re local potential Place.

Going to spread the word by buying some more of the book and give as Christmas presents

Meeting everyone has made it real, and wonderful ideas about place/spirituality/inner pilgrimage - all those different strands

Going to visit some locally and see what others are doing.

Some other way of having contact between Core Group and network of Places something to be pursued.

Now to make sure church is more accessible and open more and push forward reintroducing quiet days that had before covid.

Encouraged that went back to heart of the simplicity of the place to the inner landscape and to the inner interior journeys that we are on.

Wish to connect with other SPPs who use labyrinths - a labyrinth is a place of an inner journey, very inclusive, not prescriptive, and enables those who just come upon it to engage in their own life on that space. Important to offer this other kind of space.

Appreciated the receptivity, creativity, willingness to listen and exchange with the spirit and each other.

Wonderful to be able to speak and communicate with like-minded people.

Places give people permission to think about things of the spirit without necessarily subscribing to a particular building or way of being - give permission to 'be'.

Encouraged that lots of ideas around and we can really move forward and develop and help each other with progressions of the vision.

Inspiring and moving listening to those involved with Places. Now with Zoom it is possible to meet together more frequently.

Place in urban setting - The silence radiates out into the city

Idea of having a few copies of the book at regional level to share with people thinking about SPP

NOTE 1:

- providing space on the journey, for breathing, pondering, meditating, praying and 'being'
- offering an atmosphere that encourages stillness, prayer and reflection
- creating a silence that is profound enough for the visitor to become aware of a presence that draws us together
- making solitude possible
- presenting the potential to gently nudge tourists' glazed eyes into becoming pilgrims' softly focused gaze.'

NOTE 2:

- **Offering a vision** and inspiration for people from a wide range of spiritualities. Putting into words the mystery of Places, through writing about sacred space experiences, focuses on our purpose and helps us in SPPs reach out. Offering ideas, sharing reflections and experiences through newsletters, Facebook and links to other websites. Giving development opportunities, e.g. visiting other SPPs.
- **Support** - goodwill, being able to say 'we', belonging and being part of a larger whole. Not feeling isolated. Networking with other like-minded people – face to face and in other ways - creates energy, stimulates, and inspires.
- **Providing a base line**, or a commonality. Although the spirit of each SPP is different, they share common characteristics and roles. Each has something special. The 'brand' is a sort of peaceful, welcoming and contemplative quality mark.
- **Sharing resources, ideas, experiences** – e.g. national publicity for SPPs, website, leaflets etc