They draw us to them, over the centuries and over the miles. They are small, often tucked away, not easy to find. There are no brown signs by the road to lure the tourist to a place of interest. Yet they often hold a story, of a community and its ancestors, of a land and its husbandry, of a people of faith and doubt, praying, burying, pondering.

Nowadays they are often forlorn, these churches and chapels, neglected, with not enough people nearby to sustain regular Sunday worship, perhaps used once or twice a year. We struggle with our consciences. We can't afford to keep them going, but we would betray our ancestors, perhaps ourselves too, perhaps even God, if we declare them redundant and sell them to prop up clergy pension funds.

Some of us would prefer them gently to decay. Perhaps we can take the roof off, and declare (for insurance purposes) that the building is now a safe ruin. Well, that may be one solution. You can be given to pondering in a ruin, and a leaflet can show it as it was. And maybe, given how some of us were nudged into faith by personal calamity, we are nearer God's heart in a ruin than anywhere else on earth.

But it seems a pity if we can't find a more creative use for these evocative buildings. Small pilgrim places? Well, the large places get enough publicity and are often crowded in the summer. And there are places enough for settlers, not as many for those on journeys, people on the move again as pilgrims. And we may ponder the things of God in all manner of places - churches and chapels, yes, but small galleries too, and the homes dedicated to those who inspire us from the past.

It's no easy task, though, to create uncluttered space, to keep it quiet, conducive to the silence in which we may better discern a presence, to welcome people warmly but not intrusively, to encourage thoughtfulness and conversation in introducing a place and its story and its questions. I hear the cry of the heritage industry: Preserve them as they are, for their architecture, their art, their history. I think of a chapel at Rug, near Corwen, with its beautiful painted wood panels dating from Tudor times (not to mention the discreet visitor centre and car park paid for by who knows what funding from the far reaches of the continent). It is certainly an attractive place, commendable in its way, but it has no soul. The Spirit has departed. And I hear the cry of the tourist industry, Let's get together with the churches and encourage the spread of visitors to relatively unfrequented areas of our national parks and relieve the pressure on the 'honey pots'. Again, there are grants galore for repairs and facilities. Again, commendable, but is it not something lost if we don't make some places conducive to the kind of visit that can alter the glazed eyes of the tourist into the focussed eyes of the pilgrim?

I believe it is possible. I've been conducting an experiment since 2000 (it's for seven years) at a small church in Gwynedd in north-west Wales, at Llandecwyn, six hundred feet above the estuary of the River Dwyryd. You can see Portmeirion on the far side, you can sometimes hear the whistle of the Ffestiniog Railway, and on a clear day you can make out the whale back outline of Ynys Enlli, Bardsey Island, some thirty miles due west.

The church now has two uses. The furniture can be arranged in conventional style for the three or four occasions in the year when it is used by the local parish: Harvest, Christmas and one or two rites of passage. In the summer months the pews are rearranged to make a more open space, without clutter, and with nothing to distract the eye or ear.

Each day, from two to five, there is a 'hospitaller' present to offer simple hospitality, perhaps an answer to a question, sometimes a cup of tea and a listening ear. There is always some prayer, sometimes simply fifteen minutes of silence, at other times more formal. There is a 'meditation trail', a leaflet that takes visitors round the churchyard and the church, alerting them to what they can see and inviting them to
ponder and reflect. This slows people down after winding their way towards the church along narrow country lanes. They become more likely to stop in their tracks, to find that they are 'held' by something or someone in the atmosphere of the building. Some would say that the patron saint, Tecwyn, about whom we know nothing except that he was around these parts in the 520s, has come back. One person spent a couple of hours in silence one afternoon and afterwards said, You couldn't possibly be lonely here: it's crowded.

Maybe such places can offer a little more than a ruin. It's often breezy and cool up that hill, and at least you can shelter from the wind. And the silence can deepen inside, in contrast to the sound licking the walls from the west. Even Philip Larkin, in his poem Churchgoing discerned the human need for the places where 'our compulsions meet, are recognized, and robed as destinies.' They need to be quiet places, where the seeker and the searcher, the bruised and the vulnerable, can feel at home.

You will be welcome if you find yourself travelling this way this summer. The plan is for the church to be open and welcoming between 25 May and the end of September. Visit the website smallpilgrimplaces.org.uk or contact the hospitaller Jim Cotter on 01766 781 368 jim@cottercairns.co.uk, living at Dwylan, Stryd Fawr, Harlech, LL46 2YA.

There is plenty of accommodation in the area, everything from campsite down to country house hotel. Ah, that's a very Franciscan way of putting it. And you may find it more convenient and evocative to visit Greyfriars in Canterbury. With Llandecwyn, that makes two small pilgrim places, but the number is increasing.

On the last afternoon of the 'season' in 2003, at the end of the half-term week in October, the very last visitors were a Muslim family from the Midlands, father, mother, two daughters aged about twelve and ten. They sat quietly for ten minutes or so, and then the father came up to me and said, Thank you, I find I can pray here.

Jim Cotter is an ordained minister of the Church in Wales, writes and publishes as Cairns Publications, enjoys theatre, hills and eating with friends.