Pilgrimage for Rediscovering Discipleship - the Camino de Santiago.

Dates: 7 April 2026 – 14 May 2026[1]

The theme of this study leave – Rediscovering Discipleship came out from the rapid changes of the society, thereby the changing context of the church. I wanted to explore what it means to be Jesus' disciples and whether the discipleship shaped by Jesus was still intact. Any changes we experience in life may fundamentally entail constant movement, connection, redefining, and reshaping. The life of the church is no exception. The pilgrimage on the Camino de Santiago was chosen because it involves constant movement and connection with others, and reassessing oneself physically and spiritually, thereby redefining the meaning of the journey as a whole.

In addition, the daily challenges of walking to reach a village, finding a bed in a hostel (aka Albergue), and organising your daily life with minimal things while encountering a new pilgrim community resemble what Jesus ordered his disciples when he sent them out two by two in Luke 10:1-24.

First, the disciples were sent as workers in the harvest, while the working environment was like that of lambs in the midst of wolves. In my pilgrimage, it was more about physical hardships, such as walking an average of 25 km per day and sleeping in a bunk bed while enduring noise and all kinds of inconvenience, including foreign languages and cultures. But the real hardship was more than that. It was more about losing control of your life – you are in constant motion, adapting to a new and different environment. In most cases, you are not in a position to control things as you wish, including a choice of a bunk bed, food if you are on a special diet – to name a few.

Second, the disciples were instructed to travel light – taking no money, knapsack or extra sandals while relying on people's hospitality. This became true on the Camino. Carrying a 25-litre backpack weighing 6-7 kg on my back all the time, I couldn't think of adding anything more as it was already full and heavy enough. Jesus' instructions about travelling light were finally understood on a physical level.

1 The whole pilgrimage took six weeks which consisted of two week study leave plus four week annual leave. In this report, I reflected on the whole journey.





Third, the disciples were commissioned to heal the sick and announce to the towns –'The kingdom of God has come near to you." Anyone who heard this announcement may have wondered what it meant. In the real Camino pilgrimage, it was realised in the form of an intent listening to others' stories who came with their own life questions, hoping to find answers while walking towards Santiago de Compostela. One's faith may begin when certainty ends while seeing one's life from a fresh perspective.

Fourth, when the disciples returned, they joyfully reported that even the demons submitted to them in his name. But Jesus responded by telling them to rejoice not because the spirits submitted to them, but because their names were written in heaven. The initial joy came when I finally arrived at Santiago de Compostela. As time went by, I realised that God had been with me faithfully all this time, and the gospel message became clearer, which gave me more joy than finishing the pilgrimage.

In short, discipleship is first and foremost the surrender of one's power to control one's life to God and relying on God while leading a simple life, solely focusing on and working for God's kingdom, while overcoming difficulties in life and enjoy God's presence – simplicity, endurance, perseverance, and joy. I found all four of these elements in my pilgrimage, which I will elaborate as follows.

Simplicity 1 – 'Don't take an extra tunic'

Before I took off for the pilgrimage, apart from training myself daily near the Natural Reserve, I watched numerous YouTube videos on how to pack my backpack. What most people suggested was 10 per cent of your body weight, which, in my case, is a very light, small backpack, perfect for a day trip. The backpack was carefully packed with essentials, carrying only the necessary things. On the Camino, I didn't add anything extra to my already full backpack. The Bible verse-"not to carry an extra tunic"-used to have more of a spiritual meaning, but it has now become more physical too.

Simplicity 2 – 'Mindful Walking'

The best part of the pilgrimage was that your life becomes very simple, as you have to focus on your steps only, nothing else. When I started walking the Camino Francés, I thought I would have a lot of time for reflection. But walking seven to eight hours a day was real labour, and there was little time to think. At the end of the day, all you want is a hot shower, to wash your clothes, eat and sleep. As such, it changes the concept of reflection, too. Before, reflection meant revisiting past events and examining them from different perspectives. But on the Camino, my main job was to focus on my steps, which became like meditation. It allows me to see the past and future as a whole. Maybe it's why the pilgrimage on the Camino attracts many people.

Endurance in the Word – 'Ninja vs Ninja'

The pilgrimage on the Camino allows you to endure in God's word. You became more tolerable as you don't hold a grudge for long. At one stage, I needed to book train tickets to visit family in Barcelona. As usual, I did the Google search and chose one seemingly reputable website called 'Rail Ninja.' Everything looked normal, and I assumed I had paid the fare in euros. But a few days later, when I checked my bank account, Rail Ninja had charged me more than double the normal ticket price in NZ dollars, including service fees and exchange-related costs, which were nearly half of the total expenses. The word 'ninja' was originated from the Japanese kanji 忍者, it can mean "one who endures" or "one who practises stealth." Over time, the meaning has broadened beyond historical mercenaries to describe people with exceptional or highly specialised skills. In that sense, Rail Ninja was certainly skilled — legally charging travellers far more than the standard fare.

As I reflected on the experience, I realised I was also relying heavily on another 'ninja' — Camino Ninja. This app was created by Andy Max Jensen, who earned the nickname "Camino Ninja" after walking more than 20,000 kilometres on Camino routes. He poured his knowledge, passion, and love into the app, making it one of the most popular ad-free pilgrimage guides available. Following his sudden death in July 2022, friends continued maintaining the app so that Andy's legacy could continue serving pilgrims. These two "ninjas" revealed two very different ways of using skill and influence. One quietly took advantage of travellers; the other quietly served them.

Perhaps that is also part of the Christian calling in the world. We are encouraged to use our gifts not for exploitation, but for service, generosity, and love. At the same time, Scripture reminds us to remain spiritually alert and disciplined: "Like a roaring lion your adversary the devil prowls around, looking for someone to devour" (1 Peter 5:8). In a world full of hidden motives and subtle temptations, Christians are called to practise both discernment and compassionate service.

Perseverance 1 - "Following the arrows"

Walking from Zubiri to Logroño and beyond, I kept noticing the small yellow arrows—sometimes funny, sometimes easy to miss, yet always quietly guiding me back to the right path. When GPS failed, fellow pilgrims also helped me find the way again. It reminded me that faith, with trust in Christ, helps us find the right path, guided by small signs and by one another. Also, meeting our essential basic needs is important - food, rest, shelter. A simple reminder to care more intentionally for those without them.



Perseverance 2 - "People on the Camino"

Along the Camino, I met people walking for all sorts of reasons. M from Italy was wrestling with his own inner struggles (alcoholism), hoping to find some answer for his life. One morning, while others gathered for breakfast, he quietly sat with a glass of beer already in hand. Y from Korea was discerning whether to change her career. She had been a K-pop songwriter, living a deeply creative life, yet now stood at a crossroads. There were many others too—some walking alone, others in groups—each carrying their own stories, questions, and hopes. As I journeyed alongside them, I found myself praying that each one would discover what they were truly seeking. In the end, those kinds of questions may lead us to encounter more fundamental ones, such as why we live and why suffering exists, if God, the Almighty, created such a wonderful world, which God saw was good. Even though we don't have all the answers, we still continue to walk this journey as the disciples of Jesus.

Implications for Church Life and Ministry

One of the questions I carried with me before beginning the Camino was how discipleship can be nurtured in a rapidly changing society. While churches often discuss change in terms of structures, programmes, finances, and attendance, the Camino reminded me that discipleship begins at a more fundamental level.

The pilgrimage stripped life back to its essentials. Each day revolved around simple things: walking, finding shelter, eating, resting, and beginning again. There was little room for excess. Ironically, in having less, I became more aware of what was truly important. This made me wonder whether churches sometimes make discipleship more complicated than Jesus intended. Jesus sent his disciples out lightly equipped, dependent upon God and the hospitality of others. The focus was not on resources but on faithfulness.

The Camino also reminded me that people continue to search for meaning. Many pilgrims were not religious, yet they carried deep questions about purpose, identity, relationships, suffering, and the direction of their lives. Some were seeking healing. Others were processing grief, disappointment, or major life decisions. While the language of faith may no longer be familiar to many people, the deeper human questions remain unchanged.

This has implications for ministry. The church may not always need to provide answers immediately. Sometimes our role is to walk alongside people, listen carefully to their stories, and create space where questions can be explored honestly. On the Camino, meaningful conversations often emerged not because someone was preaching, but because people walked together. There is wisdom in that for ministry today.

Another lesson was the importance of community. Although many pilgrims began walking alone, they rarely remained isolated. People encouraged one another, shared information, looked after one another when injured, and celebrated each other's progress. The journey was personal, but it was never entirely individual. Christian discipleship is similar. Faith is personal, but it is lived in community. The church continues to have an important role as a place where people can encourage one another and journey together.

The experience also challenged my understanding of control. Much of ministry involves planning, organising, and preparing. These things are necessary. Yet the Camino reminded me that growth often happens in situations beyond our control. Weather changes, plans change, people change, and sometimes the path itself changes. Discipleship requires trust in God's guidance even when the destination is not fully visible. The yellow arrows of the Camino became a simple reminder that, often enough, guidance is given for the next step rather than the entire journey.

Finally, the Camino reinforced the importance of joy. The joy was not simply arriving at Santiago de Compostela. In many ways, arrival felt surprisingly ordinary. The deeper joy came from recognising God’s faithfulness throughout the journey: in the people I met, the hospitality I received, the strength given for each day’s walk, and the awareness that God had been present all along. In ministry, it can be tempting to measure success through outcomes and achievements. The Camino reminded me that Christian joy is found not primarily in what we accomplish, but in God’s presence with us.

Conclusion

When I began this study leave, I wanted to explore what it means to be Jesus’ disciple in a changing world and whether the discipleship shaped by Jesus remains intact today.

The Camino did not provide a simple answer, nor did it reveal something entirely new. Instead, it allowed me to experience familiar biblical themes in a fresh and physical way. Travelling lightly, depending on others, persevering through difficulties, listening to people’s stories, and discovering joy in God's presence are all characteristics of discipleship that remain as relevant today as they were when Jesus sent out the seventy disciples.

Looking back, the strongest lesson was perhaps not about walking but about trust. The pilgrimage involved a continual letting go of control. Yet in that uncertainty I discovered again that God is faithful.

The Camino also reminded me that discipleship is not a destination but a journey. We continue to follow Christ one step at a time. Along the journey, we carry our questions, hopes, disappointments, and prayers.

For me, the pilgrimage was an opportunity to rediscover the simplicity of following Christ. In a world that often values efficiency, achievement, and certainty, the Camino pointed me back to a discipleship marked by simplicity, endurance, perseverance, and joy. These qualities are not only relevant for pilgrims walking across Spain but also for churches seeking to follow Christ faithfully in a rapidly changing world.

Like countless pilgrims who continue to walk towards Santiago, the church also remains on a journey. We do not always see the whole path ahead, but we continue walking in faith, trusting the One who calls us and accompanies us along the way.

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