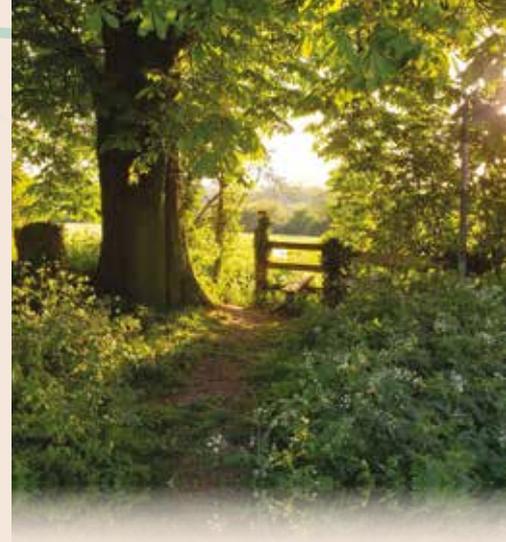


Worshipping with and within God's Creation

Siggy Parratt-Halbert explores Forest Church as an approach to environmental sustainability in church life.



The challenges of traditional church

I have met a lot of people with a strong Christian faith but who don't attend traditional church. They are deeply spiritual people – they worship, they pray, and they find fellowship – but their church isn't based in a building; rather, it is a place, or a concept, or a network.

Early Christians rarely found their place in buildings, but outdoors in the natural God-created world. For example, the lives of most Celtic saints, and their early Celtic Christian liturgies and prayers, are all about everyday outdoor lives – because that is where their experience was rooted. They were deeply connected to God's creation in a way that most of us are not. I sometimes wonder if moving into buildings did our faith a bit of a disservice.

In today's church, there is growing concern about how we can connect better with our natural environment. Not just in terms of our worship and teaching, but also because what we actually do on Sunday in church doesn't always consider environmental sustainability. For example, our worship may rely on 'tech' (the lithium in your laptop battery comes from endangered places); we use electricity (do you know how yours is generated?); and, due to its very nature, the church building itself probably has a carbon footprint the size of an elephant, even with the help of the Eco Church movement. In what follows, I will consider both of these areas:

- worship that takes place outside.
- a more sustainable approach to worship, inside or outside.

Worshipping outdoors

So, if we want to engage with a growing number of people who struggle with what we tend to call 'traditional' church, and a faith that began outside anyway, where might that lead us? Will it cease to matter so much whether or not we have a building? Have our experiences this year, of being forced out of our church buildings (by Coronavirus) given us new insights and opened up new possibilities? Can we explore and celebrate our Christian faith within the natural environment, and – while doing so – be a church whose worship and activities are even just a little more sustainable?



You might consider 'Forest Church'. Or at least, a church that spends time outside, even for a short while. This might be in a

churchyard or garden, in a local park, on derelict land earmarked for development – anywhere that is outside. 'Forest Church' doesn't literally have to be in a forest. Rather, 'Forest Church' is a modern 'fresh expression' of church, drawing on older traditions and practices and combining this with contemporary insights about the benefits of spending time outside.

Such a church will be where everyone can see it, not hidden behind big oak doors and stone walls! 'Forest Church' is intended to be for all ages, and when it is planned well, it will be accessible by all. And being so visible and accessible means people can join in, whoever they are, because there are no strange rules (stand up, sit down, make the right responses, etc.). Leaving all that behind, 'Forest Church' is simply an opportunity to come into contact with creation and to make it meaningful – something that is hard to do if we exclusively indoors.

WEB A set of resources for creating an 'Forest Church' style outdoor act of worship.

Planning and leading outdoor worship

Read before stepping outside!

- Outdoor worship is not your usual church service taking place outside; so, don't try to replicate your usual Sunday structure or content. Don't worry about singing hymns or saying all the prayers you might usually use. You won't be struck down for 'missing something out', and it's okay not to sing! (See resources **WEB**.)
- Try to do mainly, or only, things that don't require people to read sheets of paper. Outdoors, people will struggle with papers – and, of course, it's hardly sustainable!
- Keep it simple. You don't have to fill an hour or more with activity. The great thing about being outside is the opportunity to slow down a bit and ponder.
- Think about all our human senses and try to use as many as possible. Much of the time in church, the only sense we use is sound (voices and ears).
- If you're doing something 'crafty', make sure you try it out in advance – so you know it works!
- Outdoor worship can, with the right permissions, take place in more or less any appropriate and accessible places outside – in a church garden, a local park, on derelict land earmarked for development – or indeed, in a 'forest' area. The more space available the better, but it can work very well in a small outdoor space.
- Make sure the space you are planning to use is accessible to everyone. Check the site carefully in advance, looking for any potential dangers.
- Treat the space respectfully, etc. This is especially important, for example, during nesting season, or near farmland

where there are newly sown crops. Do not assume that those attending will be familiar with the good practice or regulations. As appropriate for your group, give clear guidelines about what is and isn't acceptable.

- Remember to give people advance notice. And remind them to wear the right clothing and footwear. There is no reason why you shouldn't worship in the rain or snow – just keep people moving so they don't get cold. But do use common sense: heavy rain or ice are definitely not helpful and you may need to postpone.
- Don't worry if some people do not follow every worship-related instruction to the letter. One of the features and advantages of outdoor worship is that it allows people to worship and explore their relationship with God in their own way, and that's important.
- Be realistic about people's expectations. Some will love it. Some may think you have come over all pagan (you haven't – so don't worry about it).



Resources

- The Celtic saints are usually a good place to start. Many of the prayers attributed to them are beautiful and appropriate. There are websites where you can access prayers and worship resources whose focus is on Celtic saints and their work/ministry. You could perhaps celebrate some of their Saint's Days using these resources.
- Use the principal seasons and agricultural events of the year as a 'hook'. And consider older festivals such as 'imbolc' or 'samhain'. These are just very old names for the times of year that, by and large, churches still celebrate. But if you look up any of these old festival names, you will find a wealth of ideas to use or adapt.



See [WEB](#) for other resources and sources – from related books and activities, to liturgy and prayers.

Siggy Parratt-Halbert, a Learning and Development Officer in the Methodist Church, has a particular interest and expertise in encouraging and supporting Forest Church.

Being environmentally sustainable

Whether you worship outside or inside, here are some ideas for a 'sustainable store cupboard', designed to help you make your church's activities more environmentally focused.

- If want to plant seeds, use fibre pots (you can get these from most big DIY stores), rather than plastic yogurt pots or cups. Or you could cut up undyed cardboard egg boxes, something you could incorporate into the activity!
- Use paper straws, not plastic or plastic-coated ones. Check that they are either recycled or come from sustainable resources. And remember to recycle them afterwards. The same goes for paper cups and lolly sticks.
- Purchase wildflower seeds from reputable providers who can guarantee their seeds' origins (collecting flower seeds from the wild is illegal). Or gather tree seeds like sweet chestnuts, conkers and acorns – this is perfectly legal, and it adds to the fun for children.
- Reduce your use of paper – lay off with the handouts! If you are using paper (or card), make sure it is recycled paper. It is, of course, important to make the resources you use attractive, but avoid anything with a finish or embellishment that won't rot down.
- Use air drying clay rather than plasticine. It is just as easy to get hold of and will eventually break down and wash away. But do not use this as an excuse to leave material behind – always clear up.
- Don't use glitter. Use found objects as decoration: e.g. flower petals, leaves, seeds and seed heads, twigs. It's wonderful to witness the creativity and fun that unfolds when only natural objects are provided for activities!
- Environmentally-friendly glue sticks are available now. If you're not sure which these are, look for glue that is water soluble and contains amino silane. Or make your own [WEB](#).
- Use pencils rather than pens. Forest Church often asks people to leave their prayers 'in situ', and pencil causes less problems than pen.
- If you use string, opt for gardener's hemp as opposed to regular string.

