

ELY DIOCESE CHURCHYARDS TRAINING DAY
Saturday, 20th November 2021 at Comberton Parish Church

Churchyards as an opportunity for mission

(Andy Jowitt, A Rocha UK)

1. Some personal experiences as a Vicar:

- Churchyard as a source of stress: arriving in a new post to find churchyard regulations not adhered to; plastic flowers and dead wreaths buried in grass and weeds.
- Moving to a better place: 'tidying up' but also tree-planting and attempt at wildflower area.
- Different conversations, from "Why can't I leave a windmill on the ashes plot?" to appreciation.
- Curious conversations: teenagers who'd never been in a church and associated churchyards with Gothic horror; children with smart phones looking for Pokemon creatures; Geo-caching in the churchyard.

How can we turn a burden into an opportunity?

2. Gardening

(a) Introduction

Adam as a gardener; to till and to tend; to serve and preserve.

Competing expectations: smooth lawns or re-wilding?

A change in zeitgeist: interest growing in gardening for nature and the environment.

Win/win compromises, e.g. neat, easily walked paths, contrasting nicely with less cut areas; varying the habitat; neat flower beds filled with insect-friendly plants.

Educating people, e.g. ivy as a valuable food source; benign neglect can be good at times.

Communicating: signage and interpretation boards providing information/explanations/even humour.

(b) Food growing

Can be a great way to bring people together and engage with the local community, e.g. help-yourself herb bed; community allotment / orchard / compost.

Food growing used in some places to 'do church':

working together / worshipping together; sharing food / sharing faith; learning through the ups and downs and connecting with the stories in the Bible

(c) Gardening with a theme

e.g. Psalm 23 Garden (cf. the garden commissioned by the Bible Society for the 2021 Chelsea Flower Show, designed by Sarah Eberle; cf. a Psalm 23 garden made by Ebenezer Chapel as a coming-out-of-lockdown project. Conversations with passers-by. Invitation to plant a flower in memory of a loved one. Local young people involved through 'Incredible Edible' project).

e.g. St Francis' Canticle of the Sun (cf. Hilfield Friary in Dorset)

(d) A Quiet Corner for reflection

Seating; brief explanation/Bible verses (e.g. in stone engravings) and attractive planting: a place to rest, read, think, pray.

The Quiet Garden Movement may be a useful resource <https://quietgarden.org/>

3. Providing a home for nature

Mission in itself (the 5th Mark of Mission) - Caring for creation *per se* is part of loving the Lord our God and our neighbour as ourselves

Also – a great way to connect with people.

Examples:

- Involving local enthusiasts and experts. Churches on their Eco Church journey have found themselves welcoming people into belonging through this journey.
- Local Wildlife Trust groups and Natural History Societies may be willing and eager to be helpful with advising and drawing up species data; leading nature walks in a churchyard; organising Bioblitz events.
- Churches Count on Nature and partnership between the C of E, Caring for God's Acre <https://www.caringforgodsacre.org.uk/> and A Rocha UK <https://arocha.org.uk/> - a week in June for citizen science. <https://www.caringforgodsacre.org.uk/get-involved/thank-you-for-taking-part-in-love-your-burial-ground-week/> Caring for God's Acre have produced an excellent little ID guide.

4. Children and churchyards

Example:

- Churches Count on Nature (see above) was a great opportunity to re-establish a link in a local school, with Year 2 classes visiting churchyard and church hall garden to: ID mini-bugs and flowers (and draw them); plant insect-friendly flowers; choose locations for bug hotels and bird boxes; build 'Buggingham Palace'.

Other ideas:

- Story-telling area
- Teddy Bears' Picnic with tots
- 'We're Going on a Bear Hunt' experience with Early Years
- Churchyard trail, taking in different habitats, with quizzes/activities/Bible verses/stories
- 'Glow in the Dark' party – an alternative to Halloween

5. Worship outdoors

Explored by some churches in a new way due to the Covid pandemic, but with great value in itself.

- Marking the seasons, e.g. Rogationtide; Creationtide
- Visible! People can be drawn in. (NB The importance of welcome and hospitality, e.g. spare seats, refreshments)
- It lifts the hearts (experiencing the beauty)

- Multi-sensory (look/listen/smell/feel) (NB The opportunity for the worship to be interactive/creative)
- Parables in nature (cf. Jesus' parables)

We join with nature in worship:

Isaiah 55:12 'the trees of the field will clap their hands'

Psalms 19:1 'The heavens declare the glory of God'

Lots of themes and foci work well with outdoor worship, e.g.

- Concern for the environment (climate, biodiversity, habitat loss, pollution, etc.)
- Our neighbours worldwide (as we think about this planet as our shared home)
- Our local communities (as we look out in different directions from the churchyard)

Lots of worship material online (Christian Aid / CAFOD / Tearfund / A Rocha International / A Rocha UK / Climate Sunday / Iona Community, etc).

And finally,

6. Using the Arts

Music – some music sounds great outdoors. The churchyard as a music venue?

Drawing / Painting / Sculpture – encouraging people to have a go, look with fresh eyes, enjoy/play/create; zooming in on the details; panning out to see the bigger picture

Poetry and Nature

We'll all have our favourite places to go to find poetry that nourishes us. I ended with this poem by e e cummings:

i thank You God for most this amazing
day: for the leaping greenly spirits of trees
and a blue true dream of sky; and for everything
which is natural which is infinite which is yes

(i who have died am alive again today,
and this is the sun's birthday; this is the birth
day of life and of love and wings: and of the gay
great happening illimitably earth)

how should tasting touching hearing seeing
breathing any—lifted from the no
of all nothing—human merely being
doubt unimaginable You?

(now the ears of my ears awake and
now the eyes of my eyes are opened)