



How to ...

Worship God with nature

'The heavens are telling the glory of God;
and the firmament proclaims his handiwork.' (Psalm 19)

Many of us can remember times when nature has helped us to feel connected to something bigger than ourselves. Whether it's the vastness of a starlit sky or the complexity of a tiny blossom, awe and wonder at the world around us is a part of the human experience and offers us a rich avenue through which to explore deeper questions about life and the universe together.

There is a long history of the sacred outdoors! Although many of us live and worship in much more 'indoor' settings these days, interaction with nature has deep roots in the Christian heritage of this country. Many of the festivals that shape our church year embrace older traditions that were built around the rhythm of the seasons, keeping some of the customs and infusing them with the good news of Jesus. If we put alongside this our growing need for environmental awareness and contemporary research which highlights both the benefits of spending time with nature and concerns about 'nature deficit disorder' in children, getting outside might just be a good thing to start doing again!

Different approaches...

Doing church outside

There are many Bible stories and themes that lend themselves well to an outdoor setting. 'Outdoor Church' by Sally Welch (BRF, 2016) has lots of great ideas for exploring festivals and parables and encourages participants to look and listen, to collect, to create and to celebrate together. 'Outdoor Worship' by Sara and Sam Hargreaves is available from www.engageworship.org and has a selection of outdoor activities that could easily be developed. If you want an approach that leads with the story or theme and develops from there, then this is a great way to get started and to gain confidence in creating your own ideas.

Forest Church/Mossy Church

Mossy Church is where Forest and Messy Church meet for all-age nature connection. Linked to the ethos of Forest Church, Mossy Church is about encouraging children and families to connect with nature and encounter God the Creator in the natural world. Rather than being 'a church service outside' the focus is on joining in with the worship of creation- connecting with and learning from nature by using the senses in worshipping God together. If you want an approach that leads with the natural environment, then some of the best resources for exploring this further are:

- 'Forest Church' Bruce Stanley (Mystic Christ Press, 2013)
- 'Earth Gospel' Sam Hamilton-Poore (Upper Room Books, 2008)
- 'The Lives Around Us' Dan Papworth (Christian Alternative Books, 2016)



- www.mysticchrist.co.uk/blog/post/sensio_divina

Practicalities

- Decide on where you want to meet! You don't need to have huge woodlands around the corner- anywhere accessible, like a local park, would be fine.
- Get to know your space. Once you have decided on where you want to gather, get to know the environment there- think about what plants, trees and creatures find their homes in that habitat and how you might interact with them.
- Do a risk assessment of the area. You'll need to think about hazards and safety precautions and how you will keep your group informed. The children in our group told us their Forest School safety motto "Don't pick, don't lick, be careful of sticks", which I thought was great! You'll need to give thought to how you organize activities so that children are constantly supervised, how you might clean hands and organize any drinks and snacks- and you'll need to take a First Aid kit with you!
- Decide on your particular focus and put a plan for your session together. A gathering and ending prayer to say together are always good- though you'll need to think about whether you want it to be a paperless exercise. You'll probably want a bible reading, a story or a biblical reflection drawn from nature, and you'll need a few activities- leaf or bug hunting, maybe some nature crafts. I find www.woodlandtrust.org.uk a fantastic resource for nature and craft activity ideas. You might want to include some songs too, depending on your approach.
- Think about the resources that you'll need- again, The Woodland Trust are great and sell a range of swatch books to help identify leaves, butterflies, minibeasts and even poos! People may have their own magnifying glasses and bug boxes that they can bring, but a simple approach at first is probably the best one!
- Be prepared! Ask participants to dress for the weather- covering arms and legs from nettles and ticks, and decide with your team what you will do if it is pouring with rain!
- Finally, have fun! Enjoy being outside and exploring God's glorious creation together.

Secretaries of praise...

In his poem 'Praise' George Herbert describes creation worshipping its Creator, each element and creature in its own way, with humanity taking their part as both appreciators and protectors of the created order. As we join in praise with the world that God made, we not only become

aware of the serious responsibility that we have towards it and the practical things that we can do to make a difference, we also become aware of the God-given beauty of many of the everyday and ordinary things around us, drawing us to ever-more wonder and worship.



In engaging with the natural world we also create a place in which to interact with those in our communities who share our environmental concern, with those who approach God from the perspective of earth spiritualities and with families keen for their children to grow up knowing about the world around them, praying that their encounters with creation will lead them to know Christ- the one in whom all things hold together. Let's get out there!

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