

Pioneering models of worship – connecting with God through creation

This resource provides further information about question 8 from the Worship and Teaching category:

Our church is based on or engages with a pioneering model of worship or 'fresh expression' that regularly meets outdoors (e.g. Forest Church, Muddy Church, Messy Church Goes Wild, prayer walks, contemplative liturgy)

What?

Some churches will provide an opportunity to connect with God through meeting outside in creation and exploring nature. Connecting with God *through* creation is at the heart of meeting outdoors, rather than simply taking indoor meetings outside. This resource provides further information for pioneering models of worship or fresh expressions of church to help them do this. Some examples of such models are Forest Church, Messy Church Goes Wild. Churches might also hold services in their churchyard or go for prayer walks.

'Forest Church is a contemporary movement, with roots in the long Christian tradition of engagement in nature, such as the Celtic and Franciscan approaches. Those engaged in Forest Church are seeking to meet with God in and through their connection with the natural world. The hope is that Forest Churches will become a spiritual home for those outside the traditional church who relate better to outdoor spirituality than gatherings in a church building.' Cate Williams, The Diocese of Gloucester.

Messy Church Goes Wild is the movement within Messy Church which aims to encourage Messy Churches to meet God outdoors, love the natural world, experience a sense of awe and wonder there and to be more eco-aware in all we do, both inside and out, as gathered and dispersed church, for the good of the planet.

Why?

Often the outcomes of this form of engagement with church, and encountering God within creation cannot be predicted.

'All of the children are encouraged to be themselves, to be noisy or quiet, to be engaged or to do their own thing. Yet in the fuzzy edges of this group, I have had some of the deepest conversations around puddles in the rain or toasting marshmallows around a fire. We meet God our creator in all God's fullness without limits.' Revd Judith Holliman, Pioneer Minister, Radyr Methodist Church.

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Here are a few more reasons to encourage you to consider meeting outdoors:

- Helping people get outside
- Spending time in God's creation, connecting with our Creator
- Enjoying nature means we want to nurture and protect it further
- Helping those who might find it harder to come into a church space
- Demonstrating practical and simple actions that church communities can take to protect and restore nature

What does a pioneering expression of church look like?

See [this short film](#) from the Diocese of Gloucester on discovering 'God out in the wilds' through Forest Church, for a visual depiction.

In this [short film](#) from the Penedeyrn Mission area, Joe invites you on a walk up his local mountain to experience the beauty of God's creation illustrating why by looking after it, we are looking after each other.

This is an informative [presentation](#) about the 'why', 'what' and 'how' of Forest Church (2021) from Cate Williams, Environmental Engagement Officer for Gloucester Diocese and Rachel Summers, author of multiple resources including *Wild Advent*, *Wild Lent* and *Wild Worship*.

In this [short film](#), Revd Huw Bryant, Mission Area Leader of Dyffryn Clwyd Mission Area explains some of the ways in which they set up an outdoor worship area during the pandemic which continues to be used today. They achieved the first Eco Church award in the diocese. The film was made on the day that St Peter's Church in Llanbedr held an Open Churchyard event with a wildflower count.

How?

This is a checklist which can be helpful when preparing to gather for worship outdoors:

- What are the current themes in nature/the seasons?
- What are the current themes in the church year?
- Take time to pray/walk in the space to discern/decide your core theme
- Find a nature connection activity that fits
- Find some prayers, liturgy and readings that fit

There will also be some practical considerations when meeting outside:

- Weather forecast!
- Health and safety, safeguarding, insurance
- Permission to use space if applies
- Enjoy!

Resources and information

You can access all Eco Church resources via our website, as well as resources relating specifically to the Worship and Teaching category.

[Messy Church Goes Wild](#)

[Muddy Church](#)

[Balderstone St Leonards Church: How to start a Forest Church](#)

[Wild Christian article from the Methodist Church](#)

[Forest Church article from Methodist Church](#)

[Guidance for Outdoor Worship from the Church of England](#)

[Season of Creation resource from A Rocha UK](#)

[Example of Salisbury Diocese and Salisbury Diocese Easter resource from Eco Church resources](#)

[Prayer Walk example from St Mark's, Winshill](#)

[Seasonal prayers by John Birch's](#)

Wildlife websites

[Children and family activities from Wildlife Trusts](#)

[Kids' nature activities from Woodland Trust](#)

[Teacher and school resources from Woodland Trust](#)

Books

Celtic Wheel of the Year: Celtic and Christian Seasonal Prayers (July 2007) by Tess Ward

Forest Church: A Field Guide to Nature Connection for Groups and Individuals (paperback) (2020) by Bruce Stanley

Forest Church: Earthed Perspectives on the Gospel (2019) by Cate Williams

Messy Church goes Wild: Reflections and practical suggestions from Messy Church on how we live well in God's world (2022) Edited by Lucy Moore

Messy Adventures: Twelve outdoor sessions for Messy Churches (2023) by Lucy Moore

Outdoor Church: 20 Sessions to Take Church Outside the Building for Children and Families (2016) by Sally Welch

The Book of Uncommon Prayer (2015) by Annie Heppenstall

The Earth Cries Glory: Daily Prayer with Creation (2019) by Steven Shakespeare

Wild Worship: Discovering God Through Creation (2019) by Rachel Summers

Wild Advent (paperback) (2018) by Rachel Summers

Wild Lent (2017) by Rachel Summers

Worship in the Woods: Church Service Pack (2021) by Sara Hargreaves, Sam Hargreaves, Jeremy Williams

Case studies

Worship in the Woods

Five Alive Mission Community in Devon hold regular Forest Church services in local rural venues – farms, fields and woods. Each month around 30 people, aged between 2 and 80 years old gather together to enjoy fun, faith and fresh air! The sessions follow a format of gathering praise, Bible activities and prayer responses, all making use of, and engaging with, the outdoor space. During a session in the woods, the group used material from [Engage Worship's Worship in the Woods](#) – helping them think about the rich variety of trees – and imagined how trees could use their branches and what they might say to God. They also drew their life circles on the ground and gave thanks to God for their lives. At the end of the session, the group gathered around the fire pit to toast marshmallows and chat together.



Wild Church

Inspired by Forest Church, the Mission Area of Dyffryn Clwyd, held a Wild Church service in the grounds of St Foddhyd's Church in Clocaenog at which Bishop Gregory Cameron licensed the Revd John Searl to the ministry team. John is a non-stipendiary priest who runs a forestry management business. The Mission Area Leader for Dyffryn Clwyd, Tad Huw Bryant shared: *'We've had a wonderful afternoon of sunshine and laughter. With the new Angel chair made by local tree carver, [Simon O'Rourke – Tree Carving](#), we thought about angels and together made our own piece of angel art from grass, leaves, flowers and berries. We planted lavender to grow in the churchyard and seeds to take home. We consecrated the new outdoor altar and roasted marshmallows over the fire pit, but more than that we enjoyed each other's company and felt God's presence within us and all around us.'* [Read more.](#)

Church on a hill

[St Michael's Church](#), Bishop's Cleeve gather monthly on Cleeve Hill or occasionally at other suitable outdoor venues across our benefice. The informal service is open to all, and there is a mix of ages who attend. We usually start with a question or observation challenge for the group to discuss as they journey together. We walk at varying paces before stopping for a short time of prayer and reflection linked to faith, life and often the created world that we are surrounded by. The children are usually found running around, finding



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treasures to share as part of our reflections. [Read more.](#)

Eco contemplation

[St James's Piccadilly](#), a gold Eco Church in the heart of London, offers a monthly eco-contemplative service in their garden grounds and online. Everyone is invited to go outside for a time of quiet contemplation during the spoken liturgy or be near a window, houseplant or other link to the natural world. A different person prepares and leads the liturgy each month. The session begins with a time of arrival and settling in the space where we are. Then there are some readings on a theme, and 15 minutes of silent time when participants may choose to move about and engage with particular features of the space that engage their attention. This is followed by a time of sharing responses and thoughts, then concluding with readings and prayers. [Read more.](#)