Outdoor worship and mission with children, young people and families

Case Studies, ideas and inspiration

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Why outdoors?

My mum grew up in the 1960's and she recalls at age 8, she would walk across a field to a brook where she and her friends would play for hours, swinging on a rope swing, climbing trees, paddling in the stream, catching minnows and making concoctions with mud, leaves and bark. This open-ended free play, outdoors in nature, this free range childhood did so much for her health and wellbeing, learning about the world and developing life skills such as independence, problem solving, team work, observation and appreciation for her surroundings. Unfortunately today children do not have the same experiences or benefits of such a free range childhood.

In 2005 Richard Louv, chairman of the Children and Nature network wrote a book called 'Last Child in the Woods' where he coined the term 'Nature Deficit Disorder' to describe the alienation of children from nature and being outdoors. He argued that the human cost of this alienation from nature was measured in "diminished use of the senses, attention difficulties and higher rates of physical and emotional illnesses. It isn't a clinical term but there is a deep truth in it! Nearly 20 years on from when his book was written, the situation for children spending more time outdoors has not improved and may even have been worsened, especially with the impact of the pandemic in 2020. Even adults are spending less and less time outdoors.

As a society, we are much more likely to be entertained indoors on screens. Parents want to protect children from perceived dangers outside or from getting into trouble; faster moving traffic and a lack of green spaces in urban areas means there aren't many safe places for children to play. Opportunities in the education system to be outdoors can often be limited or scheduled with sports instruction. As a nation, we have much less connection to the land, to caring for plants and wildlife and to knowing even where our food comes from. However ongoing research shows that time spent outdoors learning and being with nature helps to calm anxious nervous systems, improves behaviour and boosts attention spans, keeps us fitter and healthier and teaches us respect for the land and for creation. Children, young people and their families need this.

In an interview Richard Louv said this:
"What are we doing to our kids? We're creating environments at school and at home in which they are using fewer and fewer of their senses, that they're down to a couple of senses. Using their ears and mainly their eyes to allegedly go anywhere in the world through the internet. We're creating an environment in which I believe by definition they are less alive. What parent wants their child to be less alive? What teacher wants their students to be less alive?"

In the Bible in the book of John 10 v10b, Jesus declares 'I came to give life – life in all it's fullness' NCV. Yet children are not getting to experience life in all it's fullness. The disconnection from nature not only affects their physical, mental and emotional wellbeing but also their spiritual development. Faith in the Nexus produced some research on early years spirituality in 2022 and a key finding was being outdoors in nature helped children's spirituality to grow. Being in God's creation, observing the life and growth of the natural world increases the sense of wonder and awe. Jesus told many parables about the natural world to explain what the Kingdom of God is like and there is so much to being outdoors and caring for creation that can help people to connect with God, to learn and develop in faith.

We want children, young people and their families to feel alive and to experience life with all of their senses and in our Diocese, many of our churches have green spaces that are teeming with wildlife and biodiversity. Even if there isn't open accessible space in the churchyard, there are often parks, riversides and green spaces nearby that could be used to provide wonderful opportunities to share faith with children and their families, to create learning opportunities in all manner of subjects and to encourage everyone to experience life in all it's fullness.

To inspire and encourage you, in this booklet there are ideas and case studies from churches, across the diocese and beyond, for us to consider how we might be outdoors in nature to engage with children, young people and their families and help to nurture faith in Jesus.

Making churchyard spaces invitational

It is important to think about how we can make our churchyards family friendly spaces; having open space for free play and installing benches/picnic tables to make it a space where families can play and have fun. These photos above are from the church yard at St Barnabas Alwoodley where picnic tables and benches have been installed around an open space of grass. Having focal points for kids to explore such as bug hotels/wormeries/bird feeding stations or ponds can be interesting and educational. Providing boards with ideas for nature counts, scavenger hunts, church yard trails may also be helpful – here is a churchyard nature hunt that colleagues at Oxford Diocese produced: churchyard-nature-hunt.pdf (d3hgrlq6yacptf.cloudfront.net)

If you have space, the PCC might like to consider installing play structures or outdoor gyms to encourage exercise. These are expensive and may create challenges for installation and maintenance so do contact the Diocesan Advisory Committee for Church Buildings for advice and information. Another option could be to provide den building materials. At many National Trust properties, alongside the traditional play structures, there are spaces for storytelling circles and den building opportunities with branches and sticks around trees.

Gardening projects

Gardening projects are a wonderful way for people to connect with church and with nature and to explore faith. You may be fortunate to have space in your churchyard to create a garden or you may need to be creative or use other spaces.

St Paul's Ireland Wood Kitchen Garden Project in North Leeds has established a garden to grow fruit and vegetables and to provide space for people to come and explore faith and learn about gardening. In a small shelter cloister -like space between buildings, there are raised beds and no dig beds growing beans and pumpkins and greens as well as art installations and passages from scripture dotted around the area. The garden project began in 2022 and that summer. the church offered a holiday gardening club for primary school aged children and their families, with treasure hunts, planting and harvesting opportunities and craft activities. Part of the project's vision is to provide a safe environment where people who are struggling can come and be, to get their hands in the soil and garden and find some sense of wellbeing. The produce from the garden goes to the food bank at the church and any surplus produce is given to PAFRAS, an organisation supporting asylum seekers in Leeds.

If you are thinking about using your garden for projects to engage children, for a source of inspiration and ideas, do look at Wild Worship by Rachel Summers and A year of nature crafts by Becky Goddard Hill and Catherine Hughes

A community orchard is perhaps a gardening project on a bigger scale! In the parish of Bardsey and East Keswick, St Mary Magdalene church has a community orchard in their church yard, with fruit trees. The parish organised a Green Fair in 2023 to raise awareness of creation care and the environment in their community. There is scope to with a community orchard to organise fruit harvesting and pressing days as well.

Meditation, contemplation and prayer

You may not think that quiet meditation and prayer may be an obvious activity for children and families but children are often spiritually aware of the presence of God and being in nature can assist the slowing down and contemplation required to nurture this.

Can you create an outdoor prayer space at your church? In Tong village near Bradford, at St James, there is a beautiful church garden which takes the visitor on a spiritual journey. On a pathway that moves around the church building, there are circular flagstones with circling prayers written on them, and as you follow the path around the churchyard, there are benches to sit on and items such as the cross, a gate and a signpost to prompt meditation.

St Mary's Kettlewell have a wonderful labyrinth in their church yard, pictured below. A labyrinth doesn't have to be permanent however; it could be mowed into the grass or made of pebbles. The Small Pilgrim places network maybe a good source for ideas, inspiration and advice if you want to explore using a churchyard as a place for prayer and contemplation.

Worshipping outdoors

In 2022 Faith in the Nexus research showed that children develop a sense of spirituality by being in nature so it can be helpful to connect to God by taking our worship outside. At St Matts, Burley in Leeds, emerging from the pandemic, the congregation began outdoor worship services to keep everyone safe and socially distanced in their Prayer Garden. This way of worshipping was very popular and although services are back in the building, they continue to have a monthly outdoor service using nature to explore Bible passages and to grow in discipleship. They have prayer boards around the garden, stations of the cross that are used as part of their worship and they have installed an outdoor classroom at the far end of the garden.

Forest Church is also very popular as a way of people engaging with God in nature. Visit Forest Church for more information about this movement and advice about how to set up a Forest Church. If you would like to visit a local Forest Church, Kairos Network Church in Harrogate runs Forest Church sessions monthly.

n Huddersfield, Holy Trinity Church has a community gardening project called Dig it in their churchyard and also hold Wild Church in the same space once a month on a Sunday afternoon. Wild Church is particularly attracting families who could be described as de-churched and for whom worship services in the building doesn't work. Wild Church begins with a time of contemplation, each session has a theme to explore, there are prayer and gardening activities around the theme and the session always ends around a fire pit for refreshments, time for socialising and a chance for the children to play together.

If you are interested in exploring outdoor worship more, there are two organisations Muddy Church and Messy Church have recognised the power of worshipping outdoors and have produced resources to help.

Engaging Schools

Outdoor church spaces can provide a myriad of educational opportunities from exploring wildlife and biodiversity, to history and rites of passage or even thinking about faith and religion.

There is a movement in the Church of England called Growing Faith and the work of growing faith is to encourage the discipleship of children and young people in the Christian faith. Growing Faith recognises that faith is nurtured in children and young people when the 3 spheres of church, home and school work well together.

An exciting project happened in the Diocese of Oxford in 2015 where an organisation called Parable Gardens established partnerships between church and local primary schools to offer ethos enrichment days in the church yard. An example of this was a Treasure Hunt day based on the Parable of the Mustard seed. The children, staff and church were all involved in the consultation, planning and preparation for the day that started with collective worship and then moved to the churchyard to explore plant life and look at the plant life cycle as a metaphor for a spiritual journey. There were opportunities to garden and plant sunflower seeds, a chance for reflection and house banners were painted to demonstrate the Christian ethos of the school for each house. Sadly the project is no longer happening but the idea is inspirational for developing that partnership.

If you have a good relationship with your local school and if you wanted to explore inviting schools to use your churchyards more, Caring for God's Acre offer a variety of educational lesson plans and ideas that may be helpful. Also if your church has Commonwealth War Graves, it may be an option to help school children explore local history with a visit to your site.

Missional Opportunities

We can use our church outdoor spaces for missional opportunities; to engage with families who are not part of church and share faith.

At St James Heckmondwike, a group from the church connected with a local SEND school for children with complex needs and wanted to serve them with a gardening project. The church applied for funding to level the paths around the graveyard and to install some wheelchair height raised beds so they could grow vegetables and flowers with the children. However, their initial idea of a simple gardening project has grown in to something far more beautiful as the church group visit the children in school one week and the children come to church on alternate weeks. They work on craft projects together to sell at markets, the church holds fundraising events for equipment for the young people at the school and the group have invited the children to special seasonal events such as a Christmas dinner and Easter where they can share their faith with the children.

Helpful Resources

Forest Church by Bruce Stanley
http://www.mysticchrist.co.uk/blog/post/forest_church_a_field_guide_to_nature_connection_for_groups_and_individuals

Wild Worship by Rachel Summers
https://www.kevinmayhew.com/products/wild-worship-1501615?variant=31778352955452

Outdoor Church by Sally Welch
https://www.brfonline.org.uk/products/outdoor-church-20-sessions-to-take-church-outside-the-building-for-children-and-families

Outdoor Worship by Engage Worship
https://www.engageworship.org/store/product/outdoor-worship-book

Creative ideas for Wild Church by Mary Jackson and Juno Hollyhock
https://canterburypress.hymnsam.co.uk/books/9781848258815/creative-ideas-for-wild-church

If you have questions about how to adapt your church yard space for outreach and mission, please contact the Diocesan Advisory Committee for the Care of Churches (DAC) for advice and guidance.