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OUTDOOR CHURCH

20 sessions to take church outside
the building for children and families

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INTRODUCTION

In 2012 the National Trust published a report entitled *Natural Childhood*, which highlighted the growing alienation of children from outdoor spaces and the contact with nature that these spaces provide. The report used the term 'nature deficit disorder', first coined in 2005 by Richard Louv to describe this alienation. Although not a medical condition, nature deficit disorder none the less carries with it a great cost to human well-being, most notably in the loss of a sense of connectedness and relationship with the rest of the world, and difficulty in acknowledging one's own place within it. Much publicity surrounded the report and many initiatives have developed from it, linking with those organisations and groups that were already trying to address the disconnection between human beings and the natural world.

Within a Christian context, the steady growth of interest in Celtic spirituality has demonstrated a growing enthusiasm for developing a relationship with God in and through nature. The Forest Church movement has taken this one step further, having at its heart a vision drawn from ancient Christian practice when many sacred places were outside, but also recognising contemporary research into the benefits of time spent out of doors. Forest Church emphasises that it isn't just 'church outside' but that it aims to participate with creation; Outdoor Church has a similar vision but acknowledges that time, environment and other restrictions can mean that a different approach may be necessary.

Outdoor Church explores the relationship of groups and individuals with each other and with the natural world in ways that are most appropriate for them. It offers freedom and space to discover aspects of God revealed in and through his creation. There is scope to evolve and develop a style and pace of worship and relationship that is appropriate to the community and the individuals within it, while holding to the aims of spending time in the natural world, being at one with creation and participating in the endless cycle of praise to the creator. Outdoor Church can be a regular way of worship for a community or group, or simply a one-off or occasional event that stimulates an appreciation of the local landscape and environment. It can be for a group of adults and children or used simply for children's activity days or holiday clubs. The essence of Outdoor Church is freedom, both in its relationship with nature and in the way Outdoor Church resources are used.

USING THIS BOOK

This book is organised in two parts, with the first containing some arguments in favour of Outdoor Church events, as well as information and advice on their preparation and delivery. The second part offers seasonal activities and crafts based on the parables of Jesus, which themselves drew on the natural world to invite listeners to a deeper understanding of the kingdom of God. The activities are structured as events, with a regular programme which can be followed completely or divided into separate resources according to the requirements of the worshipping group.

At the end of each season are some suggestions for celebrating a related festival, which, again, can be used as individual components incorporated into regular worship or as a complete event in themselves. Some suggestions for prayers are also included, but it is understood that an Outdoor Church event is in itself an act of worship, with each discovery a prayer in itself: 'God writes the Gospel not in the Bible alone, but on trees and flowers and clouds and stars' (attributed to Martin Luther).

THE SOWER AND THE SEED

‘A farmer went out to sow some seed,’ began Jesus. ‘He took handfuls of seed, and cast it from side to side as he walked along.

‘Some seed fell on the path. Birds came and quickly gobbled it up.

‘Some seed fell on soil that was full of stones. The seed began to grow quite quickly, but it did not last long. Its roots had not stretched down deep into the soil so that when the sun beat down upon it, the plants shrivelled up and died.

‘Some seed landed among thorns and as it grew up, it was choked by the thorns so it could not produce fruit.

‘But some seed fell on good rich soil. There it began to grow, strong and healthy, until eventually it produced a good harvest.

‘Listen well, and try to understand the message of the story.’

BARNABAS CHILDREN'S BIBLE, NO. 268 (MARK 4:3-9)

REFLECTING ON THE STORY

The parables of Jesus are known for the surprises that are contained within them. They are stories that reverse expectation, turn away from the norm and bring in a new order of things, having turned the old order upside down.

The story of the sower and seed is no different, as it tells us something about the sheer generosity of the kingdom of heaven—a far cry from the traditional view of God as critic and judge. For who, if they had but a small amount of seed (precious in those days of hand-to-mouth existence, when every piece of grain was hoarded because it alone might stave off starvation), would treat it like the farmer does in this story? Who would go out one day and scatter seed where it could not possibly grow—among thorns, on dry ground, even on the path? True, the method of broadcasting meant that some seed inevitably went where it was not intended, but the wise farmer was careful to let this happen as little as possible. In this story, though, seed is being flung everywhere—and then the farmer’s careless ways are rewarded, as the seed that does sprout produces a ridiculously large harvest.

Perhaps God is telling us not to be so careful with the gifts that we have, not to hoard them in a miserly fashion but to share with others the good things, the talents and the love we have been given. After all, we too may have seemed unlikely ground on which to sow. Perhaps our natures are prickly like thorns; perhaps there are places in our hearts that are like stones, cold and unloving. It is God’s great generosity to us that has enabled us to flourish, and this generosity needs to be shared as we witness to our faith and God’s love for all people. Some of our actions, our gifts, may well be unappreciated, but seed grows in the most unlikely places. Perhaps we will see signs of the kingdom flourish where we might never have expected them, in ways that exceed our wildest imaginings.

ACTIVITIES

PREPARATION

We celebrate all things bird-like in these activities, so it is worth having a look for an area of land where there is evidence that birds have been nesting. Looking for birds that are eating seeds might also present a challenge, so it is a good idea to bring seed along with you. If you have time, you could visit your proposed feeding site a couple of days in advance and put food out so that the birds begin to view it as a safe feeding site. Pigeons are less fearful of human beings than other birds are, so an urban environment might even be an advantage here, as long as you bring a plentiful supply of food. There will be a feather hunt, and feathers may be quite hard to find, so you may want to gather a selection of different bird feathers beforehand.

BEING, LOOKING, LISTENING

After the hard work of singing the dawn chorus, birds are hungry and will go in search of food. Any area of open ground is a suitable place to wait for birds to come and feed, and to watch them while they do. If you wish, you can bring different types of food and notice which type the birds prefer to eat. Most birds like sunflower seeds, with others preferring millet or crushed peanuts. Scatter the seeds some distance away from where you will be watching. Make sure everyone will be comfortable in their positions, as too much wriggling and noise will frighten the birds away. You might

want to provide plastic sheeting or dustbin sacks to sit on if the ground is damp.

Encourage the group to be still and listen for the sounds of birds in the trees, and try to spot them in the branches as they look to see if it is safe to land and eat. Watch how the birds eat; notice whether they seem nervous or not and how easily startled they are. If it is later in the season, you might be lucky enough to see them carry the food away to feed their young; you might even spot the nest. Observe how the birds react to each other—whether they squabble over food, and how the smaller birds struggle to get food from the larger ones. See how different they all are: try to spot differences between two birds of the same species as well as noticing the differences between the various species.

COLLECTING: FEATHERS

Feathers are a vital piece of equipment for birds: feathers keep them warm, they attract mates, and they enable the bird to fly. Over time—from exposure to sunlight, rubbing against neighbouring feathers or branches, flying, or attack from parasites—feathers can wear out and need to be replaced. Moulting takes place at different times in different bird species, and many birds will have a new set of feathers for the breeding season, but a careful search of an area may reveal many more feathers than you expect.

Try to find different types of feather—the small, downy ones that help to trap air close to a bird's body to keep it warm, as well as the larger, sleek wing feathers with tiny hooks, which enable the feathers to stick together to become wind- and waterproof.

CREATING: BIRD MASKS

If you did not manage to collect many feathers, they can be purchased by the bagful from craft shops. The brightly coloured dyed ones are easier to source but not really appropriate for this activity. Try to find natural feathers; it is worth paying a bit extra for specific types, such as pheasant tail feathers, or you may end up with only the small, downy type for your activity.

If you can only find artificial colours, making a chick or duckling will not take you too far away from a natural look. Cut circles of yellow card for the head and body, and provide stick-on eyes, small orange triangles for beaks, and yellow feathers. You will need a fairly strong glue, such as washable PVA, to stick on the beak and feathers. If this takes too long to dry, then sticky tape may be an easier option.

With natural feathers, bird masks can be made by gluing feathers on to a card mask shape. These can be ordered pre-cut from craft suppliers or can be made more cheaply by cutting a paper plate in two and making eye holes where appropriate. If you only managed to find a few feathers, they could be stuck on to a cardboard headband, which can then be coloured or decorated according to inclination.

NB: Before using natural feathers for arts and crafts activities, they can be cleaned of possible mites or parasites by placing them in a clean pillowcase and putting them in a tumble dryer on full heat for half an hour. This should make them safe to use.

FEASTING: CHICKS

You will need (per chick):

- One cupcake
- Buttercream icing
- Yellow or brown fondant icing
- Orange fondant icing or a jelly diamond
- Chocolate dots
- Circular cookie cutter, the size of the cupcake
- Leaf-shaped cookie cutter

It is probably best to cut out all the shapes beforehand, unless the children are old enough to roll out quite a lot of fondant icing.

From the yellow or brown icing, cut a circle to form the body, and two leaf shapes, which will form the wings.

Either cut a small triangular beak from the orange icing or cut the jelly diamond in half to make a beak.

Assemble the fondant shapes on the cake to look like a chick, and stick them on with buttercream icing. Add the chocolate dots for eyes.

It is quite important to have a ready-made example for this craft or it could get confusing.

CELEBRATING: BIRD SPOTTING

Prepare yourself with camouflage clothing, binoculars and a good bird guide and try to find as many different types of bird as you can. Look for signs that birds have been present—feathers, broken eggshells, and nests in trees or hidden in

hedgerows. Never disturb birds, particularly those that are nesting: the best place to watch birds is from a distance. If you cannot be outside, watching birds from a window can be just as interesting.

The more birds you spot, the better you will become at identifying them, but don't get too caught up in this process unless you can find an expert to help you. It's better simply to observe the way they fly and how they feed and interact with each other than to spend too much time looking them up in books.

THE MUSTARD SEED

He told them another parable: 'The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his field. Though it is the smallest of all seeds, yet when it grows, it is the largest of garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds come and perch in its branches.'

MATTHEW 13:31-32 (NIV)

REFLECTING ON THE STORY

One of my favourite memories is of fetching my youngest child from school and taking him, because it was a sunny day, to the park to play. When he got to the park and saw that huge green space just waiting for him to play in, he was so thrilled that he lay down and rolled in it, just like any young animal. I looked at that joy, that sheer delight in life, and I marvelled. It is such a gift to be able to see the world as it is, without the lenses we so often wear of disappointment, low expectation and negativity.

The parable of the mustard seed reminds us that we must not ignore the smallest signs of God's kingdom, but must search for them expectantly. When we find them, as we will, we must rejoice in them. We should not give up on them, despite the brokenness of the world around us, but should believe in the possibilities of God, however small they seem.

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