

Some reflections about taking the Gospel outside and worshipping outdoors

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BODY PRAYER

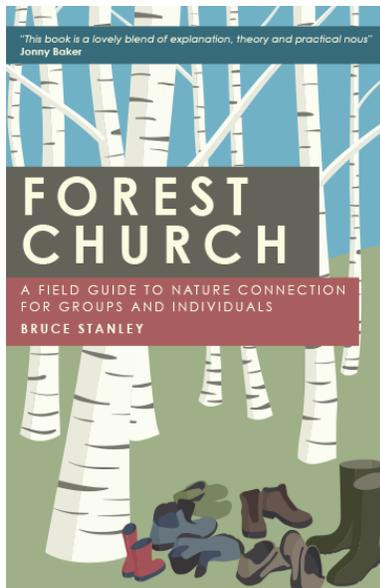


(Photo from the Sister of Mercy Website <https://institute.mercy.org.au/an-evolution-of-prayer/>)

When I visited the Rahamim Ecology Centre in Bathurst, run by the Sister of Mercy, I woke up in the early morning to take part in the Body Prayer (<https://institute.mercy.org.au/an-evolution-of-prayer/>). It is a physical prayer, honouring the earth and the elements, moving in the directions of North, South, East and West. I remember thinking how refreshing it was for my senses to pray in the coolness of the morning, noticing the colours of the sky, the trees, the grass under my feet. It sparked my curiosity about taking worship outdoors. Of course, Indigenous cultures around the world have been doing this for millennia. Ancient ways of being and knowing recognise that human spirituality is deeply interconnected with the natural world.

OUTDOOR WORSHIP

Within Christianity, there is a movement across the world to ground Christian liturgy and prayer in nature. In the UK, it is known as Forest Church http://www.mysticchrist.co.uk/forest_church. Services are conducted outdoors as much as possible, and liturgies and practices during the gatherings aim to bring about deeper ecological awareness and sense of interconnectedness to the created world. *Forest Church: A Field Guide to Nature Connection For Groups and Individuals* by Bruce Stanley is a valuable resource, filled with ideas for nurturing a love of nature and a deeper connection to God.



In North America, this movement is called Wild Church <https://www.wildchurchnetwork.com/> or Holy Hikes <https://holyhikes.org/about/> A movement where faith communities worship outdoors, inviting nature to participate in the worship, so that they see the sacramental and sacred in nature.



(Photo from a Holy Hike in Vermont <https://holyhikes.org/project/holy-hikes-vermont/>)



(photo from Church on the Woods in Canterbury New Hampshire, from <https://kairosearth.org/church-of-the-woods/>)

ECOTHEOLOGY

The field of ecotheology that shows us that scripture is full of ecological imagery, metaphors and messages and faith calls us to have a genuine care for the planet and seek environmental justice in a time of climate change. From Genesis to the Gospels, we can see the interrelationships between humanity, nature and the Divine play out in the scriptures. And Jesus, who is the incarnation of God as a biological being, is at the centre guiding us to love our neighbour. Ecotheology and Forest or Wild Church movements recognise that our neighbours include animals, plants and waterways. I have read beautiful articles by Scott M. Kershner, Clare V. Johnson, Mary E. McGann, Amelie A Wilmer and Lisa E. Dahill that describe how transformative prayer and worship can be, once it is taken out of a building that where we are walled in by artificial light and sound, and brought out into the open. God is felt in the world, present in the workings of local ecosystems, the seasons and rhythms of nature. It is enriching for the soul to feel a part of the world. It allows for a deeper level of spiritual engagement. What does it mean to have faith and follow Jesus in a time of climate change? How can church facilitate a sense of place and connection to nature through worship, prayer, liturgy and practice?

ANGLICAN RESOURCES FOR ECOLOGY AND LITURGY

As it turns out, there are resources to support parishes to worship in a more ecologically conscious way, both Australian Anglicans <https://anglican.org.au/our-work/liturgy-worship/themes-and-events/> and New Zealand Anglicans <http://anglicanprayerbook.nz/456.html> Indigenous Anglican Priest, Glen Loughrey, conducted a service for lament in a time of bushfires and has made the liturgy available <https://www.redshoeswalking.net/a-service-of-prayer-and-silence-for-all-affected-by-bushfires/> It is my hope to see faith communities venturing into their local parks, nature reserves, near local waterways, allowing the gospel to transform their hearts and the world with each encounter with nature.