



# **Forest Church Development in WYAD Diocese**

*I'd rather be in the mountains thinking of God, than in church  
thinking about the mountains." - John Muir.*

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## Introduction

This booklet was prompted by the following experiences:

1) Grinton Church, following a Mission Shaped Introduction course, started to make relationships with its parish for the first time through creation care.

2) The Vision for Mission Day **OUT!** in June 2014 in which Ben Askew and Jemima Parker ran two Forest Church taster sessions using principles gleaned from established Forest Churches to create an accessible experience for parish churches. The events followed the commitment **not** to just have regular services outside. With 40 participants, they were some of the most well attended sessions of the day. Feedback showed enthusiasm and interest in Forest Churches as means of mission and worship and there have been subsequent attempts for attendees to try out “Forest Church” experiences back home.

3) In October 2014 Bruce Stanley of the Mid Wales Forest Church, assisted by Steve Hollinghurst a Church Army officer, facilitated a Forest Church training day in Skipton which was attended by 13 people, including three members of the Mission Resourcing Team and others from the new diocese.



Forest Church Training Day, Skipton October 2014

## What are Forest Churches?

They are gatherings of people who commit to worshipping God outside, whatever the weather. These range from congregations worshipping and connecting with the environment in outdoor settings to connecting with and providing a space for pagans to encounter Christ through worship. They can range from people who feel spirituality refreshed by a walk in the countryside to neo-pagans (described by Steve Hollingsworth as “doctrine light, experience-centred, community-focussed, post-modern people who want to live well with the land and each other”), to people concerned about the environment/creation care. FCs have the potential to bring a renewal to the theology of creation and redemption and the ability to see that the Kingdom of God is close at hand. Some might suggest that the pattern of emerging FCs is a move of God or it may simply be a reaction to materialistic lifestyles, which have alienated us from God revealed through the created order. “Forest Church” as a movement needs therefore to be understood as broad and varied. It *might*, for example connect with pagans who come to God through experience rather than understanding but it *might also* be used by a group such as Scouts to teach the basics of the Christian faith as they focus on a practical spirituality outside.

This paper explores the emergence of groups which use the name Forest Church. It explores background issues relating to:

- appropriateness of the name Forest Church
- nature connection, worship with creation
- learning styles
- discipleship, mission and evangelism
- theological contribution of forest churches
- contribution the Anglican tradition can make
- a way forward for the diocese with regard to Forest Church.

## Background / History

In the USA and the UK there are a growing number of groups which meet under the name of Forest Church. In the UK, a group of about six people who refer to themselves as *Vision Bearers*, has created the [www.mysticchrist.co.uk/](http://www.mysticchrist.co.uk/) website which acts as a resource for Forest Churches. The website quotes Bruce Stanley, stating that:

*Forest Church is a fresh expression of church drawing on much older traditions when sacred places and practices were outside – but it is also drawing on contemporary research that highlights the benefits of spending time with nature in wild places.*

*Forest Church isn't just normal church happening outside; instead it attempts to participate with creation. And it isn't just a fellowship group doing an outside activity, we aim to learn, worship, meditate, pray and practice with the trees, at the spring, along the shore....*

Other FCs are distancing themselves from the Mystic Christ group, preferring worship in a more orthodox Christian tradition. Some draw on work of Forest Schools which developed in Scandinavia. Forest Schools are usually pre-schools or primaries where children, throughout the year, spend most of the week in the outdoors making fires, whittling wood and other outdoor activities.



The Mystic Christ website identifies sixteen FC groups operating in the UK and we have identified six what we would refer to as Forest Church Experiments operating in the new Diocese including the following:

Forest Church trial at the Vison 4 Mission Day June 2014

Leader	Church/Group base	Who is attending?	What stage?
Revd Mandy Rhodes	Christ Church Lofthouse		4 Saturdays per year at solstices: Dec 21, 21 Mar, 20 Jun, 26 Sep, 19 Dec all in diary.
Curate Paul Wheelhouse	Burley-in-Wharfedale		Listening. Trying out occasional events.
Keith Griffin	Holme Moss	Regular church attenders	Two meetings so far. Exploratory.
Revd Nigel Sinclair	St. Margaret's, Horsforth	Regular church attenders	Occasional outdoor experimental acts of worship
Pippa Woodhams of All Hallows Church, Leeds	Leeds Church Institute	Varied people without a settled group identity. Welcomes anybody who wants to try it out.	Monthly. Not establishing church but individual retreats for "time-out"; "an exploration of the impact of the natural world on our spirituality"
Kevin Pellatt (with Rev Caroline Hewlett)	Grinton <a href="http://www.swaledalearkengarthdaleparish.org.uk/page13a.html">www.swaledalearkengarthdaleparish.org.uk/page13a.html</a>		Called "Across in the Wood". Meeting monthly, either Sat or Sun. Can act as a confirmation course.

Table 2 shows others who are showing interest in FC in a broader sense:

Judith Allinson	Settle		Interested in using FC ideas in activities like Rogation
Cal Bailey	St James's Woodside, Leeds		Interested in developing FC

Proportionately, FCs are attracting a lot of attention in our diocese, although it is early to say whether this attention will progress in to long-term attempts to disciple people outside "inherited" church.

## Is “Forest Church” really Church?

The name “Forest Church”, like Messy Church, does not necessarily indicate a church. “Messy Church” development may provide a helpful comparison. Lucy Moore’s original Messy Church is a Fresh Expression of Church but some of the thousands of “Messy Churches” around the country meet less than monthly (the *minimum* to be granted “Fresh Expression of Church” status by the Church Army). “Messy Church”, to some, means an alternative Sunday school or an informal event for families to worship together. The situation is more complex with Forest Church which may have similar issues and more. FCs which try to reach neo-pagans may choose to be “doctrine light”. Neo pagans, Wiccans and New Agers may have difficulty with the idea of a Trinitarian, named God over the more vague concept of “Creator God”. Bruce Stanley admitted that many members of the Forest Church in Mid Wales would have difficulty with the understanding of God being Trinitarian, but that could also be argued for people sitting in “regular” pews on Sundays. The line crossed between an event set up to create dialogue with pagans and “church” is unclear. “Messy Church” **is** messy in some areas but is clear in its use of the Bible and explicit in Christian doctrine. A FC can look even messier, as it may seek to reach and teach people who do not want to connect with institutions or written scriptures.

However, many Forest Churches comply with Fresh Expressions’ broadest definition of being, *“a new form of church for a fast-changing world that serves those outside the existing church, listens to people and enters their culture, makes discipleship a priority and intentionally forms Christian community”*.

Should we worry about the title “Church” in the case of FC or “let the wheat and tares grow together” with the aim of not stifling the considerable work God is doing? Or should we encourage the use of terms such as “Forest Congregations”, “Gatherings” “Retreats” or “Experiments” rather than “Church”? Is it too late to do this now the movement is underway?

## Nature Connection

One of the common factors between all FC groups is the practice of Nature Connection. This may be as simple as being outside and experiencing the wonder and awe of Nature or engaging in activities and/or rituals which connect people with Nature, for example, being still and observing through different senses such as sight touch smell and taste. Other groups which are drawing on a closer relationship with the rest of creation might respect that relationship by addressing the natural world in some way. This is not without precedent as Jesus was known to address a storm and a fig tree and rebuked them.

Part of the thinking behind connecting with Nature is to encounter God in different ways. There are two theological concepts behind this:

- *For by Him all things were created, both in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities all things have been **created through Him** and for Him. Colossians 1:16* Therefore creation exhibits the hand or character of the creator.
- The whole of creation is **held together** by the Spirit of God. *He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together. Colossians 1:17* as a result we can sense God's spirit in nature holding it together.

Expressed in the words of a popular hymn:

*"...when I in awesome wonder, consider all the works Thy hand has made. I see the stars, I hear the mighty thunder, thy power throughout the universe displayed. Then sings my soul..."*

## Worship with and Teaching from Creation

One of the experiences that some FCs offer is worship *with* creation. A number of passages in scripture refer to creation's worship of God for example Psalm 66:4, Psalm 19:1-14, Isaiah 55:12, Rev 5:13.

Nature can also be seen as “The Second Book of God” where all can learn of the Creator. Jesus called His disciples to “consider” the birds and the flowers (Matt 6:25-34). All aspects of the natural world point us to God and display different aspects of His character, as some scientists would acknowledge. Discerning or “reading” the natural world requires time and practice and is a gift that most congregations in our Western culture have lost. Some FCs seek to re-establish this gift, which enables them to have a different encounter with God. We acknowledge that interpretation of the environment needs to be framed in a Trinitarian theological perspective, as discussed.



Upper Wharfedale

## Learning Styles

One of the benefits of FC experience is that it connects with a wide spectrum of our senses and can be useful for people with varied learning preferences. For example:

In Skipton with Bruce Stanley, we used paint colour charts to help us find those colours in nature, ate food from the forest, listened to the sound of waterfalls, were blindfolded and had to feel and identify trees and were taught all manner of facts about God's creation by our guide to help us worship the creator. More use could have been made of the scriptures, especially the stories of Jesus, but this seems deliberate. Bruce Stanley, in "Forest Church", describes "readings [as] com[ing] from the second book of God" so may not see the need for spoken Bible passages. It was a world away from the passive experience of sitting and listening to sermons which tend to be high on Biblical content but low on participation and play as forms of learning. Bruce writes of "being *in* the sermon" with Forest Church.

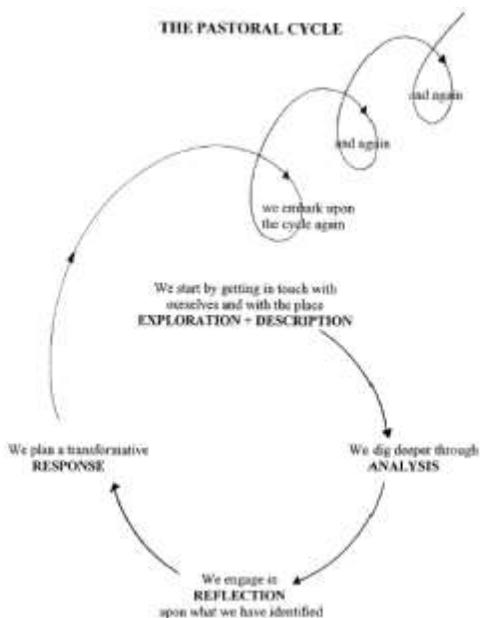
Forest Church trial at the Vison 4  
Mission Day June 2014



# Discipleship

The journey participants take together in a FC is like a “dance” as they seek to understand their experience and connectedness with their neighbours, creation and God; the process drawing them into a deeper understanding and relationship with God. If discipleship is finding out what God is saying and then joining in, the “dance” is a helpful way of discerning the former and encouraging one another in the latter.

Another way of explaining this process of *learning* is in the pastoral cycle described by Bishop Laurie Green in “Let’s Do Theology” and Kolbs’ learning cycle as seen below:



Ministry Development Resources

The Diocese of Glasgow & Galloway Scottish Episcopal Church

<http://md.glasgow.anglican.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/02/Pastoral-Cycle-resources.pdf>

We move forward in a “dance” experienced through different learning styles and senses interacting with creation, others, and the omnipresent

creator God who is revealed through Christ, creation and the companionship along the journey of discovery.

On a practical level, as FCs develop, leaders need to find ways of giving participants voices and words to express what they are learning. These discussions can provide the means through which Christian teaching and stories can be explored alongside the many experiences of FC.

## Mission and Evangelism

Mission is primarily the action of God and as he is before us in mission we should not be surprised to find that he is ahead of us in all missional contexts. As we seek to find what He is doing in establishing His kingdom we can proclaim that God's kingdom is at hand.

For those who are drawn to Celtic Spirituality, for example, it is a short journey from the stories about saints such as David and Cuthbert who used nature to connect with God and to calling others to draw near. Other potential links can be seen in the eight period pre-Christian calendar, used by neo-pagans with the Christian calendar already in our Church calendars as seen in the table below:

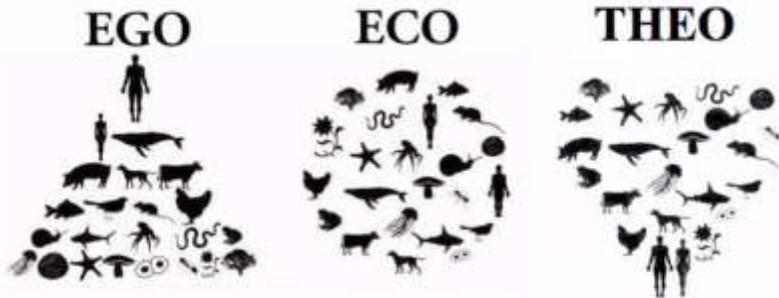
Winter Solstice	Christmas
Winter to spring	Candlemas
Spring Equinox	Annunciation
Spring to summer	Ascension/Pentecost
Summer Solstice	St John the Baptist
Summer to autumn	Lamas (Beginning of harvest)
Autumn Equinox	St Michaels
Autumn to Winter	All Souls Remembrance (End of Harvest)

With folk religion being close to the surface of much of British life, FCs provide opportunities to bring the good news of the Kingdom of God to those outside the church.

## Theology

FCs have the potential to emphasise an integrated theology revealing the relationship between God and creation. This includes humankind as a cornerstone species with a servant role, called to stewardship of the created order, rather than dominating the created order. Or just being a part of the created order.

Dave Bookless of A Rocha illustrated this in the following diagrams:



“God's word to the Church” Dave Bookless A Rocha  
Lausanne Southeast Asia Regional Conference on Creation Care and the Gospel,  
in Manila (18 Mar 2014).

[www.youtube.com/watch?v=Uo-Cuovs4k4](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Uo-Cuovs4k4)

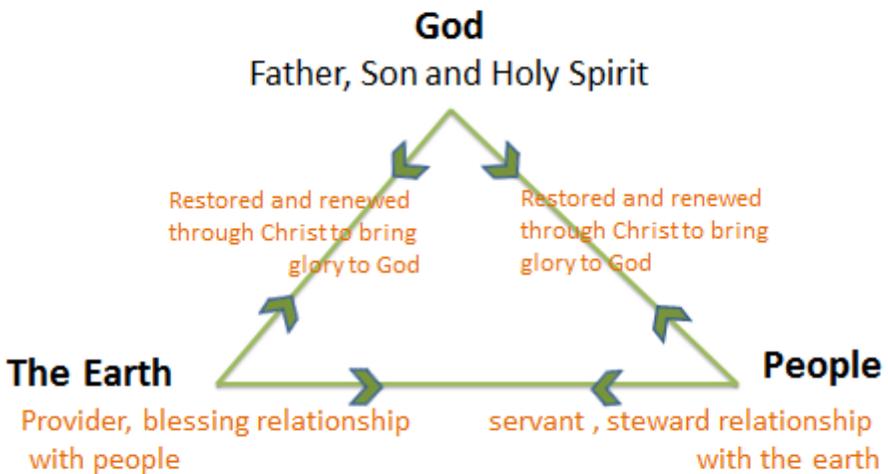
An ego-centric view with humankind at the top of creation.

An eco-centric view with humankind just being one species of creation.

A theo-centric view with human kind being a cornerstone species with special servant responsibility for creation under God.

FC also has the potential to emphasise a holistic view of the redeeming work of Christ where the good news is for the whole of creation (Col1:1-15, Rom 8:19-28). Christ's redeemed people, the church, has a responsibility to bring renewal to the created order, ushering in the healing and renewal for the earth as part of the coming of God's kingdom. In Mark 16:15 Jesus says, "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation." (Cosmos). The emphasis is on the whole of the created order and not just humankind.

### The interrelationship between God, His earth and people



## Anglican context

From our observations it seems that many FCs emerging in WY&D have connections with or are led by people from the Anglican tradition. We see that this can bring great strength to the FC movement emphasising the importance of Scripture, tradition and reason as well as accountability to a Bishop. More widely, we notice that FCs often emphasise experience without reference to the Christ centred theology outlined above. This makes it's difficult for them to identify meaning from people's experiences. FCs in the Anglican Church therefore have the potential to bring experience alongside Scripture Tradition and Reason in a similar way to Wesley's Quadrilateral model for theological reflection.



Forest Church trial at the Vison 4 Mission Day June 2014

## Way Forward and Recommendations

We see much to be encouraged and challenged by in the FC movement and notice that the majority of people conducting FC experiments/explorations in our diocese are clergy and readers who have been trained to reflect theologically on their practice. However, FC is particularly post-modern in and has particular theological issues / opportunities. We therefore suggest that we should:

1. Recognise that theological and cultural contributions emerging from FC have the potential to be a gift to the wider church particularly with regard to creation and creation spirituality.
2. Gather together those who are experimenting with FC, with the oversight of a bishop, to explore more fully the range of practice and experience in the area and reflect theologically on what God is doing.
3. Encourage the development of Christian FCs, which are able to reach out and build a discipleship culture.
4. Seek opportunities for the development of a learning network for FC leaders and relevant diocesan officers. This should be accountable to the same bishop.
5. Recognise where experiments lead people to develop Fresh Expressions of Church and resource and train people appropriately, for example in Mission Shaped Ministry Learning Communities.
6. Communicate appropriately, enabling other parishes to discern if FC could be an appropriate form of mission in their context.

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