**Use of Churchyards: engagement, enjoyment, respect and disrespect**

**Part 1**

**Introduction**

*And gravitating with it to this ground,*

*Which, he once heard, was proper to grow wise in,*

*If only that so many dead lie round.*

Philip Larkin *Church Going*



When grieving families attend a burial in a churchyard or a municipal cemetery, it may not occur to them that someone has been there before them to set the scene for their final goodbye to a loved one. Yet, in a fascinating interview with a gravedigger, Mark Sealey, we are given an insight into the preparation and care that has gone into creating the grave.[[1]](#footnote-1) In his interview, Mr Sealey talks about how prior to the burial, the paths are blown or swept clean of leaves, any rubbish and the bins are cleared and the grave site itself is carefully draped to create a peaceful and respectful scene for lowering the coffin into the ground and saying goodbye. Mr Sealey also talks about awareness of the mess and mud created by the heavy machinery needed to dig and fill graves and attempts to keep this from view, as well as being aware of the needs of grieving people in an environment that is a resting place but also subject to the vagaries of the weather. He also talks about the pleasure of tree planting in churchyards and cemeteries and watching those trees grow. It is also interesting what insights he brings to the necessary mechanics of death and burial, alerting us to the fact that an active churchyard or municipal cemetery is always changing, is a place for, and of, people, and is dynamic and always in need of care and upkeep. Even churchyards which are closed to new burials have this dynamism and potential and are places where people visit. Some churchyards and cemeteries, especially those which contain graves of famous people, are tourist attractions in their own right, such as Highgate cemetery in London.[[2]](#footnote-2)

We probably do not talk to gravediggers and those who maintain churchyard premises enough for their wisdom about the vitality of the living among the resting places of the dead and what those liminal places between life and death, grief and joy, can offer in terms of witness to Christ.

However, many churches have recognised the mission and witness potential of their churchyards and organise creative activities to maximise this potential. Some examples include:

**Geocaching and finding ‘treasures’**

Geocaching is a treasure hunting activity in which people use a GPS to determine the location of a ‘cache’ on a particular site, many of which can be located in churchyards as open, accessible, public spaces. Caches usually contain a logbook and pen so that people can record their find and sometimes contain small ‘treasures’ for people to take away or exchange for other small finds. Churches have sometimes contributed to this, by leaving information about the church or an invitation to come into the church, or they have left prayers, bible verses or other small tokens of outreach for geocachers to take away.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Similarly, when the game Pokémon GO first caused a craze of Pokémon hunting using smartphones, some churches which had Pokémon ‘appear’ in their church environment were able to flag this on their noticeboards so people could find them and be offered welcome and refreshment.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Some churches also host Easter Egg hunts in their local churchyards as an activity for families, giving an opportunity to introduce children in particular to the Christian understanding of Easter and its centrality to Christian faith.

‘Finding’ things within the churchyard can bring the sense that the local church is open, accessible, hospitable and a gift giver – and that there is always more to be found.

**Nature and the Environment**

It is increasingly recognised that churchyards can be natural havens for plant and wild life to flourish. For example, Caring for God’s Acre works nationally to support individual people and different groups to care for and enjoy churchyards and burial grounds. Recognising that many churchyards can come under threat from development or neglect, Caring for God’s Acre works to encourage ways in which these spaces can remain accessible and connected to their communities.[[5]](#footnote-5) The website contains a list and map of recommended churchyards to visit and explore.

Particularly in rural areas where population densities can be low, the benefits of involving more people from the local community in the management of the churchyard are many. By encouraging people to love and value their local churchyard they are inspiring others to get involved, learn more about wildlife and local history, and see themselves as part of the group caring for this special place and passing it on to future generations. Events and work parties bring many new people into contact with the church and in our experience the majority of people taking part in work parties are not from the congregation. Community involvement is particularly high when the churchyard is being managed for wildlife as well as for people

Andrea Gilpin, ‘Year of the Burial Ground 2020’, *Country Way* 84[[6]](#footnote-6)

Caring for God’s Acre encourages useful activity in churchyards such as ‘cake and rake’ or recording sightings of wildlife.

Similarly, many churchyards are home to ancient trees, especially yews,[[7]](#footnote-7) and, properly managed, create spaces for rare and unusual species of plant life to flourish.[[8]](#footnote-8)

Care for nature and the environment is today often a major component in people’s spiritual search. As churches have become more aware of the importance and impact of the fifth mark of mission: ‘To strive to safeguard the integrity of creation, and sustain and renew the life of the earth’,[[9]](#footnote-9) showing people how churchyards can be places of conservation and care for creation can help them connect their spiritual search with the activity of the church.

The Churches Count on Nature[[10]](#footnote-10) which is a partnership with Caring for God’s Acre, Arocha UK, the Church of England and the Church in Wales, is also a useful joint national initiative to get people involved in their churchyards, creating a Beautiful Burial Ground Portal for the results.

**Interest of the Local Authority in the churchyard**

Alongside wholly owned municipal burial grounds, local authorities will often have a specific interest in churchyards, particularly where the churchyard has been closed, where there are graves of significant interest or where there are no other places within the town or parish where the burial of residents can take place.

Degrees of responsibility vary but in most cases the town or parish council will share in a desire to see positive activities take place in churchyards and that they are well maintained. Partnerships can be very fruitful in opening up these spaces and accessing resources, so it can be really helpful if local civic authorities are included in conversations and invited to comment when burial grounds are discussed and used. In particular, it can important to think about local authorities in relation to decisions that impact on their responsibilities. Central Bedfordshire Unitary Authority have produced a useful walkthrough of the interest of local authorities in churchyards.[[11]](#footnote-11)

**Researching History**

Many people today are interested in researching their family history through genealogy sites such as Ancestry. Following on from accessing paper records and family trees, many people also travel to view graves of ancestors and to search church records. Visiting a grave gives a concrete sense of place and physical contact with ancient grave stones may help people feel more ‘connected’ to their families and sometimes an important sense of coming home. The National Burial Grounds Survey[[12]](#footnote-12) will also allow more people to find out more about their family history and encourage people to visit churches where their ancestors were buried.

The graveyard around the All Hallows Church, in Kirkburton, has more than 2000 graves with over 5000 inscriptions. As a volunteer in the award-winning Kirkburton Churchyard Team, John Wakley would regularly be tidying the grounds and noticed that people interested in tracing their family relatives often had troubles because the exact location of the grave they were looking for was unknown, or sometimes the inscriptions had become illegible over time. To preserve this historic record, and to make the searching a lot easier, Mr Wakley recorded the inscriptions, plotted each gravestone on his hand-drawn maps, and made the records available to the wider community. We remember his efforts in the Churchyard by having the main path through the churchyard named Wakley Way in his memory in 2019.[[13]](#footnote-13)

Historical societies are often also interested in stories and events associated with the history of a churchyard and its monuments as well as those of a church. While these may also include a history of paranormal sightings, such as legends about ghosts, these groups typically have a different mode of approach from many paranormal investigation groups (see below), particularly in terms of the relationship with local clergy and event management.

Many clergy attest that people coming for occasional offices will do so, even if they are not churchgoers, because of a sense of family link or sense of connection to the location. Sometimes this powerful sense of connection is difficult to describe, but felt instinctively or associated with strong positive memories, perhaps from childhood or family photographs or stories.

I was christened but my family never went to church. When my godmother died, I went to her funeral. I didn’t know what to expect and I felt pretty numb that day. A bit later I went back and looked at some of the other gravestones that were around. There were loads with my name and my mum’s maiden name and my godmother’s name too. My mum said that there were generations of our family there. Somehow, I’d never wondered where they were or what happened when they died. I went back a few times and just talked to them and I felt this weird sense of belonging to that place, which I hadn’t had before. Then when I went into the church I felt like I was joining them. It felt ok. Now I go to services there all the time. [[14]](#footnote-14)

**Points on a Pilgrimage**

Many churches are recognising the potentials of a renewed interest in pilgrimage and walking on a spiritual journey. Many new ‘caminos’ are springing up with existing paths and walkways being combined to take in stops and waystations at different churches. Churches may set up and run such pilgrimages themselves with activities and events, refreshments and/or special services.

For example:

The annual Dorchester-on-Thames pilgrimage is a ten mile walk that takes place on the first Sunday in July. It runs from Churn Knob, a place where St Birinus is supposed to have preached, over the Iron Age forts at the Wittenham Clumps, to Dorchester Abbey where there is a service open to people from all denominations and none. The pilgrimage is a well-known local event and advertised on walking sites as well as through church advertising.[[15]](#footnote-15)

Some churches have also laid out prayer trails or labyrinths within their church precincts or churchyards, or include benches or other seating for people to stop, gather their thoughts, and pray. These kinds of simple layouts within churchyards act as open invitations for people to use the space at a time and duration of their own choosing.

**Remembrance and November season**

Some churches make use of the church and churchyard on Hallowe’en (31st October) as an alternative to trick or treating. Often aimed at primary school aged children, activities may include pumpkin carving with candle lights and decoration of the churchyard, sharing food, listening to music and celebrating life. Instead of treating the churchyard in the darkness as something to fear, the churchyard can become a place to be valued and treasured.[[16]](#footnote-16)

On All Saints Day (1st November) in Poland, as across some other countries in Europe there is a tradition to visit the graves of family members and place flowers and candles. After dark, churchyards often glow richly with these lights.[[17]](#footnote-17) Eastern European communities in the UK have also observed this tradition in local churchyards and other people have adopted the practice of remembering loved ones on All Saints and All Souls Day (2nd November). Roman Catholic churches, in particular, have a tradition of celebrating a Cemetery Mass on All Souls Day. ‘Walking through a cemetery you see grave after grave of somebody who mattered to someone. And while they might not have anyone today who remembers them, they still matter to God, and they should matter to us’.[[18]](#footnote-18)



*Marcin Kargol/flickr All Saint's Day. Cemetery at Glogow, Poland.*

**Supporting grief and forming friendships**

As Mark Sealey noted in his interview, respect for the dead and grieving families whose encounter with churchyards and cemeteries is focussed on the death of a loved one, can mark the beginning of important relationship as those families are cared for. Some churches have identified the importance of having people around in the church, or walking around a churchyard to offer friendship and comfort to those visiting graves, including help with maintaining the grave and choosing a headstone or other memorial as the grave settles.

Churchyard teams which have groups of volunteers which cut the grass and tend pathways, often around shared refreshments, also naturally encounter people visiting graves and make them feel that the churchyard is somewhere where they are tended and cared for.[[19]](#footnote-19)

**Using the Churchyard for worship**

During the covid pandemic, some churches found a new impetus to meet outside for worship, - to pray, sing hymns and gather together in fellowship, typically within the churchyard. In doing so, they have discovered some of the attraction for connection to the external environment which has been a feature of the mission movement Forest Church (see extended discussion at Appendix 1).

**Part 2 Activities which can give cause for concern**

Most of the activities and creative use of churchyards and cemeteries take place during daylight. Funerals take place in the day, families visit by day and walkers and tourists will usually come during daylight hours.

Parochial church councils and other church bodies are naturally concerned about criminal activities which may target churches, often under cover of darkness, such as stealing lead and other metals from church roofs,[[20]](#footnote-20) or attempts to break into churches in order to steal items of worth. Such criminal activity is regularly reported and understood, but there are a range of other activities which may cause damage to churches and churchyards, which often take place after dark and which are less well understood. What is perhaps most concerning about these activities is that they fail to respect church property, the resting places of the dead and the feelings of families where graves are used in these activities or actually end up being disturbed. Damage to church premises and churchyards do further damage to the daylight activities, as people may be concerned, upset or generally put off by the lack of respect shown to places that should be cherished. Such activities which cause damage can be significant headaches for clergy and some may not be aware that people are targeting their churches at night or feel there is nothing they can do about it. Some of these activities are considered below:

**Paranormal Investigation Groups**

Anyone with a handheld and a dose of curiosity can launch a ghost hunting web series. But it takes authentic footage, top-notch paranormal equipment, and truly chilling results to yield anything other than an eye roll. [[21]](#footnote-21)

The UK is home to a very large number of paranormal investigation groups, many seeking followers and money from events, by providing these ‘truly chilling results’ often supported by YouTube videos shot with cameras at night. [[22]](#footnote-22) Some of these groups seek to enter churchyards or invite people to attend churchyards for events which purport to expose spirit activity or the appearance of ghosts. Some also claim endorsement or authority from church denominations or clergy to seek out ghosts or spirits. Given that many of these groups take videos at night, often without entering the churchyard, but merely pointing a video camera over a wall, it is difficult to monitor or rein in such activity, but interest in these videos and sensationalist claims for supernatural activity may cause people to come to the churchyard at night, where they may trample the ground or damage graves by not being able to see where they are going. Some people may be so eager to encounter ghosts or obtain a spooky thrill that they forget the respect which is naturally due to those who have died and make claims about certain graves, posting the images on the internet, distressing families who may find their loved ones speculated about as unrested dead, undead, malevolent spirits or otherwise.[[23]](#footnote-23) [[24]](#footnote-24)

**Hallowe’en activities**

if you really want to give yourself a scare this Halloween, then where is better to spend your time than in a church grounds?[[25]](#footnote-25)

While some churches organise events such as ‘light parties’ which may take place in church premises or be organised within the churchyard (see above), some people organise events without permission in which people enter churchyards for a ‘spooky’ feel or experience.

Additionally, some groups may take it upon themselves to enact scenes from films or enter and interfere with churchyards as part of a performance or event (typically intending to film the performance). For example, some groups of self-styled ‘vampire hunters’ have dressed up and entered churchyards, acting out the discovery and destruction of vampires. Churchyards are also favoured backdrops for amateur horror films and scenarios. All these activities may result in disturbance or damage to churchyards, particularly when quite large groups of people are involved.

**Nighthawking**

Nighthawking refers to those metal detectorists who search for and remove items they find from the ground without permission to search. Removing objects discovered in this manner is typically regarded as theft. Nighthawks are therefore different from responsible metal detectorists.[[26]](#footnote-26)

Nighthawkers, as the name suggests, also typically work at night and may try to excavate potential finds, digging near or in graves or damaging walls and churchyard infrastructure.[[27]](#footnote-27) Nighthawking can also be dangerous to the person doing it if they operate without lights and are working blind in a churchyard with many trip hazards and possibly drops.[[28]](#footnote-28)

**Champing**

Some closed churches, such as those managed through the Church Conservation Trust, are available for hire, particularly for glamping (luxury camping) or ‘champing’ as the CCT dubs it. Church camping creates much needed revenue for the maintenance of historic buildings and the majority of those who hire such buildings for church camping are respectful of the buildings and surrounds. Many people report champing as a unique and enjoyable experience. With people not able to holiday abroad easily during Covid, champing has become ever more popular.[[29]](#footnote-29) Just as some people abuse Airbnb stays however, some people think it would be amusing to abuse the space, even to the extent of performing rituals or ‘sacrifices’ in the church buildings or grounds. The CCT publishes a list of prohibited activities or behaviours[[30]](#footnote-30) including drinking alcohol in the churchyard, smoking, causing damage, making too much noise, certain sorts of filming and lack of respect for consecrated buildings and their surrounds, but clearly as with all such hires, relies on the trustworthiness and compliance of those booking the sites.

**Extra rituals and burials**

Sometimes clergy report that new graves have been interfered with after a burial has taken place with new items buried in the fresh plot or left near the grave. This is sometimes due to families feeling that ‘extra’ ritual needs to be added to the funeral process perhaps to honour some aspect of folk religion or belief, sometimes relating to the family’s heritage. For example, there have been reports of hoodoo practice involving burial of jars containing honey, urine and/or prayers or beads or other objects. While such disturbance of new graves has been often characterised as vandalism, there is evidence (better studied in the USA),[[31]](#footnote-31) that such practices are also evident in some UK churchyards.

Some forms of ‘witchcraft’ recommend gathering graveyard dirt (some sites also sell ‘graveyard’ dirt for use in rituals).[[32]](#footnote-32) Soil from a graveyard is also sometimes called goofer dust, though it may also be a mixture of soil and other elements. The Mookychick site (cited in note) argues for respect and permission giving during the collection of graveyard soil, but not all gatherers are as careful or respectful as the site recommends. Soil is typically gathered at night, at the full moon for preference and during November season, which may be considered to improve its efficacy in ritual magick.

**Urban Explorers**

Some churches and surrounds are specifically targeted by urban explorers. Urban exploration (UE) sometimes called ‘urbex’ or ‘roof and tunnel hacking’ involves people who want to explore buildings and structures, often ruins or unusual or hidden structures. UE practitioners often want to climb buildings and film or document their climbs and explorations. UE can also involve making forays into underground spaces such as cellars or crypts.

UE can involve not only trespass but risk to the individuals from physical danger. People who try to climb church buildings or ruins can run serious risk of injury or death, but may also cause significant damage in the course of the climb or exploration, or add to damage already present while exploring derelict or abandoned places.[[33]](#footnote-33)

**Natural damage – animals**

Churchyards may also sustain damage from the natural movement of animals such as deer browsing, moles tunnelling or badgers extending or excavating in the churchyard areas. Sometimes, animals have been blamed for human damage.

**Part 3**

**Some ideas about maximising creativity, care and respect and minimising damage and disrespectful behaviour**

* No matter how big or small the church environs are, churchyards can be used as creative spaces to make people feel welcome and comfortable around the idea of ‘church’
* A churchyard that is being regularly used is less attractive to night users
* Knowing who is in the churchyard and how they are using the space is not only a missional opportunity but enables friendships and care
* Talk to gravediggers, sextons and other maintenance crew about their role in churchyard maintenance and as sources of wisdom and advice
* Understand why night users may cause damage:
	+ Nighthawkers may be motivated by a need for money from their ‘finds’. Why do they need to go out at night? Why do they take risks? Making good relationships with any local metal detectorists could provide sources of information about known night hawkers and their preferred sites.
	+ Paranormal Investigators may also be looking to monetise their videos. If possible, find out what they are doing and talk about the distress caused to families if graves are visible in the videos or sustain damage. Check what people are actually doing if they ask to hire church premises at night; some investigators will hire a church hall for a ‘party’ but be advertising a paid-for ghost hunt. Their use of equipment may also breach health and safety rules and cause noise or light disturbance to surrounding houses.
	+ Urban explorers are a community of risk-takers, but some specifically want to document unexplored places for research purposes. If possible, being in contact before any exploring is done might help to agree safety and what areas are off limits as well as what kind of exploring is done. What parts of the church building or churchyard can be explored safely and how is access to spaces such as belltowers and rooftops to be granted or denied? Good lighting and security can help to deter climbing.
	+ Champing and misuse of church premises and churchyards. As noted above, champing is covered by specific rules – but what checks are made and who makes sure that the rules are followed and if they are broken what happens then?
	+ Digging in the churchyard requires some investigation – animal or human? If human, is it because a family wants or needs some extra ritual? Might there be a way of talking to families about their cultural expectations or needs? Digging for ‘magick’ materials might again be deterred by good lighting and security where that is possible, but forging good relationships with any local Pagan groups might be a way of cutting down practices of this kind.

**Appendix 1** **Forest Church**

**Introduction**

Forest Church is a contemporary movement or ‘expression’ of church which is characterised by having some services outside the church building in a green or natural space. One of its founders, Bruce Stanley, describes it as ‘experimental, permissive, creative and comes in loads of flavours’.[[34]](#footnote-34) There are a significant number of different Anglican Forest Church expressions and each has its own characteristics, although common features include the use of Celtic prayers and songs and an emphasis on meeting in a natural environment, often with an ecological theme or surrounding to the gatherings themselves.

**History**

Forest Church has been developing and burgeoning for some time. A *Church Times* article in 2013[[35]](#footnote-35) described a number of different gatherings, and the beginnings of questions Forest Church might raise in relation to mission and to ecclesiology. Mission-focussed connections were clear from the experience of Body, Mind and Spirit Festivals, where evangelists such as the Rev’d Steve Hollinghurst, noted a profound thirst for Christ-exploration, coupled with a desire for more creation-centred theology and a deep, ethically-driven, desire for connection with God’s world. Forest Church provides a setting for such people to do their exploring, but also raises the question of what such gatherings might develop into and whether such evolution would be recognisably ‘church’.

**Intention**

The intention behind Forest Church is first to connect with God within the natural world, rather than ‘inside’ a building and secondly, to appeal to people who might be interested in the Christian faith but who do not, for whatever reason, feel confident or comfortable with attending a service seated within a building. Forest Church connects with others who already have a nature-based spirituality, such as Wiccans and Druids, but also with seekers and explorers who are on the margins of church attendance and explorers within the Christian faith. Many Forest Church services are also dog-friendly and family friendly, permitting people to bring their pets and allowing their children more physical freedom than would be possible in the church building. Forest Church services are more flexible in terms of people coming and going without disturbing others and encourage brief participation by passers-by, perhaps to sing a hymn or say a prayer, but then carrying on their journey. Forest Church therefore operates in a threshold space between the natural world and the church building, and may therefore be intentionally missional in creating an openness and invitation to the life of the local church as expressed in its church and parish life.[[36]](#footnote-36)

**Process**

Many Forest Churches meet according to the Celtic Wheel of the Year, taking their cue from natural cycles: solstices, equinoxes and their mid points. Many explore the intersections between earth-centred spirituality festivals and Christian feasts such as Imbolc/St Brigid’s Day/Candlemas. Others use the seasons, the agricultural year and time services to coincide with other nature-based events in the national news (such as the Big Garden Birdwatch) or the local area (such as Harvest Festival). Different Forest Churches interact on social media in order to compare experiences and reflect on their materials, processes and rites.[[37]](#footnote-37) For example, one discussion looked at the ‘problem’ of rain and talked about how to turn the rain into a focus for the event.

In some cases, Forest Church gatherings take place in rural churches within sight and sound of the church building, but with a more ad hoc feel as people bring folding chairs and sometimes musical instruments or picnic food to share. Sometimes, evening gatherings are followed by follow-on meetings in the local pub, with a chance to talk about spiritual matters. Many Forest Church gatherings are more informal than in-church services, carried out in the round, and without the officiants being robed.

One of the noted aspects of Forest Church is that the space is both adaptive and changes over time as the seasons change. Temperature and therefore appropriate clothing, changes; the conditions for the gathering have to be assessed each time. The way people gather therefore changes. In summer gatherings, people may be out and about and passing by, interested in what a group of people are doing in the space. In winter, people may be attracted by a flame or by lights. Music may be similarly attractive.

With the advent of the pandemic, Forest Church gatherings have become more popular, permitting people to get together in the fresh air with numbers dictated by whatever advice was current. Forest Church gatherings have become associated with being ‘healthier’ and permitting the creation of communities of people who have missed the physical presence of other Christians.

**Social Media interaction**

The Forest Church Facebook page has 2.4k members. The people posting on the page ask for training possibilities and guidance, share liturgical and activity ideas, and ask for advice on things like prayer walks, prayer gardens and labyrinths as further ways of developing discipleship and spiritual accompaniment. Unsurprisingly, many of the members are mission enablers or pioneers, looking to connect with people ‘outside’ the church in both senses – those who prefer to be physically outside the building and those hovering on the edge of Christian faith. Those on the page also seek to explore challenges, such as inclement weather, but also seek to share their photos and enthusiasm for Forest Church: ‘I'm loving how energised this project is making me feel.’

**Reflections**

Reflecting on his own experience of running the Ancient Arden Forest Church (AAFC) with his wife, the musician Alison Eve, the Rev’d Paul Cudby has noted that this kind of mission experiment needs to be evaluated and reflected upon.[[38]](#footnote-38) He recognised in the case of AAFC that this expression of Forest Church, while attracting Wiccans and Druids into the Christian ambit, nevertheless meant that it was not ‘owned’ by the parish church and was pushing perhaps too far beyond the pale of what might be determined as authentically Church of England. In order to redress this, he began a more parish-based Forest Church, the Arden Forest Church (TAFC) which the PCC of his church agreed would replace the prayer book evensong on the 4th Sunday that had dwindled to a tiny handful of attendees.

This iteration of Forest Church was designed to be inclusive and non-hierarchical (meeting outside made it easy to sit in the round). The leader(s) would not wear vestments or dog collars. The group would gather beneath a tall, easily seen and discovered tree. The liturgy, drawing inspiration from Tess Ward’s *The Celtic Wheel of the Year*, included responsorial prayer, praise and times of silence and a reflective Bible reading, with a focus on referencing back to the natural world. For example, when reading Jacob’s struggle with a divine stranger, people would be invited to look for signs of ‘struggle’ within the natural world, such as moss and creepers invading gravestones. After a ‘call-back’ using a singing bowl, people would be invited to feedback their reflections and ideas about the Jacob story. Paul Cudby noted that the openness of the environment and the relaxed setting, seemed to enable a greater willingness to share and contribute to theological reflection, and that this process further led to forming of community, reflecting in people lingering and agreeing (for example) to carry on by going to the pub together. The gathering would then end with some of form of responsorial prayer and a blessing.

Paul Cudby notes that just doing ‘normal’ church outside is not at all the same thing as Forest Church, which has its own characteristics and distinctiveness. So Forest Church has gatherings rather than ‘services’. Language about God is more open and descriptive and the format is less institutional, formal, dogmatic or hierarchical. However, he acknowledges, there is a danger in this that people will see it as an opportunity for a spiritual ‘hit’ rather than a commitment to a parish church within the Anglican tradition. To this end, those with leadership responsibilities have to be aware of the missional opportunities of helping those attending to go deeper, while at the same time respecting the ‘fringe’ aspect of those who are only willing to dip a toe into the water of Christian faith: ‘The Arden Forest Church seeks instead to tread a fine line that provides a relational framework in which a contemplative spiritual experience can lead into a deeper commitment according to the place on the path that the individual occupies. The journey of each traveller is honoured with no pressure being placed on an “arrival” or crossing some in/out threshold’. He concludes: ‘Our aim at The Arden Forest Church is to bring the discipline that religion at its best can offer into a spiritual space so that an ongoing encounter with Christ, mediated by the Holy Spirit in the natural world, becomes life-changing and life-long’.

**Partnerships and interactions: example**

Robinswood Forest Church, St Barnabas Church and the diocese of Gloucester partnered with a group of local charities to be part of the FestivALL ‘Reconnect’ event (July 2021). The Rev’d Cate Williams, the Mission and Evangelism officer, put together a Forest Church nature trail. Two routes are offered, one which was shorter and easier and one which required more effort over uneven ground. The purpose of the trail was to enable a walking day to include spiritual reflection and exploration and to enable participants to connect with God’s creation.

Participants were invited to use all their senses in the process of exploration and discovery. Waystations on the route included a pond, a well cross, a meadow, a fallen tree, other trees, a bench and some carved sheep. The higher path featured an old orchard, the top beacon on the hill and a view of the cathedral. These were identified in the accompanying trail leaflet with pictures to enable participants to pick the stations out and to pause for a while. Each station was accompanied by words to reflect on, and pray about from the psalms, the gospels, from the *Celtic Wheel of the Year* and Annie Heppenstall’s *Book of Uncommon Prayer*.

The leaflet also included an invitation for participants to connect directly with the Robinswood Forest Church or St Barnabas Church, so that the nature walk would act as a ‘taster’ for deeper participation and involvement.

The leaflet also pointed to three activity stations. One involved reflecting on the lives of refugees, with the opportunity to make a peg doll that would become part of a sculpture; one involved using musical instruments to enhance listening; and one involved thinking about better cooperation and teamwork.

**Other forms of outdoor church**

As Forest Church gatherings have grown and spread, other ‘kinds’ of outdoor church have also sprung up, particularly with Covid issues. One such is Muddy Church <https://www.muddychurch.co.uk/> . Yet another, calls itself Mossy Church, a conflation of Forest Church and Messy Church foci. <http://llmcalling.blogspot.com/2014/04/mossy-church-forestchurch-messychurch.html> . The Church of England also has published guidance for outdoor worship on its website which calls on some of the principles of Forest Church: <https://www.churchofengland.org/resources/churchcare/advice-and-guidance-church-buildings/outdoor-worship> . Examples of things people might do, include prayer and pilgrim walks, a labyrinth, and Blessing on the Beach.[[39]](#footnote-39)

**Forest Church and Being Church**

In many ways, gatherings of Forest Church pose a challenge to traditional ways of thinking about ‘being’ church. The gathered community which attends is often extremely fluid and its relationships are less easily quantified. How then, would one measure church ‘growth’ or count attendance, assuming one would want to? Gatherings are not ‘services’ and performative liturgy is less specific. Because the natural world is a significant part of the spiritual environment and experience, this too interrogates the theology of ‘being’ church, where it is assumed that church buildings and parish territory are particular kinds of boundary within which the Christian community can be observed, counted and contained. In this sense, Forest Church connects more strongly with many global outdoor gatherings of Christians, for whom being outside is consonant with the way they live their everyday lives. Forest Church also expands ecclesial vocabulary, ways of talking about God and ways of expressing worshipping community, but as noted, its very inclusiveness and unboundedness leaves it vulnerable to accusations of hijack by alternative spirituality-seekers and a lack of clarity about credal cores. In this sense, how is discipleship nurtured and developed? How are sacraments offered? This suggests that Forest Churches need particular gifts and abilities among the leadership, to encourage spiritual exploration and development which is Christ-focussed. Such leaders then also need support and encouragement in a ministry which can leave them vulnerable to misunderstanding, accusations of Pagan interests and cries of abandonment from any existing church-based congregation.

Notwithstanding, post-Covid, Forest Church is attracting more interest from people who are still hesitant about returning and there has been increased interest in the outworking of the fifth mark of mission as a result. Increased interest in participation suggests that the Church might need to look more seriously at issues of training, funding and set up, but at the same time any attempt to institutionalise, regulate or ‘control’ gatherings might be counter-productive. To this extent, Forest Church as a particular kind of fresh expression remains a creative enigma, perhaps best left to visionaries and pioneers to explore and develop, unless the demand for it becomes overwhelming.

1. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-60081457> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. <https://highgatecemetery.org/> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. <https://buildfaith.org/geocaching/>; <https://www.geocaching.com/blog/2017/11/the-worlds-largest-geocache-series-church-micros/> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-36806795> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. <https://www.caringforgodsacre.org.uk/> [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. <https://arcentre.s3.eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/17113905/CW84-Year-of-the-burial-ground.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. <https://conservationfoundation.co.uk/projects/we-love-yew/> [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2017/mar/19/churchyards-are-our-forgotten-nature-reserves> [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. <https://www.anglicancommunion.org/mission/marks-of-mission.aspx> [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. <https://www.caringforgodsacre.org.uk/churches-count-on-nature-faqs/> [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. <https://www.centralbedfordshire.gov.uk/migrated_images/april-2014-supplementary_tcm3-3336.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. <https://www.churchofengland.org/resources/churchcare/churchcare-news/national-burial-grounds-survey> [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. <https://allhallowschurch.co.uk/churchyardmap/> [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Personal account, young adult, SW Essex. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. <https://www.open-walks.co.uk/South-Oxfordshire/6241-St-Birinus-Pilgrimage-Route-Churn-Knob-Dorchester/View-details.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. See ‘Hallowe’en ideas’ here: <https://www.churchofengland.org/about/policy-and-thinking/our-views/new-religious-movements> [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. <https://www.britishpoles.uk/all-saints-day-in-poland-1st-of-november-polish-tradition/#:~:text=Polish%20people%20have%20the%20conviction,walk%20away%20from%20the%20cemeteries>. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Fr Stephen Vrazel, <https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/42673/the-hallowed-tradition-of-cemetery-masses> [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. For example: <https://www.stmarybarnes.org/churchyard-daily-friends/> [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. <https://historicengland.org.uk/advice/caring-for-heritage/places-of-worship/places-of-worship-at-risk/metal-theft/> [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. <https://the-line-up.com/ghost-hunters-youtube> [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1qY55Otjsdg> [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. <https://www.cornwalllive.com/whats-on/ghost-hunters-spot-supernatural-figures-7357416?fbclid=IwAR00PLuSS_vnfIQ6v2mXS81PIpj4me1QtoOZuUHfIwSyeeuOsNsYuKFudjI> [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. <https://www.lincolnshirelive.co.uk/news/local-news/please-stop-destroying-churches-churches-3785652> [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. <https://www.essexlive.news/whats-on/whats-on-news/haunted-church-yard-tales-halloween-701841> [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2020/jun/02/theres-a-romanticism-about-nighthawking-but-its-theft-when-metal-detectorists-go-rogue> [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. <https://www.walesonline.co.uk/news/wales-news/night-hawkers-graverobbers-caerwent-monmouthshire-16977286> [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-dorset-61467988> [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. <https://www.theguardian.com/travel/2021/aug/29/camping-churches-demand-uk-staycations-campsites-holidaymakers-champing> [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. <https://champing.co.uk/the-small-print/> [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2589871X1930155X> [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. <https://www.mookychick.co.uk/health/witchcraft-spirituality/graveyard-dirt.php> [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. <https://www.theboltonnews.co.uk/news/4425267.derelict-church-invaded-by-adventurers/> [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. <https://www.facebook.com/groups/forestchurch> [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. <https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2013/4-october/features/features/if-you-kneel-down-in-the-woods-today> [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Cate Williams, *Forest Church: Earthed Perspectives on the Gospel*, Grove Booklets [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. <https://www.facebook.com/groups/forestchurch/> [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. <https://churchmissionsociety.org/resources/forest-church-from-dogmatic-desert-to-spiritual-discipline-paul-cudby-anvil-vol-35-issue-2/?fbclid=IwAR3RzWKSiSGH0wdpDcAbeLL5E8_CiC-X4lujKwM73EQlq-wJnEv3r3o3rnc> [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. <https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2020-06/Loaves%20%26%20Fishes%20%E2%80%94%20Blessing%20on%20the%20Beach%20Liturgy.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-39)