

Celtic festival	Meaning / traditions	Church year	Nature's themes
Imbolc	Pregnant, 'in the belly', expectancy	Candlemas	Early spring, life returning after winter's dormant period. Lambs, snowdrops.
Ostara / Spring equinox	Dawn/morning light. Lent—the lengthening of days	Annunciation or Easter depending on dates.	New life, resurrection, re-birth, hope
Beltane / May Day	Maypole dancing, well dressing	Ascension / Pentecost	Lush spring growth, celebration of fertility, abundance
Summer Solstice / Litha	Sunrise celebrations, decorating/prayer trees.	St John the Baptist	Celebration of the fullness of summer. Prayers for the ripening of fruit and grain.
Lammas / Lughnasagh	Cutting of the first sheaf, harvest loaf, corn dollies.	Lammas	Grain harvest: the start of the harvest season. A time of change and shift as growth slows. Seed dropping to earth ready for dormancy and next year's growth.
Mabon / Autumn equinox	Looking back reflecting on the year, clearing out, decluttering.	Harvest festival	Fruit harvest. Point of balance, going into the darker half of the year. Planting of seeds and bulbs that will find new life next year.
Samhain / All Hallows / Halloween	Facing death, remembering those who have died, resurrection hope.	All Saints and All Souls	Final harvest—nuts and berries. The dying back of nature remembering the hope of the return of Spring.
Yule	Evergreens, wreaths, yule log, candles	Christmas	The return of light to the world, days getting longer from this point. The coming of light in Christ. Light in darkness, hope, waiting, expectancy.

# Forest Church



Many people around us find that their most profoundly spiritual moments are when they are outdoors, in nature. Forest Church is a contemporary movement, with roots in the long Christian tradition of engagement in nature, such as the Celtic and Franciscan approaches. Those engaged in Forest Church are seeking to meet with God in and through their connection with the natural world. The hope is that Forest Churches will become a spiritual home for those outside the traditional church who relate better to outdoor spirituality than gatherings in a church building.

## The Celtic eightfold cycle

Many Forest Churches meet eight times a year on a pattern determined by nature – the solstices and equinoxes, and the mid-points between these. Others chose a different pattern, but either way, the themes of the seasons are often useful connections to make when preparing gatherings. A table of dates is on the back page.

Other dates that might be useful include the Agricultural Year, Apple Day (October) and national / international wildlife charity dates such as the 'Big Butterfly Hunt' (July) 'Big Garden birdwatch' (January) and International Dawn Chorus Day (May).

## Planning a Forest Church gathering

In general, simple is good. It is all too easy to overcomplicate to the point where there isn't enough space and time for engagement with nature and God. A guiding principle therefore is don't over-organise. Just provide a framework and trust God working in and through nature.



The following are questions I find useful to ask myself as I prepare:

- What element connects with nature?
- What element allows nature to speak?
- Have explicit connections been made with the Christian tradition?
- Are there seasonal themes that are helpful?
- Is there something to keep the children's attention?
- Is there space for those adults who want to be quiet with God in nature?

## Biblical resources

- Jesus' many nature parables, the way Jesus uses insight from the natural world to teach of God. We can follow Jesus' example in hearing God's voice in the natural world.
- Nature Psalms eg Psalm 19
- Job 12.7-10 Creation teaches us about God
- Col 1.15-23 All creation is held in Christ, all creation is re-deemed by the cross, not just humanity.
- Romans 8.18-25 All creation waiting to be liberated into the fullness in God that we hope for.
- John 3.16 remembering that the 'world' that God loves is the cosmos, not individual human beings.
- Old Testament theology of the land.

## Websites / online

Wildlife trust websites for nature scavenger hunts etc, especially for all-age Forest Churches: 'Wildlife Watch' from the Wildlife Trusts, 'Nature Detectives' from the Woodland Trust and 'Fun and learning'

from the RSPB are all good places to start—available on their websites. Forest Church Facebook group.

## Liturgy

Annie Heppenstall *The Book of Uncommon Prayer* (Kevin Mayhew 2015)

Tess Ward *The Celtic Wheel of the Year* (O Books 2007)

Church of England liturgies for the Agricultural year

Celtic liturgies such as Northumbria and Iona

## Books

Bruce Stanley *Forest Church* (Mystic Christ Press 2013) The definitive Forest Church guide.

Paul Cudby *The Shaken Path* (Christian Alternative 2017)

An excellent resource for any Forest Churches connecting with people with a background in various strands of Paganism, Wicca or witchcraft.

Richard Louv *Last Child in the Woods* (Algonquin 2005) Fabulous book on how connection with nature is important for wellbeing.

Elizabeth Johnson *Ask the beasts* (Bloomsbury 2004) For those wanting to go deeper theologically

Walter Brueggemann *The Land revised edition* (Fortress 2002)

Another theological resource, focusing on Old Testament theology of the land.

