### Celtic festival

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nature’s themes</th>
<th>Church year</th>
<th>Celtic festival</th>
<th>Meaning / traditions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Early spring, life returning after winter’s dormant period.</td>
<td>Imbolc</td>
<td>Ostara / Spring equinox</td>
<td>Lamps, snowdrops.</td>
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<tr>
<td>New life, resurrection, rebirth, hope</td>
<td>Candlemas</td>
<td>Beltane / May Day</td>
<td>Pregnant, ‘in the belly’, expectancy</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lush spring growth, celebration of fertility, abundance</td>
<td>Annunciation or Easter depending on dates</td>
<td>Summer Solstice / Litha</td>
<td>Lent — the lengthening of days</td>
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<tr>
<td>Celebration of the fulness of summer. Prayers for the ripening of fruit and grain.</td>
<td>Ascension / Pentecost</td>
<td>St John the Baptist</td>
<td>Maypole dancing, well dressing</td>
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<tr>
<td>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.</td>
<td>St John the Baptist</td>
<td>Lammas / Lughnasadh</td>
<td>Sunrise celebrations, decorating prayer trees.</td>
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<tr>
<td>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.</td>
<td>Harvest festival</td>
<td>All Saints and All Souls</td>
<td>Cutting of the first sheaf, harvest loaf, corn dollies.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>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.</td>
<td>All Saints and All Souls</td>
<td>Christmas</td>
<td>Evergreens, wreaths, yule log, candles</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### 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 1.27-10 Creation teaches us about God
- Col 1.15-23 All creation is held in Christ, all creation is redeemed 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.

**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