

*'Church'?*

*Churchgoing Christians may recognise the fourfold structure of the Eucharist (or communion) in what has been laid out above. This is partially a deliberate shaping but also partially a recognition that this is the shape that has been emerging without such a specific intention from the start.*

*For those unfamiliar with this structure, here it is:*

- 1. **The Gathering of the people:** rituals and song which celebrate both the fact that we have gathered and also the basis upon which we gather (as equals - none of whom is perfect).*
- 2. **The liturgy of the word:** reading from our sacred texts and reflecting on their meaning for our lives*
- 3. **The liturgy of the sacrament or communion:** going deeper in seeking union with one another and with the divine.*
- 4. **The dismissal:** being sent out into the world with the intention to live out what we have celebrated.*

### **3. PLACE**

The first four Oxford Forest Church gatherings all took place in Wytham Woods, East of Botley. This enabled us to follow the journey of nature through the seasons as the seasons changed but with the context remaining the same. Each time we have sought to explore our own spiritual journeying in the context of the natural rhythms of nature. We have linked each gathering to one of the key changes in the season: Midwinter and the approaching of darkness; spring and the emerging of new life; midsummer and fullness of life; autumn, dying and letting go.

In the second year we moved to different locations in order to experience different types of landscape.

Tim Stead July 2016

# **OXFORD AREA FOREST CHURCH**

## **1. THEOLOGY**

The theology of forest church stems from the notion that God is one and all that is, is one in God.

The problem for humans is that we have developed (or is this inherent?) a tendency, through fear, greed and the struggle to survive, to divide that which is naturally one into separate aspects which are then better able to be dominated or exploited for our own ends. This tendency to divide, separate and exploit has not only damaged many other aspects of nature but has now led humans to the point of threatening our own habitat and so our own quality of life and possibly our very existence. The good news is that finally, like the prodigal son, we are waking up to the predicament we are in and the damage we are doing.

The answer to this predicament lies in our gradually beginning to reconnect that which we have divided and separated. Starting with ourselves, we need spiritual practices which help us to reconnect with that which we have suppressed or denied within ourselves. From here we need rituals which enable us to reconnect with one another on the basis of inclusion and equality. And finally we need rituals and ceremonies to help us to reconnect with nature in order to heal this relationship too. This final part is what Forest Church seeks to engage with whilst also bearing in mind the first two.

## **2. PRACTICE.**

We all come, then, recognising these basic divisions within ourselves, between each one of us and between us and the rest of nature, seeking to be open to the possibility of healing and new relationships being formed.

So, as individuals it is important that we come as best we can with hearts seeking to be open to all that may unfold for us through the time spent together. It is also important that we are together since being in relationship with one another will be a key part of the process. And finally seeking to be open to what the “Book of Nature” may have to teach us about itself and about how we might better relate to it as a part of nature ourselves.

Our Forest church gatherings normally have four elements, though not necessarily as tidily arranged as set out below:

### **A. Gathering**

It is important that we start together and, however simply, connect with one another and with the earth to foster a sense of shared experience. This can be done through any or all of the following:

- Gathering round a fire or just in a circle
- Singing together
- A moment of holding hands in a circle and holding silence
- Hearing a poem or prayer read which might help us to be aware of our surroundings.
- Other simple rituals

### **B. Awareness.**

Although relationship is key, it cannot be true unless it is based on true knowledge. So, developing our understanding of how nature works, our effect on it and its effect on us is a key part of the process. Such knowledge both guides and inspires us but is not an end in itself. This part is not vital every time and should not be overdone but is always welcome and can be offered in a number of ways:

- Someone sharing some knowledge about the particular location and/or season we find ourselves in.
- Someone who knows about some aspect of nature (trees, birds, foraging etc.) giving us a short guided walk

- Some reading being offered to help us to reflect as we go out

### **C. Communing**

In the end, though, relationship goes beyond words, thoughts and ideas and must be rooted in experience. So time is always given for each of us, either with our children or on our own, simply to ‘be’ in the midst of nature and to see what emerges in us as a result of this ‘just being’ here with the intention to open our hearts, to listen and to notice what is.

- This part is done in silence unless you have children you need to engage with
- We can agree how long to spend on our own (perhaps between 20 & 40 mins)
- People are invited either to take a slow “Mindful” walk or to find a “sit spot” and stay put
- The suggestion at this stage is to put aside head knowledge and to open to experience
- Especially becoming aware of our own experience within as we walk through or sit in the midst of nature – whether our experience seems to be positive or negative to us, just noticing what is present for us and allowing it to be there.

### **D. Returning.**

Forest Church has a number of different ways of ending but all are aimed at enabling us to incorporate into ourselves whatever it is we have experienced and to reconnect with one another before we head back to our daily lives with the intention of living out more fully what we have experienced. Key elements of this part of the afternoon are:

- Time taken to listen to one another’s experiences of being alone in nature on this occasion
- Possibly more singing if we choose
- Sharing tea, biscuits, cake or whatever we have brought.
- Final blessing perhaps while holding hands again.