

"This book is a lovely blend of explanation, theory and practical nous"

Jonny Baker

FOREST CHURCH

A FIELD GUIDE TO NATURE CONNECTION
FOR GROUPS AND INDIVIDUALS

BRUCE STANLEY



Advance praise for Forest Church ...

Bruce Stanley's easy to read, inspiring, practical book is written with his skills as a life coach and a naturalist to the fore. He takes spirituality beyond its traditional confines of building and doctrine to a new kind of church that is earthed in experience of the outside world and the One who made it. His refreshing, inclusive and enthusiastic approach is timely and will speak to today's hunger for a church that can reach wider and touch deeper simply by starting with the ground we stand on.

**Tess Ward, Chaplain and author of
*The Celtic Wheel of the Year.***

I loved the idea of Forest Church from the very first moment I heard about it. The natural world is a place where many people sense awe and wonder and it's a neutral space. Why haven't we been doing a lot more of this?!

It's simple, low cost, creative, fun, easy to reproduce, and connects instinctively with many people's sense of spirituality. In terms of mission this is simply a wonderful way of connecting and journeying with people.

The book itself is a lovely blend of explanation, theory and practical nous. It encourages local creativity but gives plenty of ideas (a whole year's worth actually!) to get a Forest Church underway. I hope this helps kick start a whole load more Forest Churches.

Jonny Baker, Course Leader CMS Pioneer Mission Leadership Team and author of *Curating Worship.*

Bruce Stanley takes us on a highly readable journey out into nature to discover a new form of Church. Not only does the book remind us of nature's ability to speak powerfully about God, it also serves as an effective reminder of the urgent need to bring spiritual depth to the task of caring for the earth. I've been lucky enough to attend Bruce's Forest Church in Mid Wales where we found meaning in some of the simplest things we experience on a daily basis and yet seldom take time to ponder. Sharing this encounter with others was enriching and refreshing. I am privileged to support this venture.

Rt Rev Andrew John, Bishop of Bangor.

Don't read this book if you're not ready to be surprised – and quite possibly delighted. Our alienation from the natural world is well documented, and Bruce Stanley offers tried and tested ways to explore the connection, whether in urban park or remote forest – with the possibility of personal renewal and even encounters with the divine.

Olive Drane is author of *Spirituality to Go*, Fellow of St Johns College Durham, England and Affiliate Professor at Fuller Theological Seminary, California.

I sense that 'Forest Church' by Bruce Stanley will become a vital textbook for many of us who long to reconnect faith, being human and the natural world. Drawing on his own extensive experience, insights from other nature-experts and the spiritual practices of those who have never forgotten our belonging to the earth, this 'Field Guide to Nature Connection' engagingly offers a wealth of insights, ideas and resources to enable us to participate with nature. Time to get out into the forest!

Ian Adams is author of *Cave Refectory Road and Running Over Rocks*.

Forest Church

**A field guide to nature connection
for groups and individuals.**

Bruce Stanley

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For Gracie

currently an inspiring teacher of nature connection
(and her grandchildren's grandchildren).

Table of Contents

Introduction	11
1 - Why Go Outside?	17
2 - Reading The Second Book of God	32
3 - Participating with Nature	48
4 - Developing Your Wild Side	57
5 - Growing your own branch of Forest Church	79
6 - Example activities	100
Further Resources	149

Foreword

Whilst much of the western world is gripped with concerns about the banking crisis and double dip recessions, others are wondering if there are better ways to measure what is good in life than accumulating money. The threat of global warming, food shortage and environmental damage are growing concerns; whilst we wait for the next phase of the economic cycle we pay little attention to the cycle of the seasons and the cycles of life. It may well be that until we get back in touch with our world and its rhythms we will not find the secret of living well with our planet, its diverse inhabitants, each other or indeed ourselves. At the same time our post-enlightenment, secular society is seeing a decline in religious affiliation, especially Christian affiliation, but not in spiritual awareness, and interest in the mystical and supernatural are having something of a renaissance. Forest Church is about bringing these two currents together in a new and yet ancient expression of Christian tradition that inhabits the natural world and its rhythms. As such it is a creative and much needed voice that can speak to Christian and non-Christian alike.

I have known Bruce Stanley ever since we were part of a creative expression of church in Bristol together in the mid 1990s. I have enjoyed working with him on a number of projects since then as part of my work as a researcher in mission and culture. Many of these have been centred on creative ways

of engaging with the new spiritualities that are emerging in our culture outside the traditional religions. There have been many good ways over recent years of building relationships and exploring faith between Christians, spiritual seekers and those following the various paths of the new spiritualities. However, there have been few expressions of church that offer an ongoing Christian home for such expressions of faith. Forest Church is a valuable exploration of this, and this book is a great gateway into that journey, which is still unfolding.

If therefore I think this book is timely it is also informative and, I am glad to say, fun. It welcomes us into a world of the changing seasons, the provision of the world around us and the restorative power of nature that can be found in wilderness, park or city garden. It draws on a great breadth of sources to offer experience, knowledge and wisdom for life and then asks us to take time to play with it and make it our own. It invites us to listen to nature as the second book of God and open up all our senses attentively to it. It draws inventively on spiritual and mystical tradition and brings them alive. It may invite us to a tea ceremony, to a walk in the country, to take time just to sit and be, to plant a forest garden or discover the sacred landscape around us. In all of this it is rather different and that is part of both its delight and its challenge. Some of it you may find inspiring, some challenging, some you may wrestle with, and some you may decide is not for you. That is all OK; this book is about opening a creative space and offering a serious challenge, but not about saying it has all the answers. So if this book intrigues you, I think you will find it worth travelling with. There is a whole world out there for us as spiritual pilgrims to discover.

Revd Steve Hollinghurst,
researcher in mission and culture.

Introduction

The ideas explored in this book came into focus for me during a conversation with Paul Cudby (of Ancient Arden Forest Church) in April of 2012. We'd both been thinking along similar lines under the heading *Forest Church*. Since then a lot has happened, not least the formation of a growing number of Forest Church branches around the UK and beyond, of different flavours and styles.

My own focus is on nature connection as a foundation, with an underlying ethic towards living lightly – but there are other legitimate expressions of Forest Church which I explore. This book is written for someone motivated to do something similar but you can select your own level of involvement: some people want to make a career out of Forest Church; some people just want to lead an afternoon of activities during a youth camp – the book is suitable for both.

In writing the book, I've had the following people in mind:

- Facilitators and participants of Forest Church groups.
- Individuals wanting to connect with God in nature.
- Existing churches exploring a different style of service.
- Retreat centres and leaders wanting to offer something different.
- Ideas and activities for youth work.
- Friends or family groups looking to connect more with nature, during the year or away on holiday.
- People leaving existing religious practice who feel it isn't in touch with nature or environmental issues.
- People outside of church looking for a nature based group practice in the Christ tradition.
- Those from Druid, Pagan or Earth Spirituality paths that would like to see another perspective.

Before we get going, the following has found its way to the beginning of the book.

What is Forest Church?

A simple definition might be a group of people, outside, connecting with nature and worshipping God – but I don't think that quite captures the magic, so a bit more detail is needed.

Forest Church isn't just normal church happening outside; instead it attempts to participate with creation. We aim to learn, worship, meditate, pray and practice with the trees, at the spring, along the shore. Participants come with an attitude of experimentation, playfulness and readiness to connect with nature. God is present in creation and can be understood through creation; you're *in* the sermon, the readings come from the Second Book of God. The worship will happen when your heart is caught up in the beauty of the moment.

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 in wild places.

Already there are a few distinct versions of Forest Church emerging. Some people are taking a structured and liturgical approach to their events, others are simply providing a space with very little structure. Some people are facilitating groups who are strong on meditative or ritualistic practice, others have more of a field ecology focus on the flora and fauna around them. Some people are offering something distinctly Christian, some are at the fringes. Some groups meet for an hour and a half, some meet all day.

Some groups are influenced by location and have to take into consideration the dangers of their local environment and the creatures living there. The setting might be rural or urban, Forest Church isn't bound by location; it's as possible in the

city as in the middle of nowhere. *And, no, you don't need a forest.*

Having said all that, I would argue that there are, or should be, some central ideas underpinning a generic understanding and description of Forest Church.

- **Safety first** - Forest Church should be safe to go to. Think about any hazards in the environment you're going to and the safety of individuals. And consider the safety of the environment from your visiting it.
- **It happens outside, in nature** - In challenging weather, with a new group, it is hard not to move inside if there is that option but get the clothing, setting and activity right and weather doesn't matter so much.
- **Participate with nature** - The aim isn't to *go into* nature as if it is something separate from us, the idea is to let the barriers drop; to *be with* nature. This is explored more in Chapter 3.
- **Events are site-specific** - Gatherings should relate to, and be in dialogue with the specific setting they're in. If what is happening could have happened inside, it might be wonderful but it isn't really Forest Church.
- **Allow time for nature to contribute** - Nature speaks when *it* wants to. Build flexibility into events to allow this interaction to happen. This will develop as your group does – adults especially have to relearn the ability to listen but children do it naturally and in many ways are our teachers as far as nature connection goes.
- **Recognises that God is revealed in nature** - *Since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities – God's eternal power and divine nature – have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made* (from Romans 1). The idea is that we can explore the characteristics of the Creator by exploring the creation.

- **God speaks through nature** - Also recognise that God speaks through nature – we may need discernment and practice to hear and interpret meaning but nature is a source of Divine revelation (more in Chapter 2 on this).
- **Aim to be regenerative in practise** - Forest Church should try to mend some of the damage humankind has done to the natural world without making things worse. Picking up more litter than we drop is a simple example, as is offsetting any carbon spent by the event.
- **In the Christ Tradition** - Your wording might be different to mine but the intention of those operating under the Forest Church banner (via www.forestchurch.co.uk) is for Forest Church to have a Christ-centred vision at its core.

There are various expressions of Forest Church, from occasional events hosted by an existing church, to groups that operate independently. For these groups it may be relevant to explore the question ‘is it church?’ That all depends on how you define ‘church’, but there isn’t anything that a traditional church can do, such as worship, fellowship, teaching, prayer, discipleship and the sacraments, (communion and baptism for example), that can’t be done by Forest Church – although how to do all of that isn’t covered in this book.

The potential for Forest Church is exciting. They’re free to set up; they’re fairly easy to start and potentially free to run. They are open to, and attract, a diverse group of participants, some of whom wouldn’t attend a traditional church.

Participating - If you’re simply interested in participating in a local Forest Church group, you can see from the previous section that there is room for considerable difference between groups, so you’ll need to find out more about any you’re interested in joining.

If you’re a long way from any Forest Church groups, you may find others near you who would be interested in helping

start one. And there are other places to look besides – Forest Church doesn't have the monopoly on group expressions of spirituality with strong ties to nature. Five examples worth exploring are pilgrimages, Celtic Spirituality, retreats in natural settings, Christian walking and outdoor activity holidays and some Christian ecology or conservation groups.

This (northern hemisphere, temperate, maritime based) book is written with the hope that others from different parts of the world will find it useful. I apologize for any frustration a southern hemisphere reader might have over the different timings for the seasons within the year.

The book doesn't contain footnotes but there are references to source material in-line where relevant and there are links, subject by subject, to further resources at the end of the book.

I've used the word 'I' and 'we' in this book, and 'you' to address the reader directly. This doesn't mean that 'I' know better than 'you', or that I'm sure 'we' share the same ideas.

I'm not a churchman, in fact I'm positively unchurched. Neither am I a knowledgeable naturalist or experienced environmentalist (nor much of a scholar). What I am is an enthusiastic searcher for a spiritual practice that engages authentically with people in today's environmentally challenged world – a practice that aims to connect to the magic of a created natural world infused with Divine presence. Or as John Muir put it,

*I'd rather be in the mountains thinking about God,
than in church thinking about the mountains.*

Thanks to my early readers, Mid Wales and Greenbelt test subjects and to Karen Atkinson of www.wordcake.co.uk for exchanging a logo design for proofreading.

Thank *you* for reading – see you amongst the trees some time.
Bruce Stanley.

December 2012, Llangurig, Cambrian Mountains, Wales, UK.

Chapter 1

Why Go Outside?

*Earth's crammed with heaven, And every common bush
afire with God; But only he who sees, takes off his shoes.*

Elizabeth Barrett Browning

If you asked me to describe a transcendent moment, the first one that jumps to mind is always the tree of jewels that stopped me in my tracks one spring morning. If I thought about it harder I could have remembered a more iconic example from a retreat on Iona, a sunset in Cornwall or my first experience of the Alps, but the tree is always first in my mind.

I saw it during a crisply cold, very still, early spring mountain bike ride through the Forest of Dean. The undulating route we were on turned a corner and began to descend. There in front of me was a young birch holding up its smoky, purple sprays, each bud, each twig holding a perfect drop of water, each water drop holding a miniature panorama and the bright morning sun. I stopped for, I don't know how long, and I remember experiencing a completely absorbing sense of connection and appreciation for the Spirit who was both in this intimate magical moment, and timelessly behind the whole Universe.

For some years I've been asking other people about their most perfect, transcendent moments or for their descriptions of

thin places, where the division between heaven and earth is at its thinnest. The majority of people's descriptions of these are from nature (I've yet to hear many descriptions of them occurring during religious services in buildings). Usually they don't last long and they often seem to happen when the person is involved in something out of the ordinary, perhaps they're somewhere they've not been before or they're involved in an absorbing activity. What interests me most about these transcendent moments is that they are almost universal. They provide a common ground for shared experience of (what some people call) God in creation, although it is possible to have these experiences and attribute no Divine significance to them.

Nature is a doorway into the other-than-human world which is more than plants and animals. It reveals secrets about its Creator and it's somewhere God can speak to us; nature is sacred space. It would seem from the evidence in the landscape around us, that until recently, it was ever so. Towns built around sacred natural features are common: Bronze and Iron Age sites mark the landscape; sacred trees, some thousands of years old, still grow next to holy places. But worship and ritual have become synonymous with the inside spaces of temples and churches – in enclosing our spiritual practices, have we separated ourselves from one of the greatest, most vibrant sources of Divine revelation? How did that happen? The answer may be in your fridge.

The Food Story and the Sacred Land

The story of our relationship with sacred landscape, nature and place is intimately linked to the story of our food. Even to a few generations ago, that would have seemed quite obvious. The evidence was all around; even the measurement system was based on a stick used to steer oxen when ploughing. But we're living in unusual times in the Western world. For the first time in our history we're almost completely detached

from the food story; its production and journey from field to plate.

Up until a few thousand years ago, following millions of years of evolution, humans were foragers, finely evolved expert hunter gatherers. Farming started in the Middle-East about ten thousand years ago and over the next five or six thousand years the majority of the human population of the world became *food producers* rather than *food gatherers*.

The general opinion is that *food production* was more efficient and provided a surplus that freed people to do other things. This is surprisingly inaccurate. Archeological and anthropological research quoted in Colin Tudge's book, *So Shall We Reap*, showed that skilled *food gatherers*, who knew their patch well, took far less time than *food producers* to gather the calories needed; findings echoed in the book *The Earth And Its Peoples*, by Richard Bulliet of Columbia University, which goes on to explore the following related issues.

What about health and hunger? Surely the producers had it better? The fossil record actually shows a drop in the average height and age of death; the first food producers were four inches shorter and died seven years younger (figures given by Toby Hemenway, in a lecture given at Duke University in 2010). What about the area required: isn't food production a more efficient use of the land? Actually farming uses two to three times as much.

The early food producers had it tough. Their diet decreased from a diverse range of nutritious foods to a handful. Agriculture meant settling in one place, which introduced disease through polluted water and domesticated animals. Soon after any area was converted to agriculture the fertility of the soil would diminish, necessitating expansion. Farming families needed to be large to provide a workforce, and grain-based diets (porridge) meant babies could be weaned younger, allowing

the next to come along faster. Research by Theya Molleson at London's Natural History Museum showed that grain processing meant early arthritis and skeletal deformity for those at the grinding quern all day, and poor flour contaminated with sand wore down teeth. Some sources argue that agriculture necessitated the police state to protect harvests, and motivated the expansion of empires in search of new fertile soils.

The food gatherers didn't experience famine with anything like the same severity as the food producers. A good forager rarely goes hungry; there is always something to find and the feedback from the system, if you're over-harvesting, is very quick. Conversely, terrible famine is still a part of the agricultural system where feedback is slower. Hemenway, in his lecture, explained that there were seven famines in the 15th century across Europe that reduced the population by 10 to 30 percent: 13 in the 16C, 11 in the 17C, 16 in the 18C.

The question isn't whether food production is better, it is: why did we ever make the change in the first place?

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A highly readable journey that reminds us of nature's ability to speak powerfully about God, it also serves as an effective reminder of the urgent need to bring spiritual depth to the task of caring for the earth.

+Andrew John, Bangor.

Bruce Stanley's easy to read, inspiring, practical book is written with his skills as a life coach and a naturalist to the fore. **Tess Ward.**

Brimming with insights and packed with information, this book draws you out, quite literally, into nature to experience a new, well thought through pattern of spiritual practice. Bruce Stanley gives you all the resources you'll need, both practical and theoretical, to get going with a group or on your own.

Bruce Stanley ran away from the circus to become a creative project manager and wellbeing coach. These days he can be found somewhere in a forest garden in the Cambrian mountains – except, if you go down to the woods, on the third Sunday of the month.

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