

# INTRODUCTION

## *Background for using the services in this collection*

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These worship materials are a collection of outlines created for Burning Bush Forest Church in Kitchener, Ontario by Wendy Janzen. They offer a sample of what our particular way of worshipping outdoors looks like. They are not meant to be followed verbatim, but to offer an example and inspiration for you to create something unique for your place and community.

## SUGGESTED BACKGROUND READING

If you are interested in planning and leading your own forest church/wild church worship gatherings, here are two books I'd suggest for background reading:

Victoria Loorz, [\*Church of the Wild: How Nature Invites Us Into the Sacred\*](#)

Bruce Stanley, [\*Forest Church: A Field Guide to Nature Connection for Groups and Individuals\*](#)

## WORSHIPING *WITH*, NOT JUST *IN*, CREATION

One foundational thing to note about leading or planning a forest church/wild church gathering is that we are worshipping *with* creation, not just *in* creation. That means we are not simply trying to replicate what we do indoors in an outdoor setting. That style of worship is perfectly fine, but it isn't *forest church (or wild church)*<sup>1</sup>. While worshipping out in the open air, we remind ourselves that we are part of the community of creation (who are also worshipping with us in their own way), that God is present among us, and that we read both scripture and the 'book of creation.' That is, we understand that creation itself is also a revelation of God's wisdom, nature, and reconciling activity. We are invited to pay attention and enter into worship with an expectation that God is present and active in the world around us, and that creation itself has something to offer us in expanding our understanding of God.

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<sup>1</sup> I use the terms 'forest church' and 'wild church' interchangeably. I came to the use of the term forest church independently of knowing of the existence of [forest churches in the UK](#), and before I co-founded the [Wild Church Network](#) with others who were also experimenting with new forms of outdoor worship.

## RISK ASSESSMENT

We always say that we worship in all types of weather, so come prepared! However, there are limits. You need to practice good judgment in assessing the risks and safety of your gathering. This includes watching for extreme weather (like lightning storms, high winds, ice storms, cold or heat warnings, etc.). When assessing risk you want to not only consider the weather, but also the ground conditions/terrain, and overhead risks like dead tree limbs. If meeting near water it is important that parents know who is responsible for supervising their children (is it them, or is there an assigned childrens' leader?). Do you have someone trained in first aid? etc. It is a good idea to have a backup plan, and a way to communicate it if the venue or time/date needs to change on short notice. Your aim is to keep everyone's safety in mind and mitigate the risks, but not to be 'as safe as possible' - as that would likely mean not going outdoors at all!

## CHOOSING A LOCATION

Though we use the term "forest church," any outdoor, open-air space can be suitable. Nature is everywhere, not only in the forest or wilderness. We usually gather in city parks, while other options include private property (like farms or backyards), churchyards, campgrounds, retreat centers, conservation areas, hiking trails, or even parking lots.

In choosing a location I try to ask the following questions:

1. Is it easy to find/get to?
2. Is there public transportation or parking?
3. Is there water (ie, a pond, lake, river, stream)? Not necessary, but nice sometimes.
4. Can we have a campfire? Not necessary, but nice sometimes.
5. Is there access to washrooms? Not necessary, but helpful.
6. How busy is this location? What sorts of distractions are there?
7. Do you need to reserve it ahead of time?

## MAKE THE SERVICE YOUR OWN

- Add your own reflections and voice.
- Add music if you like.
- Integrate specific children's activities (stories, activities, crafts, games).
- Include other scripture, readings, or prayers.
- Incorporate special ecological features from your gathering place.

## ENGAGING CHILDREN

At Burning Bush Forest Church we take the approach that it is not our goal to entertain children. We generally do not plan a special childrens' time or childrens' activities. That is not because we don't value children and their presence! Rather, we encourage children to be inquisitive and playful, and to engage at their level in what we are doing intergenerationally. We do sometimes have a designated Children's Leader on hand to supervise the children who are present during the wandering/reflection time so parents can fully participate. This leader can follow the children's lead in a curiosity-based style of engagement. Other forest churches/wild churches provide planned programming for children.

## ABOUT THE WORSHIP ORDER

### Gathering & Grounding

This is a time to ground ourselves in the particular place where we have gathered, using our various senses, and be reminded that we are part of a community of creation. It is a transition time, a time where people cross a mental threshold from whatever they were doing before they arrived into intentional sacred space. It is an opportunity to enter into a posture of expectant worship, asking God to give us eyes to see and ears to hear. It is also a time for prayer - addressing God who is present among us. This is also a time to give words of welcome and to offer a land acknowledgement, which is one entry point for respecting the people who originally occupied this land and paying attention to both past and ongoing injustices perpetrated on them as their land was taken from them by white settlers. Be sure to make it your own.

### Readings & Reflections

This is where we shape the theme of the gathering, using scripture and other readings/quotes/poetry. A short (i.e. 1 or 2 paragraph) of contextualizing can be offered, but this isn't intended to be a full sermon. Fewer words are often better. To quote Victoria Looz in her book, [\*Church of the Wild\*](#), we "long for church to be a place where Mystery is experienced, not explained." In a way, this section is just part one of a three-part, participatory 'sermon':

- a) Part One being the words of scripture and a few framing sentences to 'seed' the wandering time.
- b) Part Two being the 'wandering & wondering' time where we enter into Mystery and ponder what is this place/element/living being telling me about God? And what might God be telling me through them?

- c) Part Three being the sharing time around the circle, as participants offer their own observations, insights, reflections, and wonderings.

### **Wandering & Wondering**

We offer a good amount of time for this element - 30 minutes in the summer, 20 minutes in the winter or if the weather is inclement. This may seem like a lot if you have never done it before, but it does take time to enter into a contemplative space and to become fully present. Participants really appreciate this time of quiet in their otherwise busy lives.

We encourage silent reflection, not chatting with a friend. People may either ‘wander’ – stroll thoughtfully but casually – or they may simply sit and observe their surroundings from one spot. This is also a time for ‘wondering’ – evoking curiosity and wonder, paying attention to how God has shown up, seeing what one notices or is drawn to, and what one is feeling or thinking. Reflections may connect to the readings and the theme, or they may not. Give people an exact time they are to return to your gathering place. You might want to have a bell or means of audibly calling them back so they don’t need to watch their phones for the time.

During this wandering time children may either go with their parents, or this could be a time when they stay together as a group with a leader to supervise and engage them.

### **Sharing**

We are usually a small enough group to share together in one circle, and we go around in order. Participants are invited to share their name, and something that arose for them during the wandering time. We try to make sure everyone feels safe sharing, and that there isn’t a high bar for only deeply theological reflections – certainly those are welcome if that’s what someone has to offer, but simple observations, questions, and feelings are also welcome. People are free to pass if they don’t want to speak. If the group is too large, this sharing can be done in pairs or small groups. In the sharing circle only one person speaks and others listen respectfully.

### **Sending**

A simple blessing sends us off.

If we are including communion (see the communion document for an example of our liturgy) or other ritual, it would generally happen after the sharing and before the sending, but can be inserted wherever you feel it makes most sense.