

Singing the Climate Crisis— In Outdoor Spaces

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The Importance of Where We Sing

Christian musical traditions are closely connected with the different spaces in which they take place. Over the course of the centuries, we have developed choral repertoire that operates symbiotically with the reverberant acoustics of stone buildings, band-led worship reliant on infrastructures of amplification, and a close relationship with keyboard instruments requiring careful control of temperature and humidity. These relationships are not purely pragmatic ones, but shape our experiences of our bodies, our relationships with one another, the impact of musical sound, and our experiences of transcendence. But what do these spaces mean for our relationships with the rest of the natural world? If the climate crisis springs, in part, from our alienated and exploitative relationships with the broader ecology surrounding us, then one possible response might be to draw our traditional reliance on buildings and indoor spaces into question. Might the indoor nature of much of our worship sometimes disconnect us from other creatures and beings? Does it make sense to sing about plants and animals whilst inhabiting a space where few of them are present? What if we sought not to add more nature into our existing patterns, but to take a ritual connection with nature as the starting point for our worship?

Practices of outdoor worship are far from something new, and many of us will have participated in outdoor processions, attended summer festivals on fields and campsites, or celebrated worship outside for special occasions and festivals. However, over recent years, the rise of movements such as Forest Church and Wild Church have sought to take the potential of outdoor spaces a little further. These movements represent a growing impulse to look for God in nature, moving acts of worship into outdoor spaces, and exploring both what it means to be attentive to those spaces and what it means for those spaces to shape the nature of worship. These

changing patterns of awareness and devotion have implications for sonic and musical practices, asking us to think about the relationship between sound and space, human and non-human, spiritual and material.

Reworking Sonic Practices

Whilst far from uniform in nature, Forest Church gatherings often involve a mixture of conversation, prayers, and reflections on the natural world alongside time to meditate on what God might be saying through the world around us and practical activities that prompt engagement with the space.¹ In amongst these different activities, different groups take a range of approaches to questions of music and sound. Some avoid music altogether, some bring instruments and speakers with them outdoors, some engage in drumming, and many are conflicted between different possibilities and options. In almost all communities, however, a sonic sensitivity to the natural world is a crucial part of what it means to move into an outdoor environment. Often this can mean that singing, as we are used to doing it in buildings, doesn't quite feel like the right thing to do, and musical practices are reshaped according to a different set of priorities. On a very human level, it can be embarrassing to sing in situations where it might be overheard by passers-by, but on a deeper ecological level, singing can sometimes be felt to represent a sonic imposition of humanity on the world around us. A move into outdoor environments asks us to recognise that sound is not merely a human phenomenon, but that other parts of creation make sound or sit in silence and that they are affected by the sounds that we make.

In the face of this awareness, attentiveness and listening can represent a different sonic and spiritual posture to the other beings around us. This can involve times of silence and contemplation, but it can also involve a

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1. An article from 2013 in the *Church Times* offers some descriptions of typical Forest Church practices. Christine Miles, "If You Kneel Down in the Woods Today," *Church Times*, October 4, 2013, <https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2013/4-october/features/features/if-you-kneel-down-in-the-woods-today>

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deliberate construction of songs to include attention to other beings and spaces, paying attention both to their presence and to the different sounds that they produce. For Forest Church groups, this is often built on the conviction that God's presence can be experienced through different parts of creation and that, through attention to the other beings around us, we may also have the chance to experience something of God's presence in and through them. For many communities, attunement to these wider relationships is a matter of time as much as a matter of space. This means that it is often important for ritual and sonic practices to tie into the changing seasons and the rhythm of the year. Songs can incorporate an awareness of natural processes and turning points, drawing the attention of those singing them to the place where they find themselves. Alongside postures of attentiveness, the question of level and balance can also be an important one, reflecting on the way that human voices balance both with each other and with the sounds of other beings in the moment of song.

Song of the Wheel

Whilst Forest Church groups have produced few musical resources, *Song of the Wheel* by Alison Eve seeks to offer different chants for the Forest Church year.² The title of the songbook/album draws inspiration from the wheel of the year, a modern pagan calendar which marks a yearly cycle of eight different seasonal festivals including each of the solstices and equinoxes. The songs that make up the album seek to rework different pagan references in a Christian context, providing music that is both sensitive to the changing rhythms of the year and which is designed to accompany different ritual actions that form a regular part of Eve's own Forest Church community.

The first song on the album, "Weaving song," is written to accompany the start of a Forest Church ritual. Whilst an act of worship in a church building begins with an established sense of sacred space, Forest Church rituals begin in a much more open environment. This can entail both a feeling that the group should ask permission from other beings to be able to use the space in worship, and the need to establish a space for the gathering, albeit a permeable space that is open to the world around it. The song thus begins with the idea that those singing it are weaving a sacred circle, connecting on a very physical level to the place where they are gathering

and the ritual actions that they are seeking to perform within it.

The song then integrates Christian imagery into this ritual process through an invocation drawing on the text of "St Patrick's Breastplate." Rather than offering a purely spiritualised sense of God's protecting presence, however, in the context of the song, the prayer offers a sense of the presence of Christ in the natural world around the participants: "Christ with us above and beneath us, Christ all around us, Christ within." Later lyrics go further in integrating this sense of divine presence with the different elements of the created world: "Father of the sky and Son of the Earth and Spirit of the waters be with us." These words affirm a close connection or parallel between persons of the Trinity and the physical world—they seek to bridge any distance between divine and natural imagery and affirm instead that God is intimately bound up with the different elements around the singers. Through this song we see an attempt to build a bridge between Christian tradition, the outdoor space of a Forest Church ritual, and some of the different forces and elements that are present in that space. In focussing on the weaving of the circle, the song is highly specific to the ritual patterns of the Forest Church group for which it was composed; however, such close attention to a particular place and time is an inherent part of Forest Church communities, and this sense of specificity can be more important than the ability to transfer something to a wider audience without the need for some kind of adaptation.

Challenges and Risks

The sonic and musical practices of Forest Church communities have the potential to challenge us in a number of different ways. They ask us to reflect on the insulated nature of our indoor worship practices, showing us that radical breaks are possible and sometimes necessary. They suggest the possibility of rebalancing our sonic relationships with different creatures and spaces around us, and they challenge us that we may sometimes learn something by looking beyond our existing traditions. We don't begin with the question of how to twist and tweak our regular worship to engage more closely with the natural world around us. Instead, we start with a space of awareness and encounter and then ask what form of worship might be appropriate within it.

2. Alison Eve, *Song of the Wheel* (Solihull: Ritualitas, 2015), <https://www.ritualitas.com/product/song-of-the-wheel>

As with all musical practices, these outdoor worship practices come with their own set of risks and possible pitfalls. Feeling a close connection with the natural world through regular rituals can be a first step in a wider rebalancing of our relationship with the ecologies around us, but we can sometimes romanticise and idealise the nature of these relationships. In a similar way to other forms of Christian practice, there is also the potential for ritual and worship to act as a form of escapism which allows us to commune with God through nature on a Sunday whilst continuing with an environmentally destructive pattern of life on a Monday. A retreat from more-human structures and patterns can offer space to rethink their operation and our own priorities, but it can also be a step back from engaging with and reforming those structures in a time where such reform is desperately needed. Outdoor worship is not an easy or an automatic fix to all of the challenges and problems that

we are facing. Nevertheless, the practices of attentiveness and relationship which these practices offer and the challenge they present to more thoroughly rethink our ritual and sonic relationships help to push beyond our established comfort zones. They ask us not just to sing about the other creatures and beings that surround us, but to genuinely make a space for them in our worship.



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