

REFLECTION

Wandering in the Wilderness: Worship with Creation

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Even before the word COVID-19 was on our lips, the Church was entering the wilderness. As a pastor in a vibrant, mid-sized congregation, there were already signs of change. Young adults were not sticking around and were not returning when they got married or had kids. The list of people we did not see regularly at worship was growing. It was getting harder to fill volunteer roles. Giving patterns were changing. At one point, I sat down with a pen and paper and started writing a list of names of people who had been at the church when I started as pastor in 2002 but were no longer present in any regular or meaningful way a decade or so later. Some had moved away; others had drifted away (and others had drifted in). The list topped 100 names. I know this situation wasn't unique.

When I took a sabbatical from that same church in 2014, I went on a short trip to New Mexico. I started with a four-day silent retreat at a remote Benedictine monastery in the high desert, followed by a three-day retreat at a nearby Presbyterian retreat center. A month before the trip, the retreat center informed me that they had to cancel the retreat due to low attendance. Since I had already made travel plans, we arranged that I would still go to the retreat center, and they would provide a few individual sessions for me.

I arrived at the retreat center grounded from my days at the monastery, open and ready for whatever they had in store for me. The first morning, the program coordinator directed me to meet with their yoga instructor. When I found her, she said we were going to walk to a part of the grounds where they have a memorial monument, and she would lead me in a grief ritual. This took me by surprise, but I went with it. (Perhaps providentially, my last service at the monastery was a special Mass for the Dead.)

Before we started to walk, she asked me to think about someone I had lost on whom I could focus for the grief work. Seemingly, out of nowhere, the thought came to me to grieve the death of the Church. Not the death

of my particular congregation, but the death of the capital “C” Church, or Christendom.

We walked to a stunning orange cliff face with the bright sun shining on it and boulders to sit on. There, under the brilliant November sky, she walked me through seven stages of grief: Shock. Denial. Anger. Bargaining. Depression. Acceptance. Hope. I reflected on my feelings around the death of the prominence of the Church, and I realized that I had experienced most of those first six stages over my years in ministry. Now, with this invitation, I was able to move into gratitude for much of what the Church has been in my life and in society. I felt able to more fully accept this new post-Christendom reality and face the uncertain future with hope. I could say with confidence that I was grateful for what has been, and I look forward to what lies ahead, with all its unknowns. Our faith, after all, teaches that death is not final. New life follows death. Death opens space for resurrection, new life, and new possibilities.

Perhaps the Church is dying. Perhaps it is simply heading into the wilderness. Perhaps those are two sides of the same coin. Both can serve similar purposes—deep reflection and transformation. Todd Wynward, in his book *Rewilding the Way*, observes that wilderness in the Bible is always a place away from the control and powers of empire.¹ I wonder if, after centuries of Christendom’s marriage of church and state (including colonialism, capitalism, racism, and patriarchy), we are heading into an era of wilderness wandering as we reimagine who we are independent from the encumbrances of empire. Perhaps what feels like death is an opportunity to let go of layers of dominant culture’s control of the Church and venture into new, unfamiliar territory.

Wilderness is not a place of punishment or banishment. It might feel that way at times. It is disorienting, and it leaves us feeling out of control. It is when we realize we are not in control that we can see that God is in control, accompanying us in the wilderness. Wilderness is a place of renewal and reformation, of re-learning how to rely on God’s provision and wisdom.

In hindsight, I believe that the grief exercise I did in the high desert created space for me to imagine a new expression of church. I certainly had not

¹ Todd Wynward, *Rewilding the Way: Break Free to Follow an Untamed God* (Harrisonburg, VA: Herald Press, 2015), 35.

been looking for an alternative. I was happy in the church I was serving, and I felt both engaged and appropriately challenged in my role as pastor. However, something new was opening up in me.

Earlier in my sabbatical, before the trip to New Mexico, a neighbor confided to me that she was done with church. She had attended a local Mennonite congregation her whole life, but now found it difficult to sit in the building listening to people talk. My first reaction was to defend the church: surely, church was more than that! She should give it another chance, and work to find ways to engage within the structure. As she went on to explain that she felt closer to God outside in nature and would rather go for a hike on a Sunday with her family, I started listening more carefully to what she was saying. I, too, could relate to feeling God's presence in nature, and I had heard that from many others. She continued, saying it would be nice to go on a hike with more than just her family, and to include 'something more,' like a spiritual element or ritual. She was not done with church completely; she was expressing a longing for something different from the way it has been.

This conversation felt very alive to me, like there was something happening beneath the surface to which I needed to attend. About a week later, I had an epiphany. My son was attending a forest school one day a week, and when I went to pick him up, a lightbulb went on in my head: If there could be such a thing as forest school, could there be such a thing as forest church, and could this be connected to the conversation I was having with my neighbor? The question fascinated and excited me. I rolled it around in my head, wondering at the possibility.

A few days later, I Googled the term "forest church" to see if someone had already experimented with the idea. Indeed, there was a website² based out of the UK that described fifteen or so forest churches operating there. One of the members of this group had even published a book!³ I ordered it, and my mind whirled as I read it. Groups were going outdoors on a regular basis to worship both *in* and *with* nature. This was not just transplanting regular indoor liturgy to an outdoor setting. This was engaging with God's good creation in new ways, listening with new ears, and seeing creation as

2 See www.mysticchrist.co.uk.

3 Bruce Stanley, *Forest Church: A Field Guide to Nature Connection for Groups and Individuals* (UK: Mystic Christ Press, 2013).

co-congregants and co-leaders.

I held all of this in my mind and heart as I traveled to New Mexico and found myself grieving the death of the Church. Perhaps my instinct to honour and grieve something in the Church that was no longer alive was creating space for something new to take root.

In nature, we observe that death is never final. Think of a tree that dies. When exactly is the moment of death? Its path toward death might start with a lightning strike, an insect infestation, multiple years of drought, or simply living out its projected lifespan. The process is often slow, and even as it is dying, its roots can pass on nutrients to other younger trees, helping them to grow and thrive.⁴ Even once a tree has fully died, a ‘dead’ tree, either in the form of standing deadwood or a fallen log, actually supports more life than it did when it was alive. Finally, as it decomposes, it returns nutrients to the earth, creating fertile soil for new life. I wondered, *what if all death could be like that: a releasing of energy for future new life and growth in the larger community?*

As my sabbatical was wrapping up at the end of December, I knew that once I returned to work on January 1, life would quickly get busy. And so, on Saturday, December 27, I called my neighbor and asked if her family would like to join my family in a local park for a forest church service the next day. She said yes, and asked if she could invite a few others. On Sunday, December 28, 2014, fifteen of us met outdoors for a simple time of worship. We listened to scripture together, walked quietly through a forested area of the park and then shared our reflections from our walk, and closed with prayer. After the service, children played as we lingered. It was lovely.

Life indeed did get busy when I returned to my work as a pastor. However, thoughts about forest church kept filling my head, even as I tried to push them to the back burner. I found myself talking about it with an evangelical passion with anyone who would listen. I had many questions—how could this work in Canada, with our cold winters? How would it be promoted? Who would come? Was God calling me to do this? Did I have the gifts? I am

4 Much fascinating research has been done in recent years around trees and how they support each other, some of it popularized in books like Peter Wohlleben’s *The Hidden Life of Trees* (Vancouver: David Suzuki Institute, 2016) and Suzanne Simard’s *Finding the Mother Tree* (Toronto: Penguin Canada, 2021).

generally a cautious introvert. I never imagined myself as a church planter, innovator, evangelist, or prophet, and yet here I was feeling compelled to step outside the box and do something radically different.

I let all of this percolate as I researched online, read books, talked to people, and imagined what this might look like. After a year, I felt compelled to take action. I had a list of interested people I could invite to what would become the first worship gathering of Burning Bush Forest Church on March 6, 2016. It started as an experiment with few expectations and no strategic plan or budget. We simply planted the seed and tended it, watching to see what the Holy Spirit would grow. We just celebrated our eighth anniversary this year.

While I was on this journey, others were hearing similar calls. Unbeknownst to each other, a handful of pastors and lay leaders across North America were all feeling the Spirit's nudge to move worship beyond the walls of the building to connect with Creator and creation in new and meaningful ways. Through the miracle of the Internet, conferences, newsletters, and word-of-mouth, we discovered one another and were overjoyed to learn that we were not alone as pioneers. We began to meet monthly on Zoom to support one another, discuss theology, share resources and ideas, find language for what was evolving, and address common challenges. This was the birth of the Wild Church Network,⁵ which, in its first seven years, grew from 6 to over 180 groups with connections to a variety of different denominations and faiths.

The polygenesis origins of the Wild Church Network remind me of the beginnings of Anabaptism and the Radical Reformation, as Anabaptism has a polygenesis origin story as well. In the early 16th Century, there were various social, political, and intellectual factors at play in different regions of Europe that "shaped the beginnings of different regional baptizing movements."⁶ They were a challenge to the establishment of the Catholic Church and contributed a richer church tapestry reflecting a greater diversity among the people of God. I wonder if movements like the Wild Church Network are contributing similar challenge and richness to the Church of today.

⁵ See www.wildchurchnetwork.com.

⁶ C. Arnold Snyder, *Anabaptist History and Theology: Revised Student Edition* (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 1997), 449.

I am not presuming that the emergence of wild church⁷ is driving a church reformation, but it is certainly part of a shakeup we are seeing in the Church landscape. Phyllis Tickle has identified a pattern of upheaval in the Church every 500 years or so, starting with Jesus and moving through to the Reformation, approximately 500 years ago.⁸ Though the Church is always growing, changing, and evolving, it seems like we are due for a seismic shift in the landscape of the Church.

For centuries now, Western theology has happened inside square rooms in square buildings with square windows (studies, lecture halls, libraries, offices, and sanctuaries), written in square books and now on square screens. Author Brian McLaren asks what this has done to our imagination about who God is and God's activity in the world.⁹ Similarly, Christian worship in the northern hemisphere happens almost exclusively indoors in climate-controlled spaces, sometimes without any windows to the outdoors at all. Has this indoor theology and worship limited our ability to think outside the box about God and church?

Lutheran scholar Lisa Dahill teaches and writes about Christian spirituality and liturgy. In a 2023 Yale Divinity School lecture titled "Rewilding Christian Worship,"¹⁰ Dahill speaks about the impact of centuries of indoor worship on the Church. She suggests that church walls are a symbol of a problem of disconnection with the sacredness of the natural world, a delineation between what is sacred and what is not, implying that the indoor sanctuary is sacred space, while the world outside the church doors is not.

The average North American spends the vast majority of their life indoors. We need outdoor experiences of God who meets us endlessly beyond ourselves and beyond our constructed security. We need outdoor experiences that testify to the uncontrollable power of God, that remind us that God

7 I use the term "wild church" to encapsulate this new movement that includes groups that call themselves by a variety of names including forest church, farm church, dirt church, garden church, mossy church, muddy church, cathedral of the trees, church of the wild, church of the woods, holy hikes, etc.

8 Phyllis Tickle, *The Great Emergence: How Christianity is Changing and Why* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2012).

9 Brian D. McLaren, *God Unbound: Theology in the Wild* (London, UK: Canterbury Press Norwich, 2019), xv.

10 View this lecture at <https://youtu.be/-3E-0wXYl8c>.

is God and we are not. Moving liturgy outdoors, into the streets, the rivers, the forests, Dahill argues, makes it possible to encounter God and more-than-human beings on their own terms. Taking worship outdoors brings us into connection with the community of creation, where we experience what biblical writers describe—trees clapping their hands, heavens declaring the glory of God, stones crying out, and the Spirit descending from heaven in the form of a dove.¹¹

Wild churches are responding to a deep longing among some in Western culture to bring worship back into relationship with God's beloved community of creation through worship in the open air and in connection with our watershed. There is variety among wild churches, but they all emphasize gathering outdoors, both *in* and *with* creation. It is different from simply transferring what is done indoors out into a natural setting. Nature is not only the place where worship happens, but also a co-leader and a co-congregant.

What does it mean to worship *with* creation?¹² Mennonite writer and wild church leader Sarah R. Werner, in her book *Rooted Faith*, writes, "the Bible is clear that it is not only humans who have the ability to connect with God, but each organism in the universe communicates this message."¹³ For example, Psalm 98 proclaims an awake and alive earth, where all are encouraged to praise God. In Job 12:7-10 it is the animals, birds, plants, and fish who have something to say to us about God's activity in the world. This understanding, that all creation contains the wisdom of God in some way, invites us into relationship with the more-than-human world in a new way. We see the creatures around us in our outdoor worship setting—the trees, birds, waterways, insects, etc.—as co-congregants, praising God each in their own

11 See, for example, Isaiah 55:12; Psalm 19:1; Luke 19:40; and Matthew 3:16.

12 To explore more about our understanding of engaging with creation in worship, see Maxwell Kennel, "The Gospel of All Creatures: An Anabaptist Natural Theology for Mennonite Political Theology," *Journal of Mennonite Studies*, Volume 37 (2019); to learn about early Anabaptist worship in forests, see Isaac Villegas, "Wounded Life" *The Conrad Grebel Review* 39, no. 1 (Winter 2021).

13 Sarah R. Werner, *Rooted Faith: Practices for Living Well on a Fragile Planet* (Harrisonburg, VA: Herald Press, 2023), 34. Werner goes on to say, "God's presence is suffused in everything around us—rocks, sky, moss, and cardinals. To understand the mindset of those who crafted the Bible and the mindset of Jesus, we must also bind ourselves more deeply to the natural world," 89.

way, and in doing so, helping to lead us in worship. In wild worship, we acknowledge we are worshiping among this community of creation,¹⁴ naming them and getting to know them. Worshiping with creation is about recognizing “that God’s glory is amplified the more each creature lives fully into the divine love at work within it.”¹⁵ In doing so, we understand ourselves to be part of a larger community that includes all of God’s creatures. We pay attention to what they have to show us about God’s word and activity in the world.

For Burning Bush Forest Church, we have a flow of worship that begins with ‘Gathering and Grounding’ ourselves in the particular place where we are worshiping. We use all of our senses to become aware of where we are and who we are with, and we open ourselves to God’s presence moving and speaking among us there. We then listen to scripture and other readings together, noting what comes alive in them when read outdoors. We take time for silence—a personal ‘Wandering and Wondering’ time, usually thirty minutes in length. During that time, we pay attention to how God speaks in different ways, through scripture and through creation, and we open ourselves to insights we are invited to take with us. From there, we return to a time of sharing with one another about what we noticed and heard. (These three movements make up an interactive, multi-voiced, three-part ‘sermon’: 1) scripture and readings, 2) silent reflection and listening, and 3) sharing with each other.) We sometimes share communion together at this point, offering the first piece of bread and the last drops of juice to the earth as recognition of God’s love for all God created, and our fellowship with all God’s creatures. We close with a blessing.

14 The term “community of creation” is one I was first introduced to in the writings of Richard Bauckham, particularly in *Bible and Ecology: Rediscovering the Community of Creation* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2010). Bauckham draws on the works of scholars like Aldo Leopold and Wendell Berry, and uses this term to describe ecosystems in which humans and the rest of nature are inextricably interconnected. “What we have in common with the lilies of the field is not just that we are creatures of God, but that we are fellow members of the community of God’s creation, sharing the same Earth, affected by the same processes of the Earth, affecting the processes that affect each other, with common interests at least in life and flourishing, with the common end of glorifying the Creator and interdependent in the ways we do exactly that.” I have since also heard the term used by Indigenous author and leader Randy Woodley (see <https://cac.org/daily-meditations/community-of-creation/>).

15 Norman Wirzba, *From Nature to Creation: A Christian Vision for Understanding and Loving Our World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2015), 78.

Victoria Loorz, a co-founder of the Wild Church Network, said, “I longed for church to be a place where Mystery is experienced, not explained.”¹⁶ Embodied and experiential worship, immersed in the community of creation particular to our watershed is what we are aiming for at Burning Bush. The Wild Church Network describes worship this way: “gatherings offer opportunities for contemplation, grief and praise, movement and song, solo wandering and wondering, advocacy, ecological restoration and activism on behalf of and in collaboration with the beloved others in our watersheds.”¹⁷

It seems that more and more people are looking for an expression of church that does all this. In this time of multiple interconnected environmental crises, I believe many established churches are recognizing that this is the existential issue of our time. Setting aside one Sunday a year to talk about creation care, or having an outdoor service that looks exactly like an indoor one, is not enough. Churches need to address the deep climate anxiety people are carrying and offer a place of grounding, grace, hope, inspiration, and action from a faith perspective.

I am noticing Mennonite congregations and organizations working at this in various ways. Mennonite Church Eastern Canada adopted a new Identity Statement in 2022 that states their purpose is to “...come together as a regional church to: Energize congregations in worship, discipleship and mission; Encourage leaders of hope, vision and transformation; Embody God’s reconciling ministry *for all creation*”¹⁸ (emphasis added). That same year, Mennonite Church Canada published a document called “The Eco-Mission of the Church in a Critical Time.”¹⁹ Both levels of church have recently added staff time to support and encourage congregations in engaging the climate crisis in deep and ongoing ways.²⁰ A new Mennonite organization, the Anabaptist Climate Collaborative, offers programs for congregations and pastors

16 Victoria Loorz, *Church of the Wild: How Nature Invites Us into the Sacred* (Minneapolis, MN: Broadleaf Books, 2021), 4.

17 Wild Church Network, accessed February 17, 2024, www.wildchurchnetwork.com/.

18 Mennonite Church Eastern Canada, “Identity,” accessed April 23, 2024, mcec.ca/res/pub/Documents/Identity/ENGLISH.pdf.

19 Mennonite Church Canada, “Climate Action,” accessed April 23, 2024, www.mennonitechurch.ca/climate-action.

20 Mennonite Church Eastern Canada hired me as Eco-Minister in January of 2022. Mennonite Church Canada hired a Climate Action Coordinator in November 2022.

to learn how to respond to the climate crisis in their congregational setting from a pastoral perspective.²¹

In this post-pandemic place of wilderness and uncertainty, shifts are happening in the Church. New expressions of church like wild church are emerging and transforming the ecclesiological landscape. Established churches are paying more attention to the environmental contexts of our time, including our relationship and God's relationship with all of creation. Wilderness is tough to navigate and presents challenges beyond what we believe we can overcome. It is also a crucible for true transformation, as it requires much from us.

What do I hope our time in the wilderness achieves? I hope for a shift from theology and ecclesiology that is anthropocentric to eco-centric: a Church that brings us into communion with God's beloved community of creation. I dream of a Church whose health is reflected in the health of the river where baptisms are performed. A Church where young people learn to be disciples of Christ and of their watershed.²² A Church where God's Incarnation, expressed in a particular way through Jesus, is also understood as extending to all of creation.²³

It is exciting, and daunting, to be living and ministering at such a time as this. Pastoring Burning Bush Forest Church gives me hope that wilderness leads us to renewal and rebirth. I live in anticipation of what our God of resurrection hope has in store for the Church as participants in God's reconciling ministry for all creation.

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21 Anabaptist Climate Collaborative, www.anabaptistclimate.org

22 Ched Myers, "A Critical, Contextual, and Constructive Approach to Ecological Theology and Practice," in *Watershed Discipleship: Reinhabiting Bioregional Faith and Practice*, ed. Ched Myers (Eugene, OR: Cascade Press, 2016), 2, 16ff.

23 Christine Valters Paintner, *Earth Our Original Monastery: Cultivating Wonder and Gratitude through Intimacy with Nature* (Notre Dame, IN: Sorin Books, 2020), xii. "God did not become flesh for one time only; Jesus teaches us that the Divine Presence in all created things has been at work from the beginning of time and will continue to the end of time."