Finding God in the Forest: an exploration into connecting with nature as a Christian spiritual practice

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Abstract:

In the United Kingdom, and in common with much of the Western world, people have become increasingly detached from the natural world. Where once most people had a hands-on and reliant relationship with nature, they have lost familiarity with it and in just a few generations have become increasingly alienated from it. The consequences of this severance are hard to overstate but, on a purely anthropocentric level, the evidence suggests that increased isolation from nature has had a direct and devastating impact on the well-being of people.

In this thesis, I examine the cultural phenomenon of the attempt to correct this malaise and ask the question of what the church is doing to join in with this effort.

I do this through a dialectical approach. Firstly, I examine the shape of this cultural movement, through an interrogation of what has been called New Nature Writing, to understand some of the theoretical ways that the literature is enticing people back into nature connection and then consider the rise in popularity of organised, nature-connecting activities. Secondly, in a bid to construct a work of practical theology, and reflecting upon what this cultural moment reveals, I question what impact this has had on the practices of the Church. I do this through a substantial study of the most cohesive and obvious ecclesiastical response so far, namely the Forest Church movement. Through an empirical approach, involving interviews, questionnaires, and observations I engaged with the progenitors, practitioners and participants of Forest Church, I try to construct a thorough representation of what the movement is in practice before moving on to analyse and critique it.

Finally, I suggest some theological and biblical resources that might affirm and encourage the Church to engage more boldly in nature-connecting initiatives. To see this fecund, cultural space as a natural and needed place of mission, through creative and confident activities that happen outside of the church building, connecting people to God the creator.

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Table of Contents

Declaration

None of the material contained in this thesis has been previously submitted for a degree in this or any other institution. The thesis is my own work.

Statement of Copyright

Acknowledgements

This thesis has, without a doubt, been the most significant and challenging task that I have ever undertaken. It has raised levels of self-doubt that I hadn't known previously and heightened the voice of both my inner critic and the imposter syndrome to overwhelming volumes. There have been many moments when I was convinced that I would never get to this point, and the temptation to give in was profound. The fact that I didn't, was almost entirely down to the crowd of people who continued to believe in me, well beyond the points when I ceased to believe in myself.

So, I have many, many people to thank for helping me to get here and I whilst can't name them all there are a few I simply cannot overlook. Firstly, I want to thank the whole team who have overseen and delivered the DThM programme at Durham University, it will forever be one of the greatest privileges of my life to have studied in that beautiful and inspiring place. I particularly want to thank my main supervisor Pete Ward, one of the most brilliant, eccentric, and talented people that I have ever met. Thank you, Pete, for sticking with me and dragging me along.

I also need to thank the whole One Church Brighton community. I started the DThM in an effort to be a better minister to a church that I was so privileged to lead, and I naively thought that I could fit the study into my spare time, without impacting the day job. I can only apologise that this was not always the case! But I am so fortunate to serve such a generous and compassionate community of people and get to work alongside inspirational people who have willed me on each step of the way.

I also want to thank my friends and family, the people who have felt the relational cost of this study the most keenly. I'm sorry that the stress and the lack of being present on occasion meant that you had to suffer me at my worst, but I could not have done it without you and I'm so grateful.

Finally, Jake and Reya, you give me so much joy, you are wonderful human beings and whilst I regret not getting you out into nature more when you were little, I'm praying that it's not too late for you to discover for yourselves all the beauty, peace and wonder that there is out there. And finally, Becky, how could I ever thank you enough for the patience, kindness and consistent encouragement that you have given me, not just throughout this venture but in everything I do. I cannot find the words, so instead, I simply dedicate this thesis to you.

1: Introduction

> "I am sitting here in a little shanty made of sugar pine shingles this Sabbath evening. I have not been at church a single time since leaving home. Yet this glorious valley might well be called a church, for every lover of the great Creator who comes within the broad overwhelming influences of the place fails not to worship as he never did before. The glory of the Lord is upon all his works; it is written plainly upon all the fields of every clime, and upon every sky, but here in this place of surpassing glory the Lord has written in capitals. I hope that one day you will see and read with your own eyes."[1]

It is May 2011 and I'm a few miles to the East of Winchester. These are my first tentative steps along the South Downs Way, a long-distance pathway that, if I can make it, will see me walking along iconic chalk cliff tops and down into Eastbourne in five days' time. I've got a hundred miles ahead of me but I'm already out of my comfort zone. I'm not a walker, never attempting anything like this in my life, and everything I'm wearing and carrying is either borrowed from friends or is fresh out of the box. I make the steep climb up and away from the city, away from the noise and the bustle of Winchester Cathedral where I'd instinctively spent some time earlier in the morning. As I pause for a moment to catch my breath, I look around and can't see another person, in fact, I can't see any houses, or roads, nor any sign that anyone has ever inhabited anywhere within my view. All I can see is the green bowls of the undulating valleys and hills, dotted with untended copses of trees in the stock fields below. And sky, vast open sky that touches every inch of the horizon in every uninterrupted direction I look. I intended this sojourn to be something of a pilgrimage, but with no intention or real idea of what that meant, I begin to feel decidedly out of place.

[1] John Muir, personal letter to his brother, March 20, 1870, quoted in Mark I. Wallace, *When God Was a Bird: Christianity, Animism, and the Re-Enchantment of the World*, First edition, Groundworks: Ecological Issues in Philosophy and Theology (New York: Fordham University Press, 2019).

I'd recently started a new job, leading a church in Brighton, a city that I will walk across the top of in the second half of the walk. Despite a desire to take things a little easier, after leaving a bustling and energy-sapping church in central London, life was already hectic and over-busy, with new projects starting and new opportunities opening for what had been a dying little Baptist church. My adult Christian faith was formed in an ecclesiology of church as an agent of change, of social justice imperatives and earnest activity being the quantifying measurement of true spirituality, all with an associated and unrelenting work ethic. And yet, here I was, in an environment that was alien to me, doing 'nothing' but walking along on my own, in a self-indulgent ramble to achieve, what exactly? In response to this thought, I'm suddenly and deeply overwhelmed by a sense of failure, of total isolation and a feeling of being utterly alone. I'm always with people, it's the currency of my job, and as my loneliness envelops, I look up to the vastness of the sky above. It's hard to express or confess what happened next, without sounding imbecilic but in an unbidden and unanticipated response, I look across the landscape and the path that lies before me and I hear the voice of God. I somehow know this is his voice, although it's unfamiliar. Unfamiliar because, despite more church worship services, conferences, and events than anyone should have to attend, it had been many years since I last heard this sound. The 'voice' spoke, into a dormant part of my soul and simply said, 'I am with you, I have always been with you and I will walk with you every step of this way'.

The next few days were some of the most fulfilling and enlightening times of my whole life. Being outside, seeing the variety and beauty of the natural world around me with fresh eyes, I felt more alive than I'd felt in a long time, not travelling alone as I had imagined and dreaded,

but walking aware of a presence I had almost ceased to believe in. This numinous moment of small revelation, a theophany of unbidden grace, not only transformed my relationship with God but is the foundational experience and need for further enquiry, that began the process of my doctoral studies and the production of this thesis.

As a life-long city dweller and a member of a generation that has become increasingly hermetically sealed off from the natural world, my Christian faith as shaped by my church attendance, had given me no tools at all to describe, justify or understand what this experience had given me. If anything, I was taught to be suspicious of this sort of thing, a weird piece of, 'woo-woo spirituality' at best and at worst, a sub-Christian, paganistic act. But this isn't just about a need for my own 'reflexive knowing'[2], it is driven by a wider phenomenology of the cultural moment in which we find ourselves.

What I discovered, as I shared this story with friends and family, Christian and non-Christian, was not a response of disbelief but of consistently hearing others sharing their own similar experiences. Where I might have thought that my experience was something quite unique, I have heard a litany of transcendent moments of being outdoors and being overwhelmed by some spiritual sense of otherness. The fact that these descriptive reflections have been indiscriminately uttered by religious and non, even anti-religious people, is what I find remarkable. There is a coalescence of this kind of spiritual experience that seems to connect with people of faith and no faith, and yet neither of these groups quite have an epistemology to describe what it is that they've experienced. In my own experience, I didn't doubt that it

[2] John Swinton and Harriet Mowatt, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research* (London: SCM, 2006), 34.

was meaningful and 'real', but I simply didn't have the theological language to situate it. In terms of ecclesiology, the church of my childhood, conservative and evangelical as it was, made it overwhelmingly clear that spiritual encounter happened exclusively within the church whereas my adult faith, liberal and progressive, had taught me that God's agency was in 'the world', amongst the poor and marginalised. So, what about this 'other' space? A shared space of Creation, existing outside of the control and constrictions of the church building, a non-anthropocentric common ground that is clearly taught within church as being created by and for Christ, but barely occupied by the church in any meaningful way.

As a work of practical theology, this task should not be viewed as an empirical study of religion for its own sake therefore but as Miller McLemore describe it, the intention is to, 'value its wider normative aims to enrich the life of faith for the sake of the world.'[3] I therefore want to answer some theological questions and explore the ecclesiological and missiological opportunities that flow out of these questions. Karl Rahner classically describes the task of practical theology in as much as that it, 'demands a theological analysis of the particular present situation in which the Church is to carry out the special self-realisation appropriate to it at any given moment'[4]. Therefore, I want to consider what the 'appropriate' or faithful Christian practice of connecting with God through and in nature can or should be. How is being in nature, observing it or participating within it in some way, a practice that can be generated and held in a distinctively Christian way? And, if there is a clear theological framework, what difference could this make to the Church? What impact could outdoor,

[3] Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, *Christian Theology in Practice: Discovering a Discipline* (Grand Rapids, Mich: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co, 2012), 104.
[4] Rahner, Karl, *"Practical Theology Within the Totality of Theological Disciplines,", Theological Investigations, Volume IX, Translated by Graham Harrison*, vol. IX (London: Darton Longman & Todd, 1972), 105–6.

nature-connecting activity have on the worshipping life of the Church and might this kind of practice be a more universally appealing activity to an unchurched but post-secular society?

What I will show is that there is a potential dissonance between the theoretical orthodoxy of contemporary writers on the subject of Christian nature-connection and the current organised response of the Church's praxis. Despite this, I want to argue that this could be a prophetic movement, the *Missio Dei* active in the world outside of the church, connecting people with God in numinous ways that the church is failing to achieve in its worship services. This isn't simply the church following a faddish, renewed interest in nature connection as an act of opportunism, but rather a response to God's Spirit reawakening all humankind to the elemental and essential need to be more aware of and connected with His creation.

1.2 A Dialectical Approach

This thesis is a dialectical consideration of two separate and often opposing culture-shaping forces. The first of these is the 'secular', cultural moment we find ourselves in, of a rise in popularity of personal connection and interaction with the natural world, and the second is the church and its 'sacred' teachings and activities that reflect upon this cultural moment. This is a congruent approach with what Graham states as the search for a 'theology of practice, in which contemporary experience is placed in a dialectical relationship with the sources and norms of tradition in order to generate practical wisdom'[5]. In their attempt to summarise practical theology, Swinton and Mowatt also affirm this when saying that it is,

[5] Elaine L. Graham, *Words Made Flesh: Writings in Pastoral and Practical Theology* (London: SCM, 2009), xiii.

'critical, theological reflection on the practices of the Church as they interact with the practices of the world, with a view to ensuring and enabling faithful participation in God's redemptive practices in, to and for the world.'[6]

As I will show in Chapter 3, there has been a phenomenal increase in the collective, cultural interest in connecting with nature. This has been expressed in terms of a reawakening from a kind of cultural amnesia, where the importance of knowing about the natural world and spending time within it have become a lost practice and we as humanity are suffering because of the disconnection. This disorder has been expressed as a move from the elemental and natural position of biophilia[7], the love of nature, towards biophobia, an aversion and fear of nature, leading to what Soga et al refer to as, 'the extinction of experience'[8]. In more populist terms, author Richard Louv evokes the phrase, 'Nature Deficit Disorder'[9] and gives nomenclature to a concept that has moved from a liminal, polemic thought 20 years ago, into a mainstream trope that has almost no opposition today. The social anxiety around our disconnection from this life-giving force has spawned the publishing phenomena of so-called, 'New Nature Writing'[10] and has seen an explosion of organised nature connecting activities, clubs and special interest groups, as well as giving renaissance to institutions and media that had begun to seem archaic in an increasingly technological age. Both the proliferation of

[6] Swinton and Mowatt, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research*, 6.
[7] As popularised by: Edward O. Wilson, *Biophilia* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1984).
[8] Masashi Soga et al., 'The Vicious Cycle of Biophobia', *Trends in Ecology & Evolution* 38, no. 6 (1 June 2023): 512–20, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tree.2022.12.012.
[9] Richard Louv, *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder*, Rev. and updated (London: Atlantic Books, 2010), 3.
[10] Cowley, Jason, ed., *The New Nature Writing: Kathleen Jamie, Jonathan Raban, Richard Mabey, Robert Macfarlane, Benjamin Kunkel, Lydia Peelle ; plus a Graphic Story by David Heatley*, Granta, 102.2008 (London: Granta, 2008).

popular writing on the subject and the growing industry of nature-connecting activities will be examined in much greater detail in Chapter 3.

The other voice in this dialectical approach is the contemporary response of what the Church in the UK is doing that reflects this cultural moment. I use the word 'response' here with some caution. I am not convinced that what I can show in terms of theoretical and practical actions that churches are doing to help people connect with nature is being done out of a deliberate desire to create an alternative response to the external stimuli of what is happening outside of the church. I'm not sure there is enough evidence to suggest that there is an intentional, reactive move towards aping the actions of this cultural phenomenon. However, I am convinced that Christians, especially those who feel increasingly on the margins of the established Church are naturally reflecting and echoing a sentiment that, if people find well-being and spiritual solace in nature-connecting activities, they want to be there too. They want to be there, to benefit from the claimed goodness of these activities but also, precisely because so many of these asserted benefits contain explicitly spiritual encounters, they want to know if and how the God, who has been so often confined to church buildings, might be found and known in these wilder places. I continue therefore to use the word 'response' in describing what the church is teaching and doing within this field, because I think there is a responsive reaction to what Christian people are doing, perhaps not an intentional, organised response but a reflexive action that is stimulated and sustained by all the current information that is being communicated to Christian and non-Christian alike. To describe it in blunter terms, it could be said that there is a desire, as is often found in the church, to have a 'Christian version' of something good that is happening outside of the church. I intend to interrogate

this version to see if it is a worthy replication both in its efficacy and in its theological faithfulness as being Christian.

In broader terms there has been much scholarly reflection upon why, in a cultural, contextual sense, the emergence and growth of non-institutional groups like Forest Church have been so prevalent. It is not the purview of this thesis to describe these in detail but some helpful examples of frameworks that have elicited the creation of these groups is worth noting.

The emergence of projects like Forest Church can be understood through the work of several academics who have explored the rise of non-institutional spiritual practices. Gordon Lynch's research on progressive spirituality[11] emphasises how these initiatives prioritise personal experience, ecological awareness, and social justice over traditional religious structures. Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead's concept of the 'holistic milieu'[12] situates Forest Church within a broader trend of spiritual practices focused on personal well-being, where nature and community are central (this was strongly affirmed through the responses received from Forest Church attenders). Additionally, Bron Taylor's work on 'dark green religion'[13] offers insight into how spiritual practices centred on nature are gaining traction, that reflect a deepening ecological consciousness.

[11] Gordon Lynch, *The New Spirituality: An Introduction to Progressive Belief in the Twenty-First Century* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2007).
[12] Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead, *The Spiritual Revolution: Why Religion Is Giving Way to Spirituality*, Nachdr., Religion and Spirituality in the Modern World (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2010).
[13] Bron Raymond Taylor, *Dark Green Religion: Nature Spirituality and the Planetary Future* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010).

Religious individualism, as discussed by Heelas, and the broader concept of what Charles Taylor refers to as, 'expressive individualism'[14], highlight how Forest Church aligns with the shift towards spirituality that centres on personal autonomy and self-expression. Taylor also discusses how modernity fosters individualism in spirituality, contributing to the rise of non-institutional practices[15]. The work of Lois Lee on 'non-religion' highlights how Forest Church might appeal to those who do not identify with traditional religion but yet still seek meaningful spiritual practices[16]. Grace Davie's concept of 'believing without belonging' is also relevant, as it captures how spiritual practices like Forest Church can allow individuals to engage in spiritual exploration without adhering to formal religious institutions[17].

Finally, Christopher Partridge examines the concept of re-enchantment and provides a framework that feels particularly apposite for the emergence of Forest Church. He argues that despite the decline of traditional religious institutions, a 're-enchantment' is occurring through alternative spiritualities and practices, where people seek to reconnect with a sense of wonder and transcendence[18].

Collectively, these perspectives show how Forest Church reflects broader cultural and spiritual trends, offering a non-traditional, nature-based, and community-oriented form of spirituality that resonates with contemporary values and concerns.

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[14] Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*, 11. print (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2010), 509.
[15] Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, First Harvard University Press paperback edition (Cambridge, Massachusetts London, England: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2018).
[16] Lois Lee, *Recognizing the Non-Religious: Reimagining the Secular*, First published in paperback (Oxford New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2017).
[17] Grace Davie, *The Sociology of Religion*, BSA New Horizons in Sociology (Los Angeles: SAGE Publications, 2007).
[18] Christopher Partridge, *The Re-Enchantment of the West: Alternative Spiritualities, Sacralization, Popular Culture, and Occulture. Vol. 1*, vol. 1 (London: T & T Clark Internat, 2004).

I will describe the methodological approach to the thesis in more detail in the next chapter, but here I want to introduce the main interlocuter to my examination of the Christian response, namely, the Forest Church movement.

1.3 Introducing Forest Church

Forest Church is essentially both a theoretical attempt to theologise, or at least rationalise, the Christian practice of nature connection as well as a loosely affiliated, growing number of expressions of church that meet outdoors.

> '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 with nature in wild places.'[19]

Whilst I will go on to describe in detail what Forest Church is, how it began and what its progenitors were hoping to achieve by it, I want to give a brief reflection here of how it manifests itself. Putting theory aside momentarily, what would one experience if they were to attend a Forest Church?

Firstly, and perhaps obviously, you would be given a time and place to meet that is outdoors. This may be in a forest as the name suggests, but it is more likely to be on an allotment, in a local park, by a reservoir, or on a nature reserve. There won't be many people there, probably less than 15 but there will be a leader of some sort who will make themselves known. At some

[19] 'Forest Church |:| Mystic Christ', accessed 21 June 2017, http://www.mysticchrist.co.uk/forest_church.

point people will gather together, perhaps around a fire or under a tree, and the theme for today's meeting will be shared. This will nearly always relate to the current season, or possibly another nature-based theme, such as bird song, tree types, fungi or food sources. There may be a quiet time of reflection, where the leader gives the group something to think about and consider, or there may be sheets handed out and a preprepared liturgy read out – and these are likely to be sourced from a small selection of Christian authors who specialise in this nature-based spirituality. There will likely be an activity of some sort as well. Where children are present, this might take the form of some craft; the building of a bug hotel or making a birdfeeder, but it could also mean being sent off on your own for a while to go and consider the theme of the gathering. You may stay in quite a small area, where the group always meet, or you may go on a walk together. At some point, you might be encouraged to sit in silence and look at a feather or stone, or to go and taste whatever fruit you can find on the trees and bushes, or to close your eyes and listen to the surroundings. At some point, you will gather back together, and the leader might ask for people to share whatever it is that they feel they have just experienced. It is unlikely that anyone will challenge what is shared directly, the leader may summarise what is shared but they won't preach a sermon at any point and often they will bring no content as such but will facilitate the gathering in a way that allows for circumspection and ambiguity. There may be some forms of readings, perhaps some scripture that is pertinent to the theme, or just as likely will be the use of a poem or reflection from some author, Christian or otherwise, to illustrate a point the leader wants to make. Very often there will be some form of food involved, be that some homemade biscuits, soup heated over an open fire or bread that is made by the group as the craft activity. And that will essentially be it. It may have lasted an hour, or sometimes a whole afternoon. It is unlikely that you'll be asked to give your details or sign up to the group. There will be no financial cost and it

probably won't be obvious as to who 'owns' the group, there won't be a notice slot telling people about the other activities of the church, because this is the church and this is what it does. You may hear words and phrases like, 'fresh expression' or 'pioneer ministry', alluding to the fact that it's been initiated by a church leader from within a particular denomination, but it is more likely that there will be no explicit information about who is behind the gathering and whether or not it belongs to a local church. The leader may be a church leader, doing this as an acknowledged or supported activity of their church but it might also be a lay person who has taken their own initiative to start a group like this. The gatherings will rarely be more often than once a month, and there will probably be a simple webpage or Facebook group that lets people know when and where they meet.

In this sense, Forest Church is a simple gathering, one that seems to deliberately remove many aspects of traditional church gatherings. Its focus is on getting people to interact with nature, to ask questions of what might be learned from the natural world and whilst there will be a strong sense that this is not like 'normal church', a significant percentage of those who attend will be people who call themselves Christian or have done in the past.

I will now describe the methodology of how I gained a deeper understanding of the Forest Church movement, as well as how I explored the themes and focus of the cultural moment.

2: Methodology

2.1 Introduction to the empirical work

In this chapter, I will outline both the process by which the thesis was formed and describe the research method that I believe is the most appropriate for the epistemological task.

As I stated in the introduction, the genesis of this work was sparked by a deeply personal moment that led to my own desire to gain understanding of and find language for what I'd experienced. However, even when considering that, 'all research is, to an extent autobiographical'[20] the conviction to turn this affectation towards academic study, from personal reflexivity to a more empirical one, took root and broadened outwards, as I began to share my experience with others. As a church minister, my interest was piqued, as one person after another, hearing my story, responded in hushed tones about how they too had 'found God' in outdoor settings, apologetically confessing that, 'I know I'm supposed to feel this stuff in church services, but I just don't anymore'. These responses led me to ask more people, fellow ministers, friends, even my neighbours, if they had stories of feeling something spiritual happening when out in nature, and again, the response was ubiquitous. Whether naming God as the source, or using different language, all had moments that they considered numinous or theophanic.

Alongside these inhabited, personal stories, and perhaps the very reason for the openness with which they were shared, was an obvious and overwhelming sense that there was

[2020] Swinton and Mowatt, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research*, 60.

something of a cultural moment happening in the UK. This was 12 years ago, and what was a growing but still niche subject within the cultural conversation, has for various reasons, not least being the catalysing impact of the Coronavirus lockdowns of 2020/21, has now coalesced into a mainstream concept. The salvific qualities of nature connection have moved from obscurity and scepticism, into an impacting force, shaping the way we work, how we teach our children, how we spend our leisure time, what we're reading about and what we're watching on TV[21]. The understanding of the essentialism of nature connection for human flourishing has been a social phenomenon over the last 20 years.

This coalescing of personal reflexivity and an epistemological desire towards ecclesiological themes of mission and worship, make this an ideal task for the discipline of practical theology. As Robert Kinast states, 'Ultimately the praxis of practical theology is transformational. It begins with a discrepancy between current praxis and belief, and it tries to overcome the discrepancy by proposing a more coherent theology and a more consistent praxis.'[22] I bought into this research strong suspicions, or 'prejudices'[23] as Gadamer et al describes them, that there are at least two 'discrepancies' in what the church is currently offering in terms of helping people connect with God through the natural world. Firstly, I found it hard to locate the theological normalcy that underpinned the practices that Forest Church and others were inviting people to partake in. As I will show, there is a paucity of literature that addresses this crucial issue and often a lack of desire in some of the practitioners to even want to

[21] See for example: Richard Louv, *The Nature Principle: Reconnecting with Life in a Virtual Age*, 1st pbk. ed (Chapel Hill, N.C: Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, 2012).
[22] Robert L. Kinast, *What Are They Saying about Theological Reflection?*, WATSA Series (New York: Paulist Press, 2000), 63.
[23] Hans-Georg Gadamer, Joel Weinsheimer, and Donald G. Marshall, *Truth and Method*, 2nd, rev. ed ed., Continuum Impacts (London ; New York: Continuum, 2004).

theologically justify their practices[24]. Secondly, in comparison to the cultural moment, what the church is doing is still being done by so few, in such unimaginative ways. I want to therefore contend that, as Cameron perfectly addresses, this is a valid research area in stating, 'practical theology seeks to direct attention to those things which the Church is overlooking but which can contribute to its part in God's mission to the world'[25]. I aim to bring some attention to what this captivating work of the *Missio Dei* appears to be doing outside of ecclesiastical walls, not to criticise the work that is already being done by some Christians, but to call for more confidence and 'practical wisdom'[26] to be shown by all churches as they join in with what the Spirit is already doing.

Reflexivity is a critical component of qualitative research methodologies, especially when utilising data collection methods that involve interaction with people, which immerses the researcher in the natural settings of the subjects being studied. This immersion inherently brings my identity, beliefs, and biases into the research context, necessitating a rigorous and honest approach to self-reflection. Hertz states that, 'It is important to admit that we study things that trouble or intrigue us, beginning from our own subjective standpoints'[27]. I have already begun to explain my motivation for this work in that there was personal 'intrigue', prompted by a sense that I was connecting with God in new and evocative ways through spending time in nature. This was and still is, the essential enquiry that Moustakas refers to as the 'passionate concern that calls out to the researcher'[28]. Graham locates research such

[24] I justify these statements in Chapter 4, where the empirical process reveals these shortcomings.
[25] Helen Cameron et al., eds., *Theological Reflection for Human Flourishing: Pastoral Practice and Public Theology* (London: SCM Press, 2012), xi.
[26] Graham, *Words Made Flesh*, xiii.
[27] Rosanna Hertz, ed., *Reflexivity & Voice* (Thousand Oaks, Calif: Sage Publications, 1997), xvi.
[28] Clark E. Moustakas, *Heuristic Research: Design, Methodology, and Applications* (Newbury Park: Sage Publications, 1990), 27.

as this, where human interactions and theological suppositions are being evaluated as, 'essentially a contemplative and reflexive undertaking, and one that is ultimately directed towards the cultivation of character – of a dispositional knowing of the seeker after truth'[29]. This describes well the process and rational for seeking to confess my own voice within the work, acknowledging the complexity of an uncertain delineation between the empirical findings and my own interpretation of them. Mason writes of this kind of discursive process inevitably leading to, 'selective viewing and interpretation' where any finding cannot be claimed to be, 'neutral, objective or total'[30]. She goes on to reflect that, 'The elements which a researcher chooses to see as relevant for a description or exploration will be based, implicitly or explicitly, on a way of seeing the social world, and on a particular form of explanatory logic.[31]

I recognise the malaise that Finlay describes in saying that this kind of personal engagement in reflexivity as being, 'full of muddy ambiguity and multiple trails as researchers negotiate the swamp of interminable deconstructions, self analysis and self disclosure'[32]. But she offers a more hopeful note in saying that 'insights can emerge from personal introspection which then form the basis of a more generalized understanding and interpretations[33]. It is therefore personal introspection that requires me to attempt to offer some positionality in regard to my chosen field of study, the Forest Church movement.

[29] Elaine Graham, 'Is Practical Theology a Form of "Action Research"?', *International Journal of Practical Theology* 17, no. 1 (January 2013): 176, https://doi.org/10.1515/ijpt-2013-0010.
[30] Jennifer Mason, *Qualitative Researching*, 2nd ed (London ; Thousand Oaks, Calif: Sage Publications, 2002), 6.
[31] Mason, 6.
[32] Linda Finlay, 'Negotiating the Swamp: The Opportunity and Challenge of Reflexivity in Research Practice', *Qualitative Research - QUAL RES* 2 (1 August 2002): 9, https://doi.org/10.1177/146879410200200205.
[33] Finlay, 214.

In the first instance, my relationship with Forest Church began before I started to do the research. At this point I was simply someone looking to connect with others and to find a group to attend. As I will go on to describe in more detail, this was not an easy task. This was the first frustration that fuelled something of the motives to understand the group more. Why would a movement with so much to offer people like me, make such a bad job of being known and connecting people with their local groups? The second and more significant annoyance came when I wanted to further understand the theology of the group. The evasive and muddled responses to requests for this information were troubling to me. This was exacerbated by the fact that from my best attempts to find alternatives, Forest Church, as badly organised and resourced as it was, was simply the only group attempting to do what I was looking for. This initial foray into the Forest Church world was therefore the essential stimulus into my research question and reveals something about the positionality towards it. By stating this, I want to be clear, I wanted Forest Church to be better than it was and believed that it could be. I did not want to discredit it or to 'prove' through my research that it was invalid or unorthodox, I hoped that it would elucidate quite the opposite. I wanted to see it established and accessible both practically and theologically. And it was this reflexive motivation that rationalised how I designed the research, analysis and structure of the thesis. The methodological approach was predicated on interrogating every level of the Forest Church movement. Whilst it may have been disorganised, it was started with intent, and it was therefore essential to listen to the progenitors and gatekeepers of the movement. As a localised activity though the outworking of the theory was shaped and held by the local leaders, and in terms of what was experienced by those attending, it was a task to reach out to those people to understand what it was they appreciated about Forest Church. But it is

here that I acknowledge that each of these interactions was with me, the researcher and lens through which the analysis and interpretation was reflected and conclusions were made.

To further situate myself within the research, I wanted to offer a more personal and narrative element to the thesis. I did this by writing two vignettes, taken from my field notes after I attended two different Forest Church gatherings. These more introspective pieces offer a reflection of what it felt like to be an attender, yes as researcher and therefore an outsider, but also as a fellow pilgrim, hoping that God might speak to me in those settings. I was unable to decide where they best fit within the thesis, and not sure that they fit at all, I have therefor decided to include them as appendices. They can be found in Appendix 4.

2.2 Research Design – A Case Study

2.2.1 Rationale for Case Study Method

In the early stages of my research design, I knew that I needed to explore and describe the two foundational voices that make up the dialectical approach, before I could go on to answer some of the questions that I laid out in my introduction. In the first instance I wanted to evidence support for the proposition that there is a social, cultural phenomena of people purposefully (re)connecting with nature that is in some way 'new'. Of course, humanity has always been a part of the natural, created world but the cultural contention is that we have become removed from the emotional and spiritual connection that previous generations have naturally benefitted from. I therefore needed show to how that this phenomenon of reconnecting with nature actually exists and demonstrate how it is manifesting itself.

Secondly, I am contending that there is a Christian version of this movement back towards nature connection as a spiritual and essential practice. I therefore need to also show a deep interrogation of the literature and activity of this type. With this in mind, I have chosen to approach this research using case study methodology.

Robert Yin describes the case study method as being particularly adept for, 'an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon (the 'case') in depth and within its real-world context'[34]. There is obvious attraction here for the purposes of my research in that the emphasis of this method is on both the foci of the research being 'contemporary' and on the study being in the 'real-world'. Cohen et al expand on this by stating that case studies, 'investigate and report the complex dynamic and unfolding interactions of events, human relationships and other factors in a unique instance.'[35]

This approach therefore is appropriate to the method of research needed to understand the Forest Church movement, the predominant research focus that I have used to consider the Church response. I am not concerned in any depth about what the Church has done historically, this may have been interesting in some ways, but it is not pertinent for my purpose. I am seeking to understand the contemporary reaction of the Church to a vivid cultural moment, and I want to observe what this looks like in its current, real-world settings. Merriam et al argue that good case studies produce 'knowledge about the world'[36] meaning the world as it is, not as it was.

[34] Robert K. Yin, *Case Study Research: Design and Methods* (Los Angeles, Calif: SAGE, 2009), 12.
[35] Louis Cohen, Lawrence Manion, and Keith Morrison, *Research Methods in Education*, 6th ed (London ; New York: Routledge, 2007), 181.
[36] Sharan B. Merriam and Elizabeth J. Tisdell, *Qualitative Research: A Guide to Design and Implementation*, Fourth edition, The Jossey-Bass Higher and Adult Education Series (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2016), 3.

Yin reminds the researcher that the ontological purposes of the case study method are to produce three types of data. These are exploratory, descriptive and explanatory data.[37] He argues that whilst all social scientific research methods can elicit these data sets, case study is most appropriately employed when the research focus is such that, 'boundaries between a phenomenon and context are not clear and the researcher has little control over the phenomenon and context.'[38] Or as Stake puts it, 'there are multiple perspectives or views of the case that need to be represented, but there is no way to establish, beyond contention, the best view.'[39] This fits well with the real-world activity of the Forest Church movement with its interconnected but unregulated forms as well as the complexity of the interpretation of the theoretical/theological foundations of the localised activity make the gaining of a rich description of the movement far from straightforward.

Stake says that in employing a case study approach, 'we enter the scene with a sincere interest in learning how [actors] function in ordinary pursuits and milieus' and with a 'willingness to put aside many presumptions while we learn.'[40] Unlike other methods, case study emphasises the use of several different research tools, 'to develop pertinent hypotheses and propositions for further inquiry.'[41] Case studies are designed to bring out the details from the 'viewpoint of the participants by using multiple sources of data.'[42] These data

[37] Yin, *Case Study Research*, 7.
[38] Yin, 13.
[39] Dr Robert E. Stake, *The Art of Case Study Research*, 1st edition (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: SAGE Publications, Inc, 1995), 108.
[40] Stake, 1.
[41] Yin, *Case Study Research*, 9.
[42] Shiva Ebneyamini and Mohammad Reza Sadeghi Moghadam, 'Toward Developing a Framework for Conducting Case Study Research', *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 17, no. 1 (1 December 2018): 1609406918817954, https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406918817954.

collecting tools are multiplicitous but centre around interviews, observations and analysing documents.[43]

When I first began the investigative process back in 2018 I did so with the intention to write an ethnographic study of the Forest Church movement. This made sense as a method to capture what Forest Church is in reality, but it soon became apparent that I simply didn't have the time, finances or accessibility to get anywhere near the 'thick description'[44] that Geertz demands of the ethnographic process. Time was also against me in other ways. The Forest Church groups rarely meet more than once a month, so even when I tried to regularly observe the most local group, Open Sky Forest Church on the edge of Brighton, I might have a previous commitment or they would cancel a meeting when I was available, and it would be months before I was there again. And because each local gathering does so in uniquely different ways, it could not be an ethnographic approach because the subject was not a particular culture to observe but multifarious expressions of a fluidly interpreted affiliation. The very nature of Forest Church gatherings is their hyper-localised activity, rarely advertised outside of these localities and all meeting with varying degrees of suspicion towards external investigation of their existence and purposes. Pragmatically this meant it was challenging to even find where these groups met and, when I did find them, they were often many miles away from where I live. I therefore turned towards a case study approach as it offered the routes to exploration, description and explanation of the subject through the use of a varied approach to data collection. Yin states that 'case studies are a form of enquiry that does *not* depend solely on ethnographic or participant-observer data' and believes that a 'high-quality' case study can

[43] Merriam and Tisdell, *Qualitative Research*, 94.
[44] Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (London: Fontana Press, 1993), 27.

be constructed, 'without leaving the telephone or Internet'[45]. He rightly caveats this statement by stating that this is only the case if the topic being studied can be effectively studied in this way. In practice this meant that I could gain rich empirical data through more fluid and reflexive means, using and adapting techniques as the various stumbling blocks of being in the field negated the imagined face-to-face observations of the practice. For example, this meant that if I couldn't attend a group to observe it, I could interview the leader across Zoom and analyse any documents that the group produced. Where a key founder of Forest Church refused to be interviewed, I was still able to review the literature that they'd produced to understand what their intentions were for the movement. And when I couldn't sit and listen to Forest Church attenders, I could observe their interactions on open, social-media groups to hear what their experiences of attending were. Whilst this is therefore not an ethnographic piece of work. I think Yin is correct in saying that there are rarely 'sharp' differences between research methods involved and there is very often 'large overlaps.'[46] The broader and more varied methodological processes of approaching Forest Church through a case study approach produced helpful empirical data. In turn, precisely because I ended up with such a variety of data to explore and analyse, the argument that case study can produce a more holistic understanding of a subject[47], proved to be correct in my opinion.

In terms of the method use to examine and evaluate the qualitative data, I took a narrative analysis approach. This method is particularly well-suited for my research on Forest Church because it allows for a deep exploration of the personal stories and experiences of those

[45] Yin, *Case Study Research*, 15.
[46] Yin, 7.
[47] Ebneyamini and Sadeghi Moghadam, 'Toward Developing a Framework for Conducting Case Study Research'.

involved. In supporting narrative analysis, Riesmann argues that these kinds of 'diverse texts' provide narrative data through, 'sequence and consequence' where events are 'selected, organised, connected, and evaluated as meaningful for a particular audience.'[48]

By examining the narratives of the progenitors and attendees of Forest Church, I sought to uncover the meanings and interpretations they attach to their experiences. This method is therefore ideal for understanding the complexity of human lives, cultures, and behaviours, which is essential when studying a phenomenon like Forest Church, one that is deeply rooted in individual and communal spiritual experiences. The use of narrative analysis also enabled me to focus on the unique perspectives of each participant, capturing the richness of their experiences in a way that other methods might not. This approach allows for a nuanced understanding of how individuals make sense of their involvement with Forest Church, revealing underlying themes and patterns in their narratives. By integrating insights from literature, interviews, and surveys, narrative analysis provides a comprehensive view of the cultural and social contexts influencing Forest Church, offering valuable insights into its significance and impact on participants' lives.

Structurally speaking, although I employed more than one narrative analytical approach, what Riessman refers to as, 'Thematic Analysis' was the most helpful and therefore most commonly used. She summarises this approach as one where a, 'typology of narratives organised by theme is the typical representational strategy, with case studies or vignettes providing illustration'.[49] In practice this meant reviewing all the different types of data collected;

[48] Catherine Kohler Riessman, *Narrative Analysis*, Nachdr., Qualitative Research Methods 30 (Newbury Park, Calif.: Sage, 2002), 1.
[49] Riessman, 2.

interview transcripts, questionnaire responses and field notes, and interrogating them to capture the emerging narrative themes that showed commonality or contrast, to show the richest description of what Forest Church is in practice.

2.2.2 Data Collection Methods

As is common in case study methodology[50], I employed a variety of empirical methods to try to understand both the cultural moment and the Forest Church movement more fully. When it came to the Forest Church, I fundamentally wanted to understand the history, beliefs and practices of the movement and for this I decided to interrogate three different groups of stakeholders, using different empirical research tools for each of them as appropriate. In the first instance I wanted to understand how the progenitors of Forest Church described it; who were these founders and what were their intentions? This exploratory process is what Yin describes as the 'what and who?'[51] questions of the research. I did this through a study of the literature and through some semi-structured interviews. Secondly, I wanted to hear from the people who lead and facilitate Forest Church gatherings, who I call the practitioners and to essentially ask the 'how?'[52] questions of the descriptive phase of the case study. To do this I conducted nine semi-structured interviews as well as visiting five groups as a participant observer. Thirdly, the challenging task of listening to the actual participants of Forest Church, to elicit answers to the 'why?'[53] question of the explanatory task. Here I used an online questionnaire to elicit seventy-two individual responses.

[50] Ebneyamini and Sadeghi Moghadam, 'Toward Developing a Framework for Conducting Case Study Research'.
[51] Yin, *Case Study Research*, 7.
[52] Yin, 7.
[53] Yin, 7.

I'll now describe in more detail how and why I used these methods to build a broad case study.

2.2.2.1 Semi-structured Interviews

To gain further qualitative detail from the perspective of the Forest Church progenitors and practitioners, I chose to conduct a series of semi-structured, informal interviews. Richard Osmer calls the discipline of interviewing, 'a very important part of attending in qualitative research'[54] and, if done well, it allows the interviewer to 'move beyond preconceived perceptions and evaluate judgments and attend closely to what others are actually thinking, feeling and doing'[55]. Whilst Pattison reflects on these deep types of conversations, where attentiveness of the enquirer is essential, to 'allow participants to discover things about their interlocuter which they never knew before; all participants end up seeing themselves and others from new angles and in a different light.'[56] This was an important aspect of the qualitative process for me personally. I chose to consider Forest Church as a focus for my research out of an attractional but also, repellent, personal interest in the movement. On one level, Forest Church seemed to practice a form of spirituality that I was finding myself more and more responsive towards personally, in contrast to what traditional church worship had become, but simultaneously I was suspicious of the theological motivations and foundations

[54] Richard Robert Osmer, *Practical Theology: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids, Mich: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co, 2008), 61.
[55] Osmer, 64.
[56] As quoted in: Swinton and Mowatt, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research*, 64.

of the movement. In conducting these interviews, I was aiming to play that attending role that Osmer describes in seeking to discover deeper and richer insights into the movement and the people who are delivering it. It was an enlightening experience and one that changed the course of my research. Agreeing with Pattison's observation, Swinton and Mowatt, describe these 'concentrated human interactions' as possibilities to 'enable the researcher to access and understand the unique meanings, interpretations and perspectives that the participant places on the chosen subject'[57]. And it was spending these long hours, being with and listening to these leaders, along with the further reflection that the transcribing process forces upon the researcher, that enabled a richer, more realistic impression of what these leaders are doing and how they personally view their task and vocation.

The process of selecting which leaders to speak to was almost entirely pragmatic. At the outset I didn't know any of the Forest Church leaders personally, so I had no contact details and apart from Bruce Stanley (perhaps the key founder of the Forest Church movement) I didn't know who the key leaders were. I simply began by seeing who I could clearly identify as leading a Forest Church gathering. I did this through observing the Forest Church Facilitators Facebook group and contacting twenty active leaders, nine of whom agreed to be interviewed. In terms of the interview process, I was able to meet three face-to-face before the Covid lockdowns of 2020/21, then held all the others over Zoom. In interviewing these nine different leaders, I chose a semi-structured approach, enabling me to drive towards some commonality of themes, whilst also giving space for the conversation to go in other

[57] Swinton and Mowatt, 63–64.

directions should they arise. The questions that framed these interviews can be found in Appendix 1.

On reflection, I became aware that in composing the questions in the way that I did, I took my own suspicions and concerns about Forest Church into the interview. Swinton and Mowat, using the terminology and work of Hans-George Gadamer, describe these pre-understandings as 'prejudices…which inevitably affect the process of interpretation'[58]. Despite the negative connotation of being prejudiced, in qualitative research terms, Swinton and Mowat describe this as, 'quite the opposite, prejudices are crucial for our developing understanding', reinforcing this in quoting Gadamer: 'to try to eliminate one's own concepts in interpretation is not only impossible, but manifestly absurd.'[59] This confessional element of the researcher does not therefore need to negate the efficacy of the questioning but merely adds to the contextuality of the interview and acknowledges the dialogical, real-world approach that is being taken. Merriman and Tisdell agree with the richness of multiplicity that semi-structured interviews can produce, even when no clearly demonstrable or unifying outcome is forthcoming, arguing that 'multiple interpretations of reality'[60] are inevitable and worthy sources of data.

Bearing this in mind, the themes that my semi-structured questions imposed upon the interviews, that expose my prejudices, were around three particular but interrelated enquiries; do these leaders consider what they are doing to be inherently Christian? Is their Forest Church group in and of itself, church? And, how do they therefore view their role of

[58] Swinton and Mowatt, 113.
[59] Swinton and Mowatt, 113.
[60] Merriam and Tisdell, *Qualitative Research*, 22.

influence, do they see themselves as priests or pastors of a congregation, or merely as organisers of an activity?[61] These questions are all laden with meaning and need much extrapolation in and of themselves, but in asking such blunt questions, without further justification around concepts like, what do I mean by 'Christian' or 'Church', I wanted to see how they themselves interpreted these terms through the responses they gave. These did elicit some useful responses and correlating themes that I will show, but the more veracious responses that challenged my prejudices, were found in the themes that emerged in answers to questions outside my more pre-emptive ones. As Stake rightly reminds the researcher, 'a considerable proportion of all data is impressionistic, picked up informally as the researcher first becomes acquainted with the case'[62], and this was very much the case as I listened to what was said and observed within my interactions with these leaders. There was undoubtedly a difference between the interviews of those I met face-to-face with, and those who I had a Zoom call with. The in-person interviews were richer, and closer to what Patton encourages where the interviewer is, 'able to read nonverbal messages' and is 'sensitive to the interview setting… carefully attuned to the nuances of the interview'[63]. They were also longer, less systematic, and therefore wider ranging conversations. Zoom constricted the interview almost solely to the subject matter and to the agreed time, with very little preamble. The benefits of people agreeing to the interview at all far outweighed the sense that the responses I gathered over Zoom were just not as rich as those in a face-to-face setting.

[61] See Appendix 1 for the specific questions.
[62] Stake, *The Art of Case Study Research*, 49.
[63] Michael Quinn Patton, *How to Use Qualitative Methods in Evaluation*, 2. ed, Program Evaluation Kit 4 (Newbury Park, Calif.: Sage, 2001), 13.

2.2.2.2 Questionnaire

In the exploratory and descriptive phase of understanding Forest Church it was essential that I somehow heard from the participants who attend these gatherings; the meaning-makers of the whole Forest Church experience. Browning refers to the 'communally oriented interpretive process'[64] as a way of describing an important lens through which we should view social and theological embodied phenomena. Forest Church is not a static, wholly quantifiable thing, it is a living, participative and complex web because it involves different people, in different settings being led in different ways. As Merriam et al so well explain, 'the key philosophical assumption upon which all types of qualitative research are based is the view that reality is constructed by individuals interacting with their social worlds'[65]. I therefore had to ensure that the voices of those who are constructing the reality of Forest Church were heard, even with the challenges that the Covid pandemic placed upon me.

As I will show in Chapter 4, the only online gathering point for both Forest Church attenders as well for those who lead the groups, is a Facebook page simply called 'Forest Church'[66]. The group has over 4,500 members and has seen significant growth in the last few years. This is the common ground for the Forest Church community of practice to share ideas, ask questions and where some moderation can take place by the gatekeepers of the movement. I will return to examine this Facebook group when asking the questions about the birth and leadership of the movement, reflecting on the beginnings of Forest Church and explaining

[64] Don S. Browning, *A Fundamental Practical Theology: Descriptive and Strategic Proposals* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 50.
[65] Merriam and Tisdell, *Qualitative Research*, 6.
[66] 'Forest Church | Facebook', accessed 2 February 2022, https://www.facebook.com/groups/forestchurch.

how this online grouping became so crucial. It is mentioned here though, because this is the primary portal through which I have watched the movement's growth, interactions and influence. It is here where I have been able to continue to hear the voices of Forest Church attenders, even if this was more by chance than design. Like any other researcher seeking qualitative data of gathered activities of any form, the impact of the Covid pandemic during two crucial years of my research, made for an extremely challenging research environment. Through this period, Forest Church groups and their essentially embodied, in-person practices have either been much curtailed or completely unable to meet during lockdowns. This limitation aside, the Facebook group has continued to be very active and increasingly so throughout the pandemic. So, unable to conduct face-to-face, informal interviews with attenders of Forest Church groups as initially planned, I collated a simple online questionnaire to try to elicit some illustrative data.

Consisting of ten, very simple questions, I designed a questionnaire that could be filled in online and anonymously. There was then a link to the questionnaire posted on to the Forest Church Facebook page and after explaining why I was asking for this information; people were asked to fill it in. I then went back on three different occasions over a two-year period and repeated the request for people who hadn't yet filled it in to do so. Overall, the questionnaire elicited a total of 72 individual responses. A copy of the questions can be found in Appendix 2.

2.2.2.3 Participant Observation

Between May 2018 and March 2022, I attended fourteen different Forest Church gatherings, in five different locations[67]. As already noted, I would like to have visited a greater variety of settings, but overall, it was a good and rich experience. The ability to attend these gatherings in-person allowed me to play the role of 'participant observer' in the real-world spaces of Forest Church.

The practice of participant observer is a crucial form of research data collection within the case study method, and particularly adept when the subject matter is a group like Forest Church. As Brewer defines it, the practice, 'involves data gathering by means of participation in the daily life of informants in their natural setting: watching, observing and talking to them in order to discover their interpretations, social meanings and activities'[68]. Whether on a wet hillside in Gloucestershire or in the woods of East Sussex, the experience of being with a Forest Church group, after years of reading the thoughts and theories of the movement, felt significant. The opportunity to observe what was going on, to ask questions of the people there but also to participate in the event itself, challenged some of my prejudices and reinforced others. The role of the participant observer is to be 'relatively passive' and to 'put people at ease'[69]. This role is therefore a nuanced and delicate one. I became acutely aware

[67] Wild Church Norfolk, Open Sky Forest Church Brighton, Robinswood Forest Church Gloucester, Greenbelt Forest Church and Wild Spirit Eastbourne
[68] John D. Brewer, *Ethnography*, Understanding Social Research (Buckingham ; Philadelphia, PA: Open University Press, 2000), 59.
[69] Merriam and Tisdell, *Qualitative Research*, 99.

that in all but one[70] of the settings, I was very much the outsider, and the role of researcher only exacerbated this sense. Patton confidently states that, 'program evaluation creates considerable anxiety among many program staff and participants.'[71], and whilst I'm unconvinced that my presence in the groups caused 'considerable anxiety' I was aware that I at least aroused suspicion and therefore changed the dynamic. Researchers who become participant observers must attempt to 'maintain the balance between 'insider' and 'outsider' status; to identify with the people under study and get close to them, but maintaining a professional distance which permits adequate observation and data collection. It is a fine balance.'[72] Patton describes this 'inside and outside' duality of the participant observer, as playing the role of being 'simultaneously member and non-member' and having to 'participate while also reflecting critically on what is observed and gathered while doing so'[73]. Whilst the overall experience of attending was always an enjoyable one, I found the duality of the role, with the enforced function of more dispassionate researcher, quite difficult. Merriam et al give a helpful hierarchical taxonomy in noting that, 'the researcher's observer activities, which are known to the group, are subordinate to the role of participant.'[74] They admit that there is a 'trade off' in play but one that I affirm; the building of trust and honouring the group confidentiality is the only way of eliciting real 'information'[75] that has efficacy for the overall research task.

[70] Open Sky Forest Church, meeting just outside Brighton and of which I was a co-leader was attended by several people I knew well. My colleague Alex led most of these gatherings though, and I was able to detach myself a little more, in order to pay more attention to what was actually going on in the group.
[71] Patton, *How to Use Qualitative Methods in Evaluation*, 88.
[72] Brewer, *Ethnography*, 59–60.
[73] Brewer, 60.
[74] Merriam and Tisdell, *Qualitative Research*, 101.
[75] Merriam and Tisdell, 101.

Patton states the observer 'is not a movie camera'[76], neither having its 'limited field of view' nor its impassivity, the observer 'sees it all', and yet needs to decide where the attention or focus should be at any one time. My impressions of the Forest Church gatherings I attended were greatly impacted, not so much by the programme that was being presented, but by the casual, informal conversations I had throughout the sessions. 'Participant observers gather a great deal of information through informal, naturally occurring conversations during periods of program participation'[77]. Whilst it was clear, and somewhat predictable, that the group leaders were aware of my presence, often apologising to me because something hadn't gone quite as they'd planned or that 'we normally get more people than this!', it was the attenders, with little interest in my role, that I experienced more open and honest conversations with.

I was regularly reminded that these events and the experiences within them were very important to those attending. My natural inclination to be friendly and in one sense to be included as just another participant, were naïve as they, and I, knew that I was present for the purpose of research. It's therefore hard to know the impact that my presence had but this is the tension that the participant observer works within. Swinton and Mowatt reflect something of this tension and helpfully frame it as an inevitable and not necessarily negative action.

> 'While the researcher's primary task is to describe the encounter, in reality, she is inevitably a co-creator of the mode and content of the encounter. More than that, she is implicitly or explicitly, a co-creator of the narrative that is the product of the research encounter.'[78]

[76] Patton, *How to Use Qualitative Methods in Evaluation*, 82.
[77] Patton, 13.
[78] Swinton and Mowatt, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research*, 61.

After each Forest Church gathering, and as soon as I was able to, I recorded my observations. Brewer encourages the observer to take notes as 'the main form of collecting data' but to have done so even as, 'unobtrusively as possible'[79], was just not possible in these settings. To have done so, in these small and often intimate settings would have been entirely inappropriate and would have corrupted the richness and honesty of the informal conversations that I experienced. I therefore had to improvise. In the first instance I recorded a voice note on my phone, as soon after the event as possible. These were an attempt to capture what Patton encourages when saying that notes should 'contain the evaluator's own feelings, reactions to the experience and reflections about the meaning and significance of what has happened.'[80] These more visceral reflections needed to be documented whilst the emotional memory of the events were still fresh, leaving the space for more circumspect field notes to be written down later to try to capture as much of the experience as possible.

The analyses of these participant observations are reflected throughout Chapter 4 as I seek to describe what Forest Church is.

2.2.2.4 Literature Review

Throughout the thesis, I refer in some detail about the various documents, books and other literature that pertain to nature connection, both in terms of the cultural moment and the Christian equivalence. This took up much of the time of the empirical work and whilst this kind of research, when correlated against the more interesting and rich human interactions

[79] Brewer, *Ethnography*, 87.
[80] Patton, *How to Use Qualitative Methods in Evaluation*, 95.

of the fieldwork, may have produced less obvious qualitative data, it was no less important to the overall task.

Amongst the tools of the case study method, Yin sees the significance of the literature review as 'a means to an end, and not – as many people have been taught – and end in itself'. He goes on to argue that the purpose of a literature review is not to 'determine the answers about what is known on a topic; in contrast, experienced investigators review previous research to develop sharper and more insightful questions about the topic'[81]. I found this to be true in practice. I wanted to ground the reflections on the Church's reaction within the context of it being part of a wider cultural response to the need for greater nature connection, and a thorough examination of the literature about this was where I started to do my research. Yin states that in beginning with the literature, the researcher is stimulated to formulate a series of 'theoretical propositions'[82], which then provides a framework for the other data collection methods.

Throughout the thesis, I will refer to literature that was useful and enlightening around the subject. This includes work previously done by others around the contemporary theories and practices of nature connection activities, as well as the theological reflections of those that I found most stimulating on the subject. However, the literature found within a genre of books, published within the last two decades, were a very significant part of my research process. In the first instance, I was aware of the publishing phenomenon of so-called, 'New Nature Writing' and I had enough personal interest to have begun to not only read much of its output

[81] Yin, *Case Study Research*, 14.
[82] Yin, 26.

but to become aware of just how proliferate it was becoming. I review this in detail in Chapter 2, but in essence, this became the provocation to the whole thesis. A publishing genre that used to be entitled, 'natural history', and written about in countless publications over the span of human history, has experienced a renaissance in interest after decades of decline[83]. But it is more than that; what has emerged is stylistically different and with an altered telos, not centred on dominance or knowledge about nature but the salvific qualities of a more hands-on connection with it. It is these themes and foci that formed the dialectical conversation between what the 'culture' and the 'Church' were saying and doing, concerning this movement in understanding and expression.

In practical terms, this meant the reading of many books within the genre to understand the themes and thrust of the New Nature Writing phenomenon and, at the same time, doing this with Christian writing to see where the correlations lay. The relationship between theology and literature is deeply connected, and is a 'vital relation'[84], particularly in the examination of genres like New Nature Writing. What I intend to show in the next chapter is that literature of this nature has the power to convey complex human experiences, emotions, and insights that are often difficult to articulate through traditional theological discourse. The intersection of New Nature Writing and theological enquiry allows for a richer, more nuanced exploration of theological themes, where literature can present lived experiences and narratives that challenge, deepen, and expand theological understanding. Here, literature can present the divine in ways that are accessible, relatable, and immediate,

[83] See for example: 'Super Natural: The Rise of the New Nature Writing - The National', accessed 18 October 2019, https://www.thenational.ae/arts-culture/books/super-natural-the-rise-of-the-new-nature-writing-1.647656.
[84] Heather Walton, *Imagining Theology: Women, Writing and God*, T & T Clark Theology (London: T & T Clark, 2007), 16.

allowing theology to engage more fully with the complexities of human experience and the natural world.

In her work on theological reflection and the use of literature, Heather Walton emphasises how it can 'challenge and charge' theology in productive ways. She argues that where literature is used as dialogical interlocutor to the theological task, it is as 'likely to confound our understandings of faith as to confirm them'[85]. Therefore, the examination of the New Nature Writing literature is not merely an academic exercise but a vital means of expanding theological reflection and an ideal dialogical partner for the task of practical theology. Even where theology and literature are positioned in asymmetrical mutuality, the outcome of the consideration of the literature has the generative possibility to give 'the illumination necessary to live by faith in this world'[86]. It allows theology to engage with contemporary issues, emotions, and experiences in a way that is both grounded in the human condition and open to the transcendent. In taking the approach of investigating and summarising the work of the new nature writers and their reflections on lived experiences, I hope to create a stimulus for more relevant theological reflection, leading to practices that explore the intersections of faith, experience, and the natural world.

[85] Heather Walton, ed., *Literature and Theology: New Interdisciplinary Spaces* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011), 1.
[86] Walton, *Imagining Theology*, 15.

3: Nature Connection: Investigating the Cultural Moment

3.1 The Literature: Introducing New Nature Writing

Whilst the telos of this thesis is the theological and ecclesiological implications of nature connecting activities for the future of the Church, I want to first show that this is situated within a significant cultural movement. I am proposing that groups like Forest Church, which I will go on to consider at length, are not coincidental happenings, as though the cultural moment and the Church's similar activities simply coexist. I am convinced that the rise in acceptance and encouragement of the associated nature-connecting practices of the Church are a response to what was already happening in 'the world'. This is a significant point because it situates the stimulation and genesis of an increased interest in nature connecting activities as being outside of and preluding the activity of the Church. I note this here because I want to show that much of what the Church is doing is responsive to this cultural zeitgeist and not, as it might be argued by some, a 'new thing' that is happening within the church. I want to consider that much of the Church activity of equivalence has taken its form and function from this societal shift, and whilst that may not be problematic, I want to ask the question of how the church can specifically and demonstratively make its activity distinctively Christian.

In this chapter I will be considering two qualitative pieces of evidence that nature connection, in a cultural sense, is experiencing a new and rigorous renaissance. I want to explore the landscape of what I consider to be a quantifiable, cultural moment. Through both the rise of what is being called 'New Nature Writing' and the associated, nature-connecting activities

that are happening throughout the UK, I will attempt to demonstrate the scale and complexity of this phenomenon.

Firstly, I will review the proliferation of literature that pertains to this genre, seeking to understand the vagaries of what New Nature Writing is, before attempting to charter its rise in popularity. I begin by drawing on the work of both the commentators and critics of New Nature Writing, then we will listen to the voices within the movement through some broad brushstrokes of the key individuals involved and the themes within this work.

3.1.1 The New Nature Writing – What is it?

In 2008 *Granta*, the British literary magazine that highlights new writing, produced a special edition featuring the work of 19 different authors under the title 'The New Nature Writing'[87]. It would be hard to argue that this is the first ever use of the phrase, it was almost certainly the first published use of what has now become ubiquitous terminology for a particular type of writing about nature. New Nature Writing as coined here, existed in many different books and articles well before 2008, as we shall see, but it was this edition of Granta that postulated and galvanised the new phenomena and gave it the moniker that others have subsequently used.

In the editor's introduction, Jason Cowley briefly begins to draw attention to the shift from an older type of writing about nature into new territory, through the image of his own stereotype of 'the nature writer'. 'I would picture a certain type of man, it would always be

[87] Cowley, Jason, *The New Nature Writing*.

a man: bearded, badly dressed, ascetic, misanthropic. He would be alone on some blasted moor, with a notebook in one hand and binoculars in the other, seeking meaning and purpose through a larger communion with nature: a loner and an outcast.'[88] In starting this way, Cowley succinctly offers us an image of what New Nature Writing is seeking to avoid. Whether through conscious or unconscious motives the first thing to note about this new approach is that it is different[89], not just stylistically, which it undoubtedly is, but in its approach to its very purpose and meaning.

Lydia Peelle, who contributes the only piece of fiction in the *Granta* issue, introduces us to some of the key, shaping forces that are creating the New Nature Writing:

> 'The New Nature Writing, rather than being pastoral or descriptive or simply a natural history essay, has got to be couched in stories – whether fiction or non-fiction – where we as humans are present. Not only as observers, but as intrinsic elements. I feel this is important, because we've got to reconnect ourselves to our environment and fellow species in every way we can, every chance we have. In my thinking, it is the tradition of the false notion of separation that has caused us so many problems and led to so much environmental degradation. I believe that it is our great challenge in the 21st Century to remake the connection. I think our lives depend on it.'[90]

Peelle highlights the single, most significant catalyst behind both the enterprise of New Nature Writing and its telos. The growing awareness of the environmental crisis, the potential loss of the very thing that is being observed and written about being under

[88] Cowley, Jason, 7.
[89] Rob Cowen, *Common Ground*, 2016, 34.
[90] Cowley, Jason, *The New Nature Writing*.

genuine threat, is the theme that has fuelled the proliferation of this writing. The purpose of the initiative seems to be split into two sub-genres, that of writing to stimulate debate and activity that leads to engagement with ecological recovery and that which comes out of a desire to simply capture for posterity the things that are going to be inevitably lost. Cowley brings these two approaches together in his closing statement, 'This is our modest attempt to contribute to the long journey of reconnection. At present, the human animal lives in but often strives to be apart from nature. None of us wishes to imagine what comes after nature when we are gone'[91].

It is the creation of urgency towards the state of nature and human agency within it, both its complicity in ecological destruction and its potential for undoing these wrongs, that Cowley and Peelle argue are the recurring themes in New Nature Writing. However, I think they miss another, very significant key aspect of this writing, one that is potentially more of a driving factor in the popularity of the movement (and is also more pertinent to the purpose of this thesis). It may be underrepresented in the *Granta* issue because it is an even more recent adaptation, or motivation, of the genre but the correlation of our health and wellbeing being viscerally connected to the natural world in a localised, here-and-now setting is a fundamental aspect of New Nature Writing.

It should be noted the the *Granta* issue has not subsequently been without its critics for other reasons, with some arguing that the essays that it contained held 'nothing very new' within them. Anna Stenning and Terry Gifford contributed one of the most vociferous

[91] Cowley, Jason, 12.

critiques, citing that the issue failed to show any real progression from what they termed simply 'sensitive and informed individual's encounters with nature'[92]. However, the amount of debate that the issue invoked goes some way to prove its efficacy in seeking to highlight the publishing phenomena.

Two more recent publications on the subject, from Deborah Lilley and Jos Smith, have built upon the *Granta* debate and it is here where we find a more constructive and maturing understanding of the possible contributing factors behind the popularity of New Nature Writing. Lilley, an extensive researcher in the field of pastoral writing, argues that despite some scepticism, there was a particular shift in this type of writing from 1990 onwards[93]. She rightly acknowledges the obvious, that there has been 'nature writing' in some form or another for as long as people have been able to write; in one sense Stenning and Gifford are correct, there is nothing new here. However, Lilley writes convincingly that, whilst subtle, the focus and form of New Nature Writing has seen an evolution towards a more embodied and localised form. This, she says, to contrast, 'recent British nature writing is marked by an attentiveness to the relationships that make up the landscape, the places and forms in which they can be found, and the various ways that they can be seen. Recent versions encompass and extend beyond both scientific and romanticized accounts of the natural world, blending elements of autobiography, travelogue, natural history, and popular science to explore, record, and critique the interweaving of human–natural forces in the landscapes of Britain.'[94] She goes on to quote writer Tim Dee who succinctly summarises what New Nature Writing seeks not to be in saying, 'until recently ... the British branch of Nature

[92] Anna Stenning and Terry Gifford, 'Twentieth-Century Nature Writing in Britain and Ireland', *Green Letters* 17, no. 1 (February 2013): 1,
[93] Deborah Lilley, *New British Nature Writing*, vol. 1 (Oxford University Press, 2017), 3,
[94] Lilley, 1:3.

Writing was nice writing and it walked—stout shoes and a knapsack—a thin green lane between the hedges of science on one side and a wild wood of poetry on the other.'[95]. 'Nature writing is an unsatisfactory term,' argues Cambridge academic and nature writer, Robert Macfarlane, 'for this diverse, passionate, pluriform, reviving tradition—but it is the best there is, and it serves as a banner to march beneath.'[96]

The rise in prevalence of writing about nature is as congruent as would be expected with the increased sales of books on the subject. In the UK alone, in the decade from 2009 to 2019, physical book sales saw a dramatic 58% decrease from 330 million copies of all books sold to below 192 million[97]. It is even more remarkable therefore that sales of books about nature[98] increased by 62% from 1.15 million to 1.85 million in the same period (by way of further example, from the data I received, using the same categories of nature book sales, there were just 630,000 sold in 2001)[99].

I want to now consider in depth the content and purposes of this field of literature, to ask the question of what it is that these authors are trying to achieve in this new form of writing about nature? Whilst there is much variety, I want to suggest that four sub-genres encapsulate the array of foci within the breadth of writing that has proliferated over the last two decades. These four major themes of nature writing coalesce around the conviction that nature is: epistemic, topophilic, participative and salvific. I believe that it is important to

[95] Lilley, 1:9.
[96] Stenning and Gifford, 'Twentieth-Century Nature Writing in Britain and Ireland', 2.
[97] 'Book Sales UK: Print 2022', Statista, accessed 3 October 2023, https://www.statista.com/statistics/261278/number-of-books-sold-in-the-uk/.
[98] As Nielsen BookData don't yet have a specific 'New Nature Writing' category, as I am describing it here, they provided sales data for the following categories, after suggesting that these four areas would cover all the kind of work that I am referring to: Natural History: General, Natural History: Plants, Natural History: Animal & Wildlife and Environmental & Ecology: General.
[99] Please see Appendix 3. These statistics were obtained via a direct email request to Nielsen BookData, the body that, amongst other services to the publishing industry, collates book sales data through point-of-sale feedback.

understand these metanarratives in detail because they offer a theoretical framework that I believe is analogous with consistently arising themes that are found echoed in the Christian literature and practices of groups like Forest Church.

3.1.1.1 New Nature Writing as Epistemic

> 'Literature has the ability to change us for good, in both senses of the phrase. Powerful writing can revise our ethical relations with the natural world, shaping our place consciousness and our place conscience.'[100]

The first major theme to coherently arise within New Nature Writing exemplifies Terry Gifford's description of work that is neither 'statistics' nor 'seductions'[101]. In this epistemic style of writing the authors want the reader to understand something new, but the focus of this knowledge is complex and pluriform. Hard to categorise with exactitude, the authors go beyond the simple taxonomies of natural history and are much less concerned with the exotic and unknown. They seek to give an alternative reframing of nature, where the author is ever-present in the work but doesn't dominate the space or romanticise the view. Unlike their predecessors, these authors are hyper-aware of their place in nature, namely one of humble and pedagogical approach to nature as other. The antithesis of the intrepid explorer returning from adventures with cases full of previously unseen objects gathered, these writers are wide-eyed in awe of the wonders that are on their doorstep and self-deprecating in what nature might teach the foolishness of humanity. In writing this way, re-conceptualising nature as other and not object, as teacher not pupil, they also avoid the cloying romanticism of a singularly anthropocentric approach. When done well, this genre of writing leaves the reader

[100] 'Robert Macfarlane: Why We Need Nature Writing', *New Statesman* (blog), 2 September 2015, https://www.newstatesman.com/culture/2015/09/robert-macfarlane-why-we-need-nature-writing.
[101] Lilley, *New British Nature Writing*.

with a greater knowledge about both the natural world and the human condition, where neither epistemological outcome dominates, and both foci give weight and credence to the other. This type of writing has flourished in the last two decades and has been the foundational approach that launched the genre.

In terms of the key texts of this epistemic style, which is evolving with each new release, the early and foundational influence of Robert Macfarlane cannot be understated. Macfarlane is a prolific writer but in book form, his major works are *Mountains of the Mind* (2003), *The Wild Places* (2007), *The Old Ways* (2012), *Landmarks* (2015) and most recently, *Underland* (2019).

Macfarlane wrote his first book, *Mountains of the Mind* (2004) at just 27 years of age. It won myriad awards including the Guardian First Book Award, a remarkable achievement considering that it beat a host of hugely successful fiction books that year, including Monica Ali's Brick Lane and DBC Pierre's, Booker Prize winning, Vernon God Little.[102] The judging panel praised Macfarlane's work as writing 'with authority, elegance and a passion that is capable of persuading even the most reluctant armchair adventurer to join him on his journey.'[103] In its review, the Irish Times were the first to acknowledge that this wasn't just a good book, but Macfarlane had captured a form that was unique and beguiling; 'This is a new kind of exploration writing, perhaps even the birth of a new genre, which doesn't just defy classification - it demands a whole new category of its own.'[104]

> Macfarlane's writing gets to the heart of profound questions about literature's efficacy, about the way that art can inform and galvanise our relationship with the

[102] John Ezard, 'Mountain Man Wins Guardian Book Prize', *The Guardian*, 5 December 2003, sec. UK news, https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2003/dec/05/books.guardianfirstbookaward2003.
[103] Ezard.
[104] 'Peak Season', The Irish Times, accessed 10 January 2022, https://www.irishtimes.com/news/peak-season-1.358558.

> physical world. His books have been lauded for their lyrical prose style and appeal to a wide readership, but they are not presented as the final word on their subjects.[105]

Macfarlane may well have pioneered this new style of writing, one which many others have since followed, but he himself is quick to acknowledge his influences, never suggesting that he is deliberately seeking to launch a new genre. 'Yet it is clear that in Britain we are living through a golden age of literature that explores relations between selfhood, landscape and ethics…I don't know what to call this writing, nor am I persuaded that it needs a name.'[106]

When writing about mountains, Macfarlane says:

> Mountains seem to answer an increasing imaginative need in the West. More and more people are discovering a desire for them, and a powerful solace in them. At bottom, mountains, like all wildernesses, challenge our complacent conviction - so easy to lapse into - that the world has been made for humans by humans. Most of us exist for most of the time in worlds which are humanly arranged, themed and controlled. One forgets that there are environments which do not respond to the flick of a switch or the twist of a dial, and which have their own rhythms and orders of existence. Mountains correct this amnesia. By speaking of greater forces than we can possibly invoke, and by confronting us with greater spans of time than we can possibly envisage, mountains refute our excessive trust in the man-made. They pose profound questions about our durability and the importance of our schemes. They induce, I suppose, a modesty in us.[107]

I use this quote at length, because it perfectly articulates the problem, the solution and the approach that personify this genre. The problem it describes is the disconnect that many in the West are experiencing from the natural world and the need for an 'increasing imagination' towards a reconnection; the solution is to 'join him in his journey', to get up and out and into nature to 'correct this amnesia'; to approach in humility and modesty, to let nature

[105] 'Robert Macfarlane - Literature', accessed 12 April 2022, https://literature.britishcouncil.org/writer/robert-macfarlane.
[106] 'Robert Macfarlane'.
[107] Robert Macfarlane, *Mountains of the Mind: A History of a Fascination*, 1st paperback edition (London: Granta Books, 2004), 275.

'question…the importance of our schemes'. This modesty is further expressed by Macfarlane in his constant referrals to earlier writers who he acknowledges as his direct influencers, none more so than Roger Deakin. Deakin was a friend and mentor to Macfarlane up until his early death in 2006 from a brain tumour. Alongside journalism, documentary-making and ecological activism, Deakin published his sole work, '*Waterlog*' (1999). This book, a definitive forerunner of this epistemic style is an examination of swimming in various lakes, streams and puddles of Deakin's locality and is widely credited with the rebirthing of the 'wild swimming' phenomenon.[108] It is somewhat ironic, that in giving such praise to Deakin as his mentor and shaper of his own style, Macfarlane propelled Deakin's little-known work into the public spotlight and caused the posthumous publication of two further titles collated from Deakin's personal notes and essays[109]. This was also the case with other work such as Nan Shepherd's 'The Living Mountain' (1977) and J. A. Baker's 'The Peregrine' (1967), regularly cited and highlighted by Macfarlane with both receiving intense revivals of interest as a direct result – with Macfarlane writing introductions to both in subsequent rereleases[110].

Macfarlane is not without his critics though, which is hardly surprising when such prominence and cultural popularity inevitably commands a greater scrutiny. Kathleen Jamie, a contemporary of Macfarlane and author of two similarly excellent and ground-breaking collections of essays '*Findings*' (2005) and '*Sightlines*' (2012), is visceral in her critique of his

[108] Anelise Chen, 'Swimming in the Wild Will Change You', The Atlantic, 27 May 2021, https://www.theatlantic.com/culture/archive/2021/05/roger-deakin-waterlog-why-wild-swimming/618974/.
[109] Roger Deakin, *Wildwood: A Journey through Trees* (New York: Free Press, 2008); Roger Deakin, *Notes from Walnut Tree Farm*, ed. Alison Hastie and Terence Blacker, First thus edition (Penguin, 2009).
[110] Nan Shepherd, *The Living Mountain (Canons): A Celebration of the Cairngorm Mountains of Scotland: 6*, Main-Canons Imprint Re-issue edition (Edinburgh: Canongate Books Ltd, 2011); J. A. Baker, Robert Macfarlane, and Mark Cocker, *The Peregrine: 50th Anniversary Edition: Afterword by Robert Macfarlane*, ed. John Fanshawe (London: William Collins, 2017).

second book, 'Wild Places', and describes Macfarlane as 'a lone enraptured male'[111]. Whilst she doesn't try to deny Macfarlane's literary talent and excellent prose, she attacks his viewpoint; 'It brings out in me a horrible mix of class, gender and ethnic tension. What's that coming over the hill? A white, middle-class Englishman!'[112] This seems somewhat unfair in what Macfarlane himself cannot help being, but she makes a more erudite observation in saying:

> The danger of this writing style is that there will be an awful lot of 'I'. If there is a lot of 'I' (and there is, in *The Wild Places*) then it won't be the wild places we behold, but the author. We see him swimming, climbing, looking, feeling, hearing, responding, being sensitive, and because almost no one else speaks, this begins to feel like an appropriation, as if the land has been taken from us and offered back, in a different language and tone and attitude.[113]

It is true that as an author Jamie does insert less of herself in her writing, at least in less obvious, foregrounding ways, but she is still the interpretive lens of her work and is therefore unfair and naïve in her criticism. Jamie cannot deny Macfarlane's sheer efficacy in what he has achieved, and it could be argued that her own works have found their place in British publishing popularity because of what Macfarlane first enabled. Perhaps mindful of this critique though, Macfarlane has become increasingly collaborative in his work. Whether working on the multi-media Lost Words project[114] with artist Jackie Morris and well as a host of folk musicians from around the world or colluding with artist Stanley Donwood and author Dan Richards to produce two illustrated 'prose-poems'[115], Macfarlane continues to evolve his

[111] Kathleen Jamie, review of *A Lone Enraptured Male*, by Robert Macfarlane, *London Review of Books*, 6 March 2008, https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v30/n05/kathleen-jamie/a-lone-enraptured-male.
[112] Jamie.
[113] Jamie.
[114] 'Lostwordsbook | The Lost Words', accessed 3 February 2022, https://www.thelostwords.org/lostwordsbook/.
[115] Robert Macfarlane, Stanley Donwood, and Dan Richards, *Ghostways: Two Journeys in Unquiet Places* (New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company, 2020).

own voice and champions with urgency the need for humanity to reconnect with nature at every level.

In terms of this genre, where Macfarlane has been foundational, there are an overwhelming number of British authors who have also contributed within this epistemic approach. Where Macfarlane converses about mountains, wild places and ancient footpaths, a new wave of writers have expanded the genre further in their areas of focus. Katherine May takes on the season of Winter in her work, Wintering (2020), backdropping it with her own struggles with the dark and cold days, encouraging readers that nature teaches us that, 'Winter is not the death of the life cycle, but its crucible'[116]. Christopher Nicholson takes the theme to a more specific level when focussing on patches of un-melted snow in the clefts and crannies that he observes on his walks in the Scottish Highlands in *Among the Summer Snows* (2018), but again re-conceptualises the seemingly ordinary into lessons, 'about love and loss, fragility and chance, the wide world and the near world'[117]. *Wanderland* (2020) by Jini Reddy offers a much broader view of various landscapes and places, very much in the Macfarlane mould (with the ubiquitous endorsement from him on the back cover) but does so from a refreshingly different perspective. Reddy is British by birth but was bought up in Canada with South African and Indian heritage. 'People I meet for the first time in the countryside often look at me a second longer than they need to…a woman with coffee-coloured skin walking on her own.'[118] Reddy doesn't have a singular focus but sets off in search of 'magical places', in an unashamed admission of her journalistic instinct to write something that will appeal to the cultural

[116] Katherine May, *Wintering: The Power of Rest and Retreat in Difficult Times* (Rider, 2020), 13.
[117] Christopher Nicholson, *Among the Summer Snows: In Search of Scotland's Last Snows* (September Publishing, 2017) From the back cover.
[118] Jini Reddy, *Wanderland: A Search for Magic in the Landscape* (London Oxford New York New Delhi Sydney: Bloomsbury Wildlife, 2021), 32.

zeitgeist. This isn't a particularly convincing read therefore, and whilst she fulfils Jamie's desire to see more non-white, non-male contributors to the genre, she fails in terms of the 'awful lot of 'I'' that Jamie derides in Macfarlane's work. Reddy is extremely present in each and every encounter: 'I want to connect with the spirit of the land. I want to feel heard, cared for, led. I want signs, synchronicity, the whole deal!'[119]. But there is a freshness and a vulnerability within this work that is reflected by a new wave of authors who are taking a more circumspect, less serious approach to the task of nature writing. Where Deakin and Macfarlane are somewhat academic experts using this genre to educate and enthral, writers like Reddy bring enthusiasm, honesty and green ignorance that create pathways for a much broader audience to engage with.

Whether it's Macfarlane's call to the perspectives that mountains bring to human life and death, Deakin's revitalising and life-giving pond swimming, May's lessons from nature to thrive in winter or Reddy's infectious drive to get out of the city and find places of enchantment, these epistemic writings are more than just knowledge bearing. In this genre of writing the epistemological process is subtle and unfinished, it is deliberately enticing, andragogical and heuristic.

Alongside this style of New Nature Writing, is a progressively emerging sub-genre of work that focuses on the unseeable biological processes of the natural world. These invisible interactions are predominantly considered within plant life, with some also focusing on animal life, but the epistemology that is sought to be enlightened is around social processes

[119] Reddy, 222.

and connectivity – and especially ones that contain lessons for humanity. There have been countless books written on arboreal subjects, many focused on the human relationship with trees as shelter, fuel and life-giving oxygen organisms, but this new writing is concerned with the vital, internal life of trees and examines their symbiotic communities. The publishing phenomenon that has seen a significant surge in this genre and bought previously unknown understandings and words into the cultural norm, is Peter Wohlleben's, *The Hidden Life of Trees: What they feel, How they communicate* (2016). Wohlleben, a German horticulturist and forester, appears to have published his work at just the right moment (others had attempted in the past to communicate the same ideas but did not meet the same popularity, Colin Tudge's Secret Life of Trees (2006) for example is a very similar iteration of this style but is obscure in comparison with this work). Landing at the zeitgeist moment, Wohlleben introduces the concept of trees as complex, intelligent and interdependent entities. This somewhat fanciful and at times, overreaching in its anthropomorphistic and animistic claims of tree-life, has none-the-less captured the vision of a post-secular society and reenchanted the woods in ways that modernists would never have thought possible. Public scientist and environmentalist Tim Flannery, observes just this in his foreword to the book in saying:

> We read in fairy tales of trees with human faces, trees that can talk, and sometimes walk. This enchanted forest is the kind of place, I feel sure, that Peter Wohlleben inhabits. His deep understanding of the lives of trees, reached through decades of personal observation and study, reveals a world so astonishing that if you read his book, I believe that forests will become magical places for you too.[120]

Wohlleben popularises the scientific work of recent decades that have identified forms of communication between trees. This is done through fungal networks called mycorrhiza which

[120] Peter Wohlleben, *The Hidden Life of Trees: What They Feel, How They Communicate*, Illustrated edition (Vancouver, BC, Canada : Vancouver, BC, Canada ; Berkeley: Greystone Kids, 2016) Foreword.

form vast weblike structures that interconnect trees under the ground. These mycorrhizal networks, Wohlleben explains, act like a 'wood wide web'[121] with information being passed from tree to tree, with the theory that this creates communities of trees that share nutrients and act in unity against disease. The fact that words like 'mycorrhizal' and concepts of symbiotic relationships with the forest are so accepted and adopted into societal language and understanding, whilst these concepts are still being studied and understood in scientific circles, is further evidence of the veracious cultural hunger to appropriate these kinds of nature imparted knowledge. Wohlleben is, like all these other authors, writing in an appeal to be kinder to nature, to save it, and the anthropomorphism of his subject does this but also greatly increases the appeal in ways that his predecessors failed. He says, 'When you know that trees experience pain and have memories and that tree parents live together with their children' he argues, 'then you can no longer just chop them down and disrupt their lives with larger machines.'[122]

The spiritual implications of this type of writing have fuelled activity such as that found within the Forest Church movement. As I will show in detail in the next chapter, this kind of notion, that the natural world has important things to teach us may have cultural contestation over who or what is the source provider of this knowledge, if there need be any source at all, but the Christian mind should be seeking to make connections. Christians are therefore rightly provoked to ask questions around these knowledge giving opportunities of being in nature and should be able to affirm the genesis of this knowing as being the Creator's voice coming from within the natural world.

[121] Wohlleben, 11.
[122] Wohlleben, xiv.

3.1.1.2 New Nature Writing as Topophilic

If nature writing as epistemic is seeking to get people out and engaging with the vast, magical and wild aspects of nature, topophilic writing shares something of the same goal but uses very different stimuli in its approach. Popularised by influential geographer Yi-Fu Tan, the term topophilia refers to, 'the affective bond between people and place or setting'. This genre of New Nature Writing is singularly focused on a particular geographical place or on a specific species of animal, bird or plant. This is a deeply personalised form of writing where the view that is presented to the reader is in close-up; considered in every diminutive detail and observed over long periods. This type of writing might seem to have a long history, with books on particular species of flora and fauna being the standard texts of birdwatchers, gardeners and nature lovers in general. But this new genre is different. Here the concern is not with the taxonomies of knowing about birds or insects or trees from descriptions on a page, the focus is on the intimate relationship between the writer and an object and its behaviour within its location.

This is a genre that is flourishing. It is perhaps *the* publishing phemonena within the wider phenomenon of British New Nature Writing. As researcher, it has been fascinating to observe the exponential growth of this genre. With a handful of books firmly within this style just ten years ago, and having endeavoured to continue to read them all, it has since become an impossible task to continue to document the flood of hundreds of new and increasingly singularly focused titles.

One of the originators and propagators of this topophilc approach is John Lewis-Stempel. A farmer by trade but also a talented and prolific writer within the New Nature Writing genre. It is possible to chart the popularity and demand of this type of writing through Lewis-Stempel's work. Before his first nature focused book, Lewis-Stempel had written about fatherhood[123], war[124] and a biography of James Herriot[125] but in 2014 he wrote *Meadowland: The Private Life of an English Field*[126]. Ostensibly, this is a book about a man watching a single field, over the course of a year, and recording the things that he sees. It doesn't appear to be the subject of a best-seller, but it was this work that propelled Lewis-Stempel into the literary spotlight, with The Times calling him 'Britain's finest living nature writer'[127]. *Meadowland* also won the prestigious Wainwright Prize in 2015, which he won again in 2017 for *Where Poppies Blow*[128], becoming the first and only writer to receive the award twice.

What Lewis-Stempel did in writing Meadowland, that elevates it into an entirely different place to the traditional natural historical genre, was partly achieved by the ecopoetic prose he employs but also through the position and focus of the author. He offers almost nothing by way of explaining what he is trying to achieve, but simply states in the shortest of prefaces:

> I can only tell you how it feels. How it was to work and watch a field and be connected to everything that was in it, and ever had been. To rationalise it…is pointless. The Romantic poet William Wordsworth was not always the most reliable recorder of the British countryside, but this he got right:

[123] John Lewis-Stempel, ed., *Fatherhood: An Anthology*, Reprint edition (Woodstock: Overlook Pr, 2004).
[124] John Lewis-Stempel, *Six Weeks: The Short and Gallant Life of the British Officer in the First World War* (London: Orion, 2011).
[125] John Lewis-Stempel, *Young Herriot The Early Life and Times of James Herriot by Lewis-Stempel, John (Author) ON Sep-29-2011, Hardback* (Ebury Press, 2011).
[126] John Lewis-Stempel, *Meadowland: The Private Life of an English Field*, 2015.
[127] 'John Lewis-Stempel', accessed 13 April 2022, https://www.penguin.co.uk/authors/1060097/john-lewis-stempel.html?tab=penguin-biography.
[128] John Lewis-Stempel, *Where Poppies Blow: The British Soldier, Nature, the Great War*, Reprint edition (W&N, 2017).

Sweet is the lore which Nature brings;
Our meddling intellect
Mis-shapes the beatous form of things
We murder to dissect.[129]

Here is the essence of this topophilic genre, the personification of Tan's bond of affectation that can be experienced between people and place. This is writing about 'how it feels' and not just what it looks like. It is also striving to be honest writing, there is as much an elegiac tone as there is joyfully optimistic in Lewis-Stempel's musings of the vixen and badger and vole who visit his field each day. Nature is not over-romanticised but remains 'red in tooth and claw', realistic but considered with humility, and always able to enlighten the human condition.

> I suddenly realize that the swifts have gone. No fanfare. Just a prestidigitator's trick, a disappearance into the morning's mist. Inside I sigh a little. One of life's allotment of summers is over.[130]

Lewis-Stempel has since gone on to write numerous works, with his gaze becoming even more focussed in upon a wood[131] and a pond[132], to singular species of hare[133], owls[134] and most recently, sheep[135]. Another contributor to this subgenre is the similarly profligate, Stephen Moss. Moss is a veteran of nature writing and has contributed many different bird-watching books, but like Lewis-Stempel, saw an increase in popularity when writing in this topophilic style in *Wild Hares and Hummingbirds: The Natural History of an English Villag*'[136]. Other

[129] Lewis-Stempel, *Meadowland*, 1.
[130] Lewis-Stempel, 211.
[131] John Lewis-Stempel, *The Wood: The Life & Times of Cockshutt Wood*, 1st edition (Black Swan, 2019).
[132] John Lewis-Stempel, *Still Water: The Deep Life of the Pond* (London: Black Swan, 2020).
[133] John Lewis-Stempel, *The Running Hare: The Secret Life of Farmland* (London: Black Swan, 2017).
[134] John Lewis-Stempel, *The Secret Life of the Owl: John Lewis-Stempel*, 1st edition (London: Doubleday, 2017).
[135] John Lewis-Stempel, *The Sheep's Tale: The Story of Our Most Misunderstood Farmyard Animal* (S.l.: Doubleday, 2022).
[136] Stephen Moss, *Wild Hares and Hummingbirds: The Natural History of an English Village* (Vintage, 2012).

popular works that have consequently been inspired, where a particular place is slowly and forensically observed, have included Rob Cowen's *Common Groun*' (2014), Mark Cocker's *Claxton: Notes from a Small Planet* (2015) and Cal Flyn's *Islands of Abandonment* (2021).

Moss has continued to write in the topophilic style but focuses his gaze not upon local geography but on the locality of single, common bird species. His works on the Robin[137] and Wren[138], written as 'autobiographies', continue the transformation of this, at once observer of birds, into an explorer of the everyday relationship that people share with their most common-or-garden birds. Other creatures to get such topohilic treatment are bees, with numerous writers such as Brigit Strawbridge Howard[139], Dave Goulson[140], Helen Jukes[141] and Jack Mingo[142] all moving closer and closer into the hive in order to bring life-lessons to light.

This may seem like a counter-intuitive way of engaging people in nature, presenting such personal, place-focused and often miniscule observations. But this is not parochial writing. It is deliberately presenting thick descriptions, offering overwhelmingly complexified processes and interactions that have the effect of drawing the reader inwards and convincing them of humanities embeddedness within these complexities and reenforcing our reliance upon them.

[137] Stephen Moss, *The Robin: A Biography : A Year in the Life of Britain's Favourite Bird*, 2017.
[138] Stephen Moss, *Wren: A Biography.* (Penguin Random House, 2020).
[139] Brigit Strawbridge Howard, *Dancing with Bees: A Journey Back to Nature* (Chelsea Green Publishing Co, 2019).
[140] Dave Goulson, *Bee Quest: In Search of Rare Bees / Dave Goulson* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2017).
[141] Helen Jukes, *A Honeybee Heart Has Five Openings* (Scribner UK, 2019).
[142] Jack Mingo, *Bees Make The Best Pets: All the Buzz about Being Resilient, Collaborative, Industrious, Generous, and Sweet- Straight from the Hive.*, Illustrated edition (San Francisco, CA: Conari Press, 2013).

There is strong evidence, considered in the next chapter, that the Church has a strong affiliation with this kind of writing. In the not-so-distant past, it seemed that it was almost part of the parish priest's job description to draw attention to the natural world within the specific locality of the parish. This was most famously expressed by the eighteenth century 'parson-naturalist', Rev Gilbert White in his ground-breaking work *The Natural History of Selbourne*[143], and was one of many such writings. However, this approach has been very much forgotten by the church. Where, in any denomination, are church leaders being trained or encouraged to consider the natural world within their parish or locality, and to actively connect their congregations with it?

3.1.1.3 New Nature Writing as Participative

If nature writing as epistemic and topophilic take a circumspect approach to encouraging readers to get out and engage with nature, there is a less subtle methodology in the genre of participative writing. Here we see practices, techniques and folklore combining to entice people to get involved with nature.

Tristan Gooley describes himself as 'a medium-sized fish in the smallest pond in the world'[144]. The pond he is referring to is 'natural navigation'. This ultimate negation of modernity and technology, goes back to times before maps, let alone satnavs, to the primal ability to get a sense of where you are and where you want to get to, simply by using nature's signs as

[143] Gilbert White, *The Natural History of Selborne*, ed. Richard Mabey, Reprint edition (Harmondsworth, Eng. ; New York etc.: Penguin Classics, 1977).
[144] Jim Holden, 'Who Is "natural Navigator" Tristan Gooley?', Great British Life, 17 December 2020, https://www.greatbritishlife.co.uk/people/what-is-natural-navigation-7296124.

guidance. Gooley has made this his career, writing about the subject in eight different books over the last eleven years, after setting up a 'School of Natural Navigation'[145] . The first work, *The Natural Navigator* (2010) introduces the art of natural navigation as 'being able to determine direction without the aid of tools or instruments and only by reference to natural clues including the sun, the moon, the stars, the land, the sea, the weather, the plants and the animals. It is about observation and deduction.'[146] Through detailed and descriptive studies of shapes of landscape, moss on tree trunks, star positions and lichen on stone walls, Gooley invites his readers to use the natural world in a completely non-harmful or exploitative way. His techniques take practice and a constant coming back to a place to see how the subtle changes mean so much more. In writing this way Gooley makes an attractive and suggestive argument for connecting with nature. There is a playfulness here rather than the seriousness of study that might be expected in a work like this. In destabilising formerly solidified conceptions of trees, stars and waves this work animates them into living, breathing signposts and changes the readers relationship towards them.

In a more invasive way, the study of wild food, or foraging, has also seen a significant resurgence over the last decade. Whether through John Wright's cyclical anthological approach[147], David Hamilton's excellent work on foraging even in the most urban settings[148], Alys Fowler's guide to growing an edible garden[149] or Adele Nozedar's resource to get your

[145] 'Courses', The Natural Navigator, accessed 13 April 2022, https://www.naturalnavigator.com/natural-navigation-courses/.
[146] Tristan Gooley, *The Natural Navigator: The Art of Reading Nature's Own Signposts*, 10th anniversary edition (London: Penguin, 2020), 5.
[147] John Wright, *The Forager's Calendar: A Seasonal Guide to Nature's Wild Harvests*, Main edition (S.l.: Profile Books, 2020).
[148] David Hamilton, *Where the Wild Things Grow: A Forager's Guide to the Landscape* (Hodder & Stoughton, 2021).
[149] Alys Fowler, *Eat What You Grow: How to Have an Undemanding Edible Garden That Is Both Beautiful and Productive*, 1st edition (Kyle Books, 2021).

kids involved in the hunt for their next meal[150], wild food is becoming an increasing popular participative activity.

> Most of us will walk past wild foods every day without noticing them. I recently tested this on a short walk from my home to the local park. In around 1000 steps, I counted sixty different plants and trees with edible parts. Every few paces a different weed, flower, tree or shrub suggested a new dish.[151]

In a similar way to natural navigation, these works are all written with a sense of adventure and offering potential for new experiences, 'once you know what to look for, a whole new world of exciting tastes will open up to you' says Hamilton. Robin Harford takes foraging a step further in seeking to teach people how to find wild plants that act medicinally, something he says 'knowledge that was once common to everyone.'[152]

Like Gooley, these are genuine experts in their fields (literally) and yet they write with accessibility and elicitation of activity as their goal. This is clearly exemplified in the seismic shift over the last decade that has seen the transformation of ornithological writing. 'Birdwatcher' has long been the natural equivalent to that of 'trainspotter' in the populist moniker to stereotype someone as a lonesome and boring individual. But writers like Simon Barnes[153], Wenfei Tong[154], Matt Sewell[155] and Jennifer Ackerman[156] are all employing various techniques, whilst openly acknowledging the previous reputation of the subject, to transform and elucidate a new way of personally engaging with the ornithological subject. Where once

[150] Adele Nozedar, *Foraging with Kids: 52 Wild and Free Edibles to Enjoy with Your Children*, New edition (Nourish, 2018).
[151] Hamilton, *Where the Wild Things Grow*, 6.
[152] Robin Harford, *Edible and Medicinal Wild Plants of Britain and Ireland* (Independently published, 2019).
[153] Simon Barnes, *How to Be a Bad Birdwatcher* (London: Short Books Ltd, 2012).
[154] Dr Wenfei Tong, *How to Read a Bird: A Smart Guide to What Birds Do and Why: 1* (The History Press, 2020).
[155] Matt Sewell, *Our Songbirds: A Songbird for Every Week of the Year*, Illustrated edition (Ebury Press, 2013).
[156] Jennifer Ackerman, *The Genius of Birds* (Corsair, 2016).

bird-books were page upon page of taxonomies of species, with an emphasis on the observation of the rare and exotic, here we find humour, challenge, daily routine setting and the use of all the senses and emotions to hybridize the possibilities of getting out and participating with nature. Where previous iterations of similar themes have been more concerned with the exactitude that was expected from within the discipline, here all that matters is the increased connectivity with nature and therefore the methodology has demanded a more urgent and destabilising affectivity, especially if it is going to persuade a new generation of nature connectors. As Nozedar puts it in her defence of foraging as an activity, 'In a world of increasingly sedentary lifestyles and a growing detachment from the food that we eat, it has never been more important to encourage children to put down their screens, get outside and engage with nature.'[157]

This type of writing has obvious connections to the work of Forest Church. Whether out of a well thought through theological motive, or simply because the cultural moment I'm describing is creating a desirous hunger to get out there, Christians are getting together to go and interact with the natural world. However, it is the sheer breadth and creativity of this subgenre of nature writing that emphasises the insipidness of the Christian response.

3.1.1.4 New Nature Writing as Salvific

Of particular interest to this thesis is the genre of New Nature Writing that correlates around the anthropocentrically focused salvific claims of nature connection. I use the word 'salvific'

[157] 'Https://Adelenozedar.Com/', accessed 13 October 2021, https://adelenozedar.com/.

here with intention. I want to employ it as provocative but appropriate terminology and also to emphasise the overlaying themes of New Nature Writing and the theological/ecclesiological dialogue that I am seeking to show through the interrogation of this non-Christian, non-religious literature. Here, salvation is expressed as a more expansive view of whole-life, healthiness and wellbeing as opposed to a soteriology that is confined to the atoning work of Christ and focussed on the goodness to come after death. This is not a denial of the traditional understanding of Christian salvation, nor of Christ's part in making all aspects of salvation possible but an acknowledgement that we can experience salvation in the 'here and now' and in this instance, of the reception of goodness from God, freely given through connecting with nature.

This genre of salvific themes is different from the previously described forms of writing, in that whilst all the previous genres imply human benefit, this genre foregrounds the supposition. Here is found works that are specifically examining and expressing these salvation themes, themes that have seemingly enraptured a post-secular audience, fuelling the populism and exemplifying the cultural moment I am seeking to describe. Again, we find prolific and varying types of this writing filling up evermore bookshelf space in book shops across the country. I want to consider two sub-genres of these salvific themes, firstly, writing that talks in more general terms about the issue before going on to consider more personal stories of salvation found from nature connection.

3.1.1.4.1 Nature as Ubiquitous Salvation

In coining the term, 'Nature Deficit Disorder'[158], author and journalist, Richard Louv, gave epiphanic form to an underlying but previously unnamed cultural anxiety. Louv's work focuses on children, no doubt a genuine concern for what he calls 'the first generation to be raised without meaningful contact with the natural world'[159], but in focusing on the youngest generation he brings provocative and apocalyptic urgency to his intended readership of parents and concerned adults. Both well-researched and clearly articulated, Louv's work *Last Child in the Woods* (2005) has been catalytic in propelling dialogue and activity aimed at the reintroduction of an increasingly attention-deficient, 'denatured'[160], generation to a natural world that can save them. In reflecting on his own experiences as a child, climbing trees and breathing in their scent, Louv says, 'the woods were my Ritalin. Nature calmed me, focused me, and yet excited my senses'[161].

Louv's genius is in figuratively naming and framing the issue, revealing the growing and provocative paternal angst of raising a generation of screen-dependent children, whilst also remaining quite positive that things can yet improve. This optimism is in contrast with fellow ecologist Bill McKibben's declaration of humanity already experiencing 'the end of nature'[162], and David Wallace Wells' more recent but equally bleak and alarming work[163]. Whether or not a reengaged-with-nature generation can save the planet isn't Louv's primary argument,

[158] Louv, *Last Child in the Woods*, 10.
[159] Louv, 6.
[160] Louv, 6.
[161] Louv, 10.
[162] Bill McKibben, *The End of Nature*, Revised edition (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2003).
[163] David Wallace-Wells, *The Uninhabitable Earth: A Story of the Future*, 1st edition (London: Allen Lane, 2019).

though his work is a convicting study in the deficit in physical, mental and spiritual wellbeing caused directly by the increasing distance of people to the rest of nature.

> Prize the natural spaces and shorelines most of all, because once they're gone, with rare exceptions they're gone forever. In our bones we need the natural curves of hills, the scent of chapparal, the whisper of pines, the possibility of wildness. We require these patches of nature for our mental health and our spiritual resilience.[164]

What Louv is referencing and certifying here is what others have called, 'the biophilic hypothesis'. The term biophilia was popularised by influential biologist and naturalist E. O. Wilson to describe the possibility of an innate, hard-wired instinct that all humans have in their proclivity towards relating to the natural world. Wilson argues that the human brain evolved in a 'biocentric world, not a machine regulated world'[165] giving humanity an 'innate tendency to focus on life and lifelike processes'[166]. It is this hypothesis, insisting that it is un-natural and harmful for people to be removed from the living world of nature, that Louv and many others have since based their more actualised work upon.

In his third book on the subject, *Vitamin N (2016)*, Louv brings a more pragmatic approach to his espoused theories of his previous books, keen to come across less luddite and more realistic. 'The point isn't that technology is bad for kids and the rest of us' he concedes but 'daily, monthly, yearly electronic immersion without a force to balance it, creates the hole in the boat that can drain our ability to pay attention, to think clearly, to be productive and creative'[167]. The book goes on to give 500 suggestions for activities that can develop a 'hybrid

[164] Louv, *Last Child in the Woods*, 262.
[165] Wilson, *Biophilia*, 32.
[166] Wilson, 1.
[167] Richard Louv, *Vitamin N: The Essential Guide to a Nature-Rich Life*, Main edition (Atlantic Books, 2016), 45.

mind' in young people, where many of the activities he encourages need a phone or some other form of technology to achieve.

Louv's work, often saturated with a North American worldview, has undoubtedly influenced British nature authors with, for example, Isabel Hardman[168], Sue Stuart-Smith[169] and Patrick Barkham[170], all offering more anglicised answers to the questions that Louv raises.

From this broad and mainly theoretical base, a growing number of books have appeared that focus in on more specific encounters with nature that propose to elicit human flourishing. Works like, Charlie Corbett's *12 Birds to Save Your Life* (2021), Emma Mitchell's *The Wild Remedy: How nature saves us* (2018), and Gary Ferguson's *Eight Master Lessons from Nature* (2019) are all examples of the uplifting and optimistic approach that can be found in this genre. What identifies them as still being firmly in the New Nature Writing style though is that all the authors not only appear within their work, but their own experiences are the validating force that hold the whole narrative together. In Corbett's case he isn't just telling the reader about various species of birds that they can learn lessons from, the ever-present subtext is how the serendipitous appearances of certain birds helped him process and deal with the grief of the sudden death of his mother. For Mitchell it is her twenty-five-year battle with depression that backgrounds her work and justifies her wild remedy claims, and it's Ferguson's longing for the vastness of his 'Mid-West' homeland that fuels his search for similar stimulation.

[168] Isabel Hardman, *The Natural Health Service: How Nature Can Mend Your Mind*, Main edition (Atlantic Books, 2020).
[169] Sue Stuart-Smith, *The Well Gardened Mind: Rediscovering Nature in the Modern World*, 1st edition (London: William Collins, 2020).
[170] Patrick Barkham, *Wild Child: Coming Home to Nature* (London: Granta Books, 2020).

This need for a personal story, to show that the author has experienced their own epiphanic moment, whilst still giving a realistic and earthed view of nature, is well illustrated in Michal McCarthy's brilliant *The Moth Snowstorm: Nature and Joy* (2015). McCarthy was the environmental editor of *The Independent*, a well-respected and authoritative figure within the world of nature, but at 71 years of age he begins his book by recalling an evocative, life-changing moment. At the age of seven, McCarthy's mother suffered what would now be understood to be a nervous breakdown but like so many of her generation she was committed to a 'mental hospital'. McCarthy and his brother were taken away by their aunt to stay with them. Whilst his brother, John, was deeply distraught and screamed every day, McCarthy says of his reaction, 'as for me, there was nothing, it was as if my soul had been ironed flat on a board with not a ripple or wrinkle in it.' However, as the weeks drew on, he recounts going out to play and coming across a buddleia plant, 'covered in jewels, jewels as big as my seven-year-old hand, jewels flashing dazzling colour combinations…the buddleia was crawling with butterflies'[171].

> I gazed up at them. I was mesmerised. My eyes caressed their colours like a hand stroking a kitten. How could there be such living gems? And every morning in that hot but fading summer, as my mother suffered silently and my brother cried out, I ran to cheque on them never tiring of watching these free flying spirits with wings as bright as flags…these wondrous visitants. Wondrous? Electrifying, they were. Filling the space where my feeling should have been. And so, through this singular window, when I was a skinny kid in short pants, butterflies entered my soul.[172]

In telling his own story he creates an affecting narrative that weaves its way through the rest of the work. This is essentially about the devastating loss of insects in the UK and the terrifying

[171] Michael McCarthy, *The Moth Snowstorm: Nature and Joy* (London: John Murray, 2016), 5.
[172] McCarthy, 5.

consequences of their continued decline. It employs a kind of switch-and-bait approach to the ecological engagement, in what he calls a 'defence through joy'[173]. What McCarthy does so well is to convince the reader of the sheer joyfulness that is to be found in nature, whilst at the very same time asks for the consideration of what life would be without it. It is unclear what McCarthy's own faith convictions are, but he clearly has some understanding of Christian language and sensibilities, when he says, 'When we are close to nature, we sometimes find ourselves, as Christians put it, surprised by joy: 'A happiness with an overtone of something more, which we might term an elevated or, indeed, a spiritual quality'[174]. He is also aware of where Christianity is lacking in its role of mediating on behalf of nature:

> Once, Christianity offered a ready explanation: our joy in the beauty and life of the earth was our joy in the divine work of its creator. But as Christianity fades, the undeniable fact that the natural world can spark love in us becomes more of an enigma.[175]

Throughout his work, where he could so easily just give lists of facts and figures about the declination of species, which he does in measure, he more often uses prosaic and earthed illustration to bring conviction. For instance, he recalls times, not in distant memory but just a couple of decades ago:

> Where butterflies filled the summer days, the moths filled the summer nights, and sometimes the moths were in such numbers that they would pack a cars headlight beams like snowflakes in a blizzard, there would be a veritable snow storm of moths and at the end of your journey, you would have to wash your windscreen, you would have to sponge away the astounding richness of life.[176]

[173] McCarthy, 30.
[174] McCarthy, 67.
[175] McCarthy, 6.
[176] McCarthy, 13.

Something as simple but as profound as the sudden awareness of the lack of splattered bugs on a car windscreen, destabilises the cultural amnesia of climate denial and creates an urgency in the reader to reengage and reappreciate the natural world.

This genre, as well as the next, of cultural or personal salvation through nature, using narrative language that is almost symbiotic with the language of religious experience, has inevitably drawn criticism. Writing in the New Humanist magazine, Richard Smyth refers to the 'the cult of nature writing' in his scathing review of this particular genre:

> Books on nature and landscape follow fashion, just like everything else. At present, the dominant mode is the transcendental: muddy-booted birdwatchers are out, and high-minded Emersonians are in. Arguments from authority – the lab smarts of the ecologist or zoologist, the field knowhow of the naturalist – have lost their clout.[177]

In making this comment, Smyth shows ignorance of the field of work that he is writing against. His inference that New Nature Writing isn't being done by 'lab smart' people is to miss the essential dialogical shift that has taken place. Whether through academic study or time in the field, these are the expert naturalists of our day. Goulson writing about his interactions with bees, is Professor of Biology at Sussex University, Lewis-Stempel, focussing on the life of an English field is a farmer whose family have farmed his land for seven-hundred years, MacCarthy was the environmental expert for the Independent for 27 years. The style of writing has shifted but the expertise of the author, in most cases, is established before the writing takes place. Whilst the caricature that Smyth is lampooning is not found in the essential and enduring writers of this genre, it is however undeniable that the accusation

[177] 'The Cult of Nature Writing', accessed 17 February 2022, https://newhumanist.org.uk/5019/the-cult-of-nature-writing.

holds truth in some cases. In the 'following of fashion' some authors lack any empirical conviction that the role of nature is used as anything other than a prop to make their points or tell their story. Numerous celebrities have jumped on to this bandwagon and written their own 'nature-saved-me' books after embarking on a pilgrimage or visiting some childhood epiphanic moment. But Smyth makes too broad a critique in his approach that misses the point of this writing, and it becomes clear that he is most offended by the post-secular, religious connotations of this type of writing:

> When highly articulate, highly educated, highly confident people experience intense emotion, books tend to happen. When we're lucky, the book has a subject that is strong enough and fascinating enough to bear the weight of the prose; the content squeezes out the waffle. Where the subject is weak or ill-defined, we can consider ourselves less fortunate. For a long time, religion – inspiringly evocative and helpfully vague – was the topic of choice for such empty books; now, very often, it is nature.[178]

Smyth makes a compelling argument for the replacing activity of nature-connection as new religious behaviour. But whilst he sees this activity as vacuous and the accompanying writing as unable to 'bear the weight of the prose', he does so in the face of a tide of popularity that makes his voice sound archaic and bitter. He goes on to acknowledge, 'There is no doubt that many of the feelings triggered in us by nature are powerful, meaningful and worthy of contemplation' but again shows his hand in saying, 'Experiences of this kind shouldn't require the mediation of a prophet'. [179] What the popularity of this genre is proving, beyond doubt, whether one can fully know what motivates the compulsion or not, is that people do indeed need these 'prophets' to encourage and accompany them into their experiences of nature.

3.1.1.4.2 Nature as Personal Salvation

[178] 'The Cult of Nature Writing'.
[179] 'The Cult of Nature Writing'.

The most provocative and personal genre within New Nature Writing is found where the symbiotic themes of nature connection and individual loss and suffering are explored. Where the previous work considered nature as salvific to all, this approach sees with greater specificity, the role that nature has played in the salvation of the author.

Few books in recent decades have surprised the publishing world in a way that Helen Macdonald's *H is for Hawk* (2014) has. The initial reviews of the book were not always favourable, both critiqued that it wasn't good enough nature writing and that it was too dark a memoir[180]. Mark Cocker first described this work as 'at once a misery memoir…and a falconer's diary'[181] and fails to foretell just how influential this work was going to become. It arrived at the opportune, post-secular and fecund moment and became a best-seller that redefined the personal memoir genre and a significant best-seller across the globe.

In 'H is for Hawk', Macdonald's lament is visceral and raw, felt in the wake of her beloved father's death and the cause of mental breakdown and complete withdrawal from the world. In her grief, she returns to her childhood love of falconry, not initially as a healing exercise but in a kind of myopic grasp of something familiar and distracting. She buys a goshawk, a hawk with a notoriety of stubborn aggressiveness, extremely difficult to tame, reflecting the grief inside herself, and starts to do life alongside this young bird called Mabel. On first sight of her, Macdonald describes her as, 'A reptile. A fallen angel. A griffon from the pages of an

[180] See for example: Eileen Battersby, 'Bird Tale That Fails to Fly: H Is for Hawk by Helen Macdonald', The Irish Times, accessed 18 January 2022, https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/books/bird-tale-that-fails-to-fly-h-is-for-hawk-by-helen-macdonald-1.1917840.
[181] Mark Cocker, 'H Is for Hawk by Helen Macdonald – Review', *The Guardian*, 23 July 2014, sec. Books, https://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/jul/23/h-is-for-hawk-helen-macdonald-review.

illuminated bestiary. Something bright and distant, like gold falling through water.'[182] She goes on to describe a growing co-dependency of human and beast, taking great care not to write in ways that simply project her emotions and situation on to the bird but uses the hawk as a space within which meaning, hitherto unobtainable because of the grief, begins to emerge.

This isn't the first time that wild animals as saviours, or at least companions, have been seen in literature. Whether an otter in Gavin Maxwell's *Ring of Bright Water'*(1957) or the kestrel in Barry Hine's *A Kestrel for a Knave'* (1968), these fictional attempts to describe how animal behaviour can have affecting impact hold echoes of works like Macdonald's. But in writing this way Macdonald incarnates the genre in a personal-factual narrative and elevates and establishes the veracity of the interdependent relationship. She says, 'Some deep part of me was trying to rebuild myself, and its model was right there on my fist. The hawk was everything I wanted to be: solitary, self-possessed, free from grief and numb to the hurts of human life.'[183] Whilst there is some healing of grief through this animal relationship, it is small and slow, it momentarily lifts but crashes back down again, in what Macdonald calls, 'comfort in the blithe superiority that is the refuge of the small'[184]. And, in the end, whilst lessons of patience and trust enable a return to normal life, the sadness and loss is never fully sated and, just like the hawk, remain unpredictable, ungrateful and untameable.

This voguish genre has seen many others follow in Macdonald's lead but with some subtle shifts in the last few years. Where different themes of human malaise have been explored,

[182] Helen Macdonald, *H Is for Hawk* (London: Vintage Books, 2014), 53.
[183] Macdonald, 85.
[184] Macdonald, 31.

from addiction to childhood trauma, the commonality continues to be in the personal salvific qualities of nature connection. This body of writing tends to fit into one of two categories. In the first instance, there is retrospective work. Here, established nature writers, perhaps mindful of the permission for more personal introspection, sanctioned by the success of authors like Macdonald, can be found writing in very different styles from their previous work. Secondly, this type of writing has attracted both debutant authors as well as writers who have never written within the nature genre before.

In terms of established nature writers and personalities, examples are Richard Mabey's *Nature Cure* (2008) and Chris Packham's *Fingers in the Sparkle Jar* (2017). Where Mabey predates Macdonald, and ironically writes very little about nature in curative ways in his book - regretting his chosen title and acknowledging its inappropriateness[185] - Packham chooses this moment to revisit his childhood and chart the salvific place that nature has played in his life. In this unconventional, chaotic, Bildungsroman memoir, it feels as though Packham's previously unrevealed Asperger's syndrome is given free reign. Here, chronology, subject matter and even style do not always follow any predictable patterns, but in vulnerable and honest ways Packham shows how nature held his attention, and his emotions, when all else failed to connect. These themes are picked up in the surprise winner of the 2020 Wainwright Prize for Nature Writing, Dara McAnulty's 'Diary of a Young Naturalist' (2020). The reason this work made such an impact was partly because McAnulty was sixteen years old when he wrote the book, but also because he too is non-neurotypical, having autism. In more accessible form than Packham's approach, McAnulty's diarised entries offer a most fascinating insight, where

[185] Patrick Barkham, 'Can Nature Really Heal Us?', *The Guardian*, 14 March 2020, sec. Books, https://www.theguardian.com/books/2020/mar/14/wild-ideas-how-nature-cures-are-shaping-our-literary-landscape.

the intersectionality of normal teenage transitions and tensions, generational ecological anxiety and neurodiversity all coalesce on the page. There is a raw honesty in this work, McAnulty clearly has supportive parents, but his background is growing up on a council estate in Northern Ireland, constantly bullied at school for both is autism and his passion for the natural world. Nature is not so much his cure as his often sole and most consistent companion, the one thing that seems to understand him and enables him to make sense of himself. He describes being alone on top of a hill, 'Alone but for the hazel, showing us who it really is – I think it's my favourite thing about late Autumn, the way it reveals the structure of trees. Angled maps, splayed vulnerability. This is what they really look like, leafless, down to bare branches.'[186]

Other, new writers who exemplify salvific nature themes are Amy Liptrot[187], Charlie Gilmour[188], Kerri Ni Dochartaigh[189] and Luke Turner[190]. All of these works share something of the ecopoetic prose that has become now familiar within New Nature Writing but do so with the autobiographical background of pain of alcoholism, childhood trauma, growing up in the Troubles of Northern Ireland, and repressed sexuality, respectively.

Liptrot, also a winner of the Wainwright Prize in 2016, writes her debut work around her slide into alcoholism. Growing up on a farm in Orkney, she is desperate to get away, her father's mental illness and the over-bearing solitude see her move to London in a bid to find purpose and friendship. It is here that her own mental health is tested, and alcohol starts to become

[186] Dara McAnulty, *Diary of a Young Naturalist* (Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 2021), 154.
[187] Amy Liptrot, *The Outrun*, Main edition (Edinburgh: Canongate Books, 2016).
[188] Charlie Gilmour, *Featherhood* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2020).
[189] Kerri NI Dochartaigh, *Thin Places* (Edinburgh: Canongate Books Ltd, 2022).
[190] Luke Turner, *Out of the Woods* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2019).

an increasingly present substance in her life. After years of troubling alcoholism, out of sheer desperation, she returns home to Orkney and it is here of all places that she faces her demons and allows the rawness of her homeland to bring healing and perspective. From joining a group for sea-swimmers, to building dry-stone walls and surveying elusive birds, she sees with fresh eyes all that she left behind. Again, this is not romanticised writing, it is descriptive and beguiling, but it is not over-promising. The addiction still remains, all is not tied up and sorted, the frayed ends are still on show, but nature is constantly helping meaning be found and perspective given.

> Now, I still pursue heightened states but do so with greater self-knowledge. I want to have a story but I have to do it sober…I want something to take the edge off. But I'm realising that times of anxiety are necessary and unavoidable and, in any case, I like the edge: it's where I get my best ideas. The edge is where I'm from. It's my home.[191]

This is also reflected in Ni Dochartaigh's more wistful but equally rooted, *Thin Places* (2021). The author also has cause to leave and yet return to her homeland, but for Ni Dochartaigh it was the trauma of a bombed out childhood home in Northern Ireland, that caused her to flee to the mainland: 'Fear held me tightly in the belly of its storm, and my identity, which had once seemed so fiercely outlined as a teenager, had faded at the edge; the lines of my map had blurred and I didn't have a compass.'[192] In provocative prose she charts her sojourn away from the Troubles as incomplete, with an inevitable need to return to the scene of the trauma in order to properly assimilate and deal with it. But she returns with fresh eyes, deeply aware that Brexit may yet have brought a return to fractiousness in her hometown of Derry but awakened to the surrounding beauty of the local lochs, mountains and cliff-edges. Ni

[191] Liptrot, *The Outrun*, 273.
[192] NI Dochartaigh, *Thin Places*, 97.

Dochartaigh is both more poetic and evocative than her peers in her writing style but somehow remains real and rooted to the healing properties of nature. As example, she reminds the reader that, 'Nature is not somewhere we go into. Nature is not just my river, or the tundra, the Highlands, and island, an empty beach or a perfectly sculpted woodland. Nature is not always silent and a bringer of healing. It is not for any one type of person, with any particular background.'[193] This admission that nature is not always a bringer of healing is an important counterpoint. Whilst the biophilic theory may bear weight that the human psyche is hard-wired towards fecundity and the natural world, it does not correlate that either nature cure is somehow universal or that its healing qualities are always available to all people. If these autobiographical works teach anything, it is that people can live in some of the most beautiful parts of the British Isles, seeing nature every day of their lives, but it takes some moment, or the stimulation of other sources, to awaken the soul to the salvific possibilities of nature. And even then, in a more positive form of addiction, it takes time and practice for these habits to take root and be most efficacious. This is exemplified in Luke Turner's *Out of the Woods* (2019). Turner, growing up as the son of a Methodist minister on the edges of Epping Forest, writes about his complex and polyvalent relationship with his neighbourhood woods that dominate his child and teenage years. As unlike McAnulty's writing as possible, here the narrative isn't granular, detailed, and anthropomorphised, but the woods of Epping Forest are on almost every page. In this memoir as bildungsroman, nature has no personality, no essence that Turner overlays upon it but it is integral to his story in that this is his playground, his place to escape to and, unlike other nature settings, discover more about the human world in gritty and morally challenging ways. Epping Forest is close to

[193] NI Dochartaigh, 15.

the urban sprawl of London, and Turner lives in the liminal, riparian space where woods like this aren't always tranquil and life-giving but are used to dump everything from rubbish to dead bodies. Here, murder, rape and other toxicities spill up against ancient woodland. And for Turner, his own repressed sexuality, one that even he doesn't understand and is condemned by his parents' religious beliefs, is further confused by scenes that he stumbles across in these notoriously seedy fringes of the city. This is not a pleasant pastoral read. Turner does not hold back in his descriptions of his promiscuity and self-destructive behaviour. After moving to central London and swapping one bedsit or friends' floors for another, whilst continuing to revisit Epping Forest, a force that is both repulsive and magnetic to him, he decides to go and live once again on its edge. Alongside explorations of human sexuality and masculinity, the themes of Christian faith from Turner's childhood, which have never been totally extinguished despite the condemnation he feels over his bisexuality, continue to flicker throughout the memoir (he gives his parents much credit for this, despite his hurt and anger at the church, they show grace and unending kindness throughout the memoir). He is clear eyed in his condemnation of the complicity of the Church in forming the atmosphere, through generations, that has created the very need for these dark and unseen places: 'it's all too easy to forget the ingrained prejudice, loneliness and social isolation that force queer men to seek out places like Epping Forest and make them their own.'[194] Despite all this, after time and patient returning, their eventually comes a redemptive moment. He goes and stands in the ruins of an old church that generations of his family worshipped in. Where the altar would have been, grows a young tree and he places a stone there, saying:

> I am back in the moment of my own birth…the smell of the flowers is as rich and sickly as incense…I step back take off my hat and say a prayer to the God who has shaped

[194] Turner, *Out of the Woods*, 74.

> me, to the forest, to my family and to love. The forest is silent aside from the drops of melted snow from the trees. My head is full of hymns.[195]

The ending of the book draws criticism from some, mainly because part of his redemption is a return to his Christian roots, something that seems so extremely unlikely throughout the book. Whilst he is 'right on' in terms of appeal to the post-secular imaginary, this criticism might point to the fact that our Christian heritage is not as acceptable to return to as other forms of spirituality.

In summary, what can be observed by the proliferation of New Nature Writing, is that there is a very real social phenomena happening in the UK. But, more pertinently for the purposes of this thesis, I believe that all this writing, almost without exception, draws on themes and asks questions, that the Church should be extremely well equipped to interact with and yet, seems ponderously emboldened to do so.

3.2 The Activities: New Activity

Where the literature around nature connection seems to be evolving into more complex and honest reflections, the associated renaissance in organised activities is proliferating in confident and optimistic ways. In the writing, nature's curative abilities remain undoubtedly possible but are more demanding, less summonable, and less simplistic than in previous iterations of the genre. It is hard to quantify with any certainty whether the increased cultural move towards nature connecting activities as salvific practice preceded the increased popularity in the writing, making the writing more of a reflection of a cultural moment, or

[195] Turner, 264.

whether the writing has been responsible for reigniting the embodied activity through its evocative, eliciting prose. Perhaps the most realistic reflection is that there has been a deeply dialogical process in play. The writing has been both a prophetic/apocalyptic window into an unimaginable ecological future and a cultural mirror that has reflected nature connection as salvific of a more anthropocentric apocalypse of worsening mental, physical, social, and spiritual health. The increase in popularity of nature connecting activities, and the associated marketability and monetisation of them, have undoubtedly been inspired by New Nature Writing and this actualised behaviour has propagated an insistence for more of this type of literature.

In terms of the organised activity, with its purpose of re-connecting people with the natural world, there appear to be two categories of activity. Firstly, over the last two decades there have been new activities and techniques to satiate public demand and secondly, there has been a renewing of old practices to reach a wider audience and entice a new generation into nature. But, whether old or new, these activities are multifarious and rarely organised in any centralised way. The organic, localised nature of the activities, suspicious of the corporatisation of their work, rarely sit neatly under any governing body. This makes the summarisation of nature connecting activities in their entirety extremely difficult. Here I want to simply cover a few groupings of types of activity in order to illustrate the popularity and also to consider the societal needs that they are fulfilling.

3.2.1 Shinrin-Yoku

The Japanese practice of Shinrin-Yoku, or 'forest bathing', has become an increasing popular activity here in the UK. It fulfils all of the faddish criteria of new nature connection, in exemplary ways. The National Trust describe the process in this way:

> Forest bathing is no more complicated than simply going for a wander in your local woods or park. The only difference is that rather than walking for exercise, you take the time to really focus on the natural world around you: from the rays of sunlight catching the leaves to birdsong echoing from the canopy.[196]

As Forestry England explain it, 'being calm and quiet amongst the trees, observing nature around you whilst breathing deeply can help both adults and children de-stress and boost health and wellbeing in a natural way.'[197] The practice began in Japan and the title of Shinrin-Yoku was 'coined by the Japanese Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries in 1982'. In a bid to counteract an alarming decline in mental health, 'Japan's Forest Agency invested $4 million to study forest bathing and set up the 'International Society of Nature and Forest Medicine'.[198] This seemingly simple activity, only varying between some describing it as slow, mindful walking in the woods to others depicting it as a more passive sitting or lying down under the tree canopy, has startlingly beneficial health claims. Writing in the *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, Hansen et al consider the therapeutic effects of Shinrin-Yoku as benefiting 'the immune system function (increase in natural killer cells/cancer prevention); cardiovascular system (hypertension/coronary artery disease); the respiratory system (allergies and respiratory disease); depression and anxiety (mood

[196] 'A Beginner's Guide to Forest Bathing', National Trust, accessed 18 January 2022, https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/lists/top-10-places-for-forest-bathing.
[197] 'Your Guide to Forest Bathing', Forestry England, accessed 12 April 2022, https://www.forestryengland.uk/blog/forest-bathing.
[198] 'What Is Shinrin-Yoku?', *Forest Bathe* (blog), 13 October 2017, https://forestbathe.co.uk/forest-bathing/what-is-shinrin-yoku/.

disorders and stress); mental relaxation (Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder) and; human feelings of "awe" (increase in gratitude and selflessness)'[199]. These claims are echoed by Dr Qing Li, of the Nippon Medical School, in saying that Shinrin-Yoku 'has the power to counter illnesses including cancer, strokes, gastric ulcers, depression, anxiety and stress… It boosts the immune system, lowers blood pressure and aids sleep.'[200] Hansen et al go on to evaluate a growing body of scientific research that all seem to support these claims and summarise their findings in saying: 'The practice of Shinrin-Yoku and Nature Therapy are ontological realism and offer humans an authentic way of healing and health prevention for the mind, body and spirit'[201]. This work has been cited many times within the scientific community and whilst many are asking for further, broader, longitudinal research, the general attitude of healthcare practitioners can be summarised by Harper et al in response to the issue: 'Conversely, or maybe concurrently, a holistic theory of integrated relatedness may be developed as a parallel expression of support for nature in therapy while the explanatory science catches up.'[202] This kind of pragmatism where those involved in seeking a more holistic approach to healthcare are finding undeniable benefits, either through their own practices of Shinrin-Yoku or their patient's testimonies, is compelling. The growing practice of 'social prescribing' in the UK, where doctors can prescribe non-medicinal or non-traditional therapies to patients is turning to practices like Shinrin-Yoku.[203]

[199] Margaret M. Hansen, Reo Jones, and Kirsten Tocchini, 'Shinrin-Yoku (Forest Bathing) and Nature Therapy: A State-of-the-Art Review', *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 14, no. 8 (August 2017): 851, https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph14080851.
[200] Harriet Sherwood, 'Getting Back to Nature: How Forest Bathing Can Make Us Feel Better', *The Observer*, 8 June 2019, sec. Environment, https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2019/jun/08/forest-bathing-japanese-practice-in-west-wellbeing.
[201] Hansen, Jones, and Tocchini, 'Shinrin-Yoku (Forest Bathing) and Nature Therapy'.
[202] Nevin J. Harper, Carina R. Fernee, and Leiv E. Gabrielsen, 'Nature's Role in Outdoor Therapies: An Umbrella Review', *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 18, no. 10 (12 May 2021): 5117, https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph18105117.
[203] Sherwood, 'Getting Back to Nature'.

With evidential support for the benefits of the practice, there is also a piquant, post-secular fashionability to its attraction when it is coupled to its Eastern, mystical roots that many are invoking. However, this practice is not an ancient one, nor one borne out of any religious or spiritual convictions. This is an immersive practice of feeling, of meaning-making, and using all of the senses, 'Smelling the smells, touching your surroundings, immersing yourself in nature' as one 'influencer' and blogger describes this 'wellness trend'[204]. And, in ways that coalesce with all these different activities, it has evolved into both an activity that people are doing with others, and 'experts' are increasingly monetising.

What seems like the perfect solitary activity, even an essential part of the practice, is seeing a rise in popularity where organisations are now running group sessions. For £45, one can join an event organised by *The Forest Bathing Institute*[205], where guides 'will lead you through mindful activities in a Forest environment, helping you to relax and feel the benefits of spending time in woodland while a guide holds space for you.'[206] There are many of these events to choose from and most of them happen in woodlands and forests that have open, free access to them. Whether just opportunistic free-market capitalism or otherwise, the fact that a practice that should be accessible to all, at no cost, is seeing numbers of people attend organised groups with guides to 'hold the space' for them, perhaps reveals that this is as much about another way to connect with people as it is with nature.

[204] 'What Is Forest Bathing: Wellness Trends 2020', Wendy Rowe, 31 January 2020, https://wendyrowe.com/wellness/forest-bathing.
[205] 'Home', The Forest Bathing Institute, accessed 20 April 2022, https://tfb.institute/.
[206] 'The Forest Bathing Institute (TFBI)', Eventbrite, accessed 21 April 2022, https://www.eventbrite.co.uk/org/30588482964?ref=eofblike.

3.2.2 Forest Schools

Few initiatives have done as much to disrupt the normative educational practices of the British school system than Forest Schools. Developed in Scandinavian pre-schools in the 1980s, Forest Schools first appeared in the UK after some nursery nurses, from Bridgewater College, Somerset, went to Denmark in 1993 and were 'enthused by the largely outdoor, child-centred/play-based pedagogy'[207]. This transformed their teaching practices and developed into the college offering a 'BTech in Forest School' in 1995. By 2000, Wales and several local authorities in England 'took up Forest School' and in 2002 the first national conference on Forest Church techniques was held where a UK definition was agreed upon:

> *An inspirational process that offers children, young people and adults regular opportunities to achieve, develop confidence and self-esteem through hands-on learning experiences in a local woodland environment.*[208]

Few could have predicted just how widespread the impact of this work would become. There are now around 200 Forest Schools in the UK[209] - numbers are hard to ratify, as these are not officiated by any one association, but that is the number estimated by the most significant organisation, The Forest School Association. Whilst there may only be around 200 of these Forest School's where the play-based pedagogy, in an outdoor setting, make up the entirety of the curriculum, there are also thousands of nurseries and schools that now have elements of the Forest School philosophy embedded in their weekly activities. The Forest School

[207] 'What Is Forest School?', *Forest School Association* (blog), accessed 19 May 2017, http://www.forestschoolassociation.org/what-is-forest-school/.
[208] 'History of Forest School', Forest School Association, accessed 21 April 2022, https://forestschoolassociation.org/history-of-forest-school/.
[209] 'Forest Schools Are Booming in the UK – Here's Why', Positive News, 7 January 2022, https://www.positive.news/society/education/forest-schools-are-booming-in-the-uk-heres-why/.

Association alone had trained 'over 12,000 practitioners'[210] in Forest School practices by 2014. Mel McCree, a lecturer in early childhood studies at Bath Spa University, describes this latter approach of integrating Forest School ideology into normal school life as, 'FS Lite' this is as opposed to the 'FS Full Fat' ideation of 'pure Forest School'. She is critical of nurseries and schools who include Forest School in their prospectuses as purely 'marketing to compete for new business [children] and that practice can be reduced to a tick-box exercise in this cynical but pragmatic approach', and calls this nominal approach 'FS Ultra-Lite'[211].

Whether or not Forest School, full-fat or otherwise, will have lasting impact on the educational system in the UK is hard to predict but there are rigorous, empirical studies taking place to affirm, or not, the insistence that this approach is beneficial for children. Either way, the consumer choice seems to attest that parents and guardians, when considering schooling options, want to at least see evidence of this new approach to an increase in their children being outdoors, more often.[212] This desire appears to have been heightened by nearly two years of educational lockdowns, due to Covid restriction. The Forest School Association claims that 'since March 2020' their work has 'never been more popular', and two-thirds of their schools seeing an increase in demand over pre-lockdown levels[213].

Outside of the educational realm, similar nature-connecting activities are also flourishing. New groups, often independent and informal, are encouraging children to come together

[210] 'History of Forest School'.
[211] Liz Lightfoot, 'Forest Schools: Is Yours More a Marketing Gimmick than an Outdoors Education?', *The Guardian*, 25 June 2019, sec. Education, https://www.theguardian.com/education/2019/jun/25/forest-schools-more-marketing-than-outdoor-education.
[212] Miranda Bryant, 'Forest Schools Flourish as Youngsters Log off and Learn from Nature', *The Observer*, 31 October 2021, sec. Education, https://www.theguardian.com/education/2021/oct/31/forest-schools-flourish-as-youngsters-log-off-and-learn-from-nature.
[213] Bryant.

outdoors and are using various techniques to entice. Examples of this are found in organisations that will help children engage with food foraging[214], learning bushcraft techniques[215], geocaching[216] and stargazing[217]. All over the UK now, nature focussed, outdoor groups for children are flourishing. The evidence for this is seen on website like 'Club Hub', an online directory that receives 'over 200,000 views every month', where local groups can advertise their activities. On this site alone, 168 different nature clubs for children are listed[218]. These supervised groups for children, a space once dominated in their organising by the Church and uniformed organisations, is now the domain of a primarily secular set of activities.

3.2.3 Technology

As also noted in the work of Richard Louv, there is a pragmatic inevitability that technology was going to find ways to accompany people in their pursuit of greater nature connection, and this is very much proven to be the case.

This may seem a counterintuitive and potentially negative development, but the types of technology that are proving most popular is where the technology enhances and educates nature, rather than attempts to replace it. When launching his company, Meta, Mark Zuckerberg drew much criticism as he painted a picture of a future, virtual reality world, 'the

[214] 'Welcome To', Family Foraging Kitchen - Discover Cornwall's Free Food, accessed 21 April 2022, https://familyforagingkitchen.co.uk/.
[215] 'Family Bushcraft Weekend Course in Sussex, Wildwood Bushcraft', Wildwood Bushcraft, accessed 21 April 2022, https://www.wildwoodbushcraft.com/family-bushcraft-weekend-course.
[216] 'How Geocaching Can Get Your Family Outside, Moving, and Having Fun', Active For Life, 9 October 2014, https://activeforlife.com/have-fun-with-geocaching/.
[217] 'For Families at the Royal Observatory', accessed 21 April 2022, https://www.rmg.co.uk/royal-observatory/families.
[218] 'Nature Activities for Kids | Children's Activity Directory', *Club Hub UK* (blog), accessed 7 March 2022, https://clubhubuk.co.uk/listings/nature/.

metaverse', that would be an immersive experience and one that he claimed would be better than the 'limited' real world[219]. Zuckerberg's point may have been that in a virtual world people can 'travel' to see aspects of the natural world on any point of the globe, but it has been rightly met with derision as a 'soulless virtual vision'[220]. Things may yet change as technology changes and improved the virtual experience, but instead of creating further distance between people and the natural world, the technologies that are flourishing are phone apps and other wearable tech that actively encourage the user out into nature.

In terms of apps, initiatives like iNaturalist[221] are changing that way that the scientific community and the every-day nature buff are interacting. The iNaturalist app, developed as a joint initiative of National Geographic and California Academy of Sciences, encouraged users to take pictures of wildlife, upload them and then discuss their findings with 'fellow naturalists'. This has so far elicited nearly ninety-five million different observations, from over five million users and identified over three-hundred and forty thousand different species. This type of community sharing experience is seen in many other apps, many of them based in the UK. Whether from the Zoological Society of London[222], the RSPB[223], the Wildlife Trust[224] or Outdoor Classroom[225], all have released apps that are asking people to interact with one

[219] 'Mark Zuckerberg Says Virtual Reality Is Better than the "Limited" Real World', The Independent, 12 October 2017, https://www.independent.co.uk/tech/mark-zuckerberg-virtual-reality-better-real-world-comments-vr-a7995546.html.
[220] Jacob Silverman et al., 'The "Metaverse" Is Facebook's Soulless Virtual Vision for the Future of Life and Work', *The New Republic*, 30 August 2021, https://newrepublic.com/article/163461/metaverse-horizon-workrooms-facebook-soulless-virtual-reality.
[221] 'iNaturalist United Kingdom', iNaturalist United Kingdom, accessed 20 April 2022, https://uk.inaturalist.org/.
[222] 'Intro | ZSL Instant Wild', accessed 20 April 2022, https://instantwild.zsl.org/intro.
[223] 'RSPB Giving Nature a Home App', The RSPB, accessed 20 April 2022, https://www.rspb.org.uk/app#t2Z1hQjlWPgZhW8w.99.
[224] '30 Days Wild App | The Wildlife Trusts', accessed 20 April 2022, https://www.wildlifetrusts.org/30DaysWild/App.
[225] 'Nature Passport App', Outdoor Classroom Day, accessed 20 April 2022, https://outdoorclassroomday.com/resource/play-explore-learn-nature-passport/.

another as they gather their findings from within nature. Some of these apps, like the Wildlife Trusts, '30 Days Wild', have created specific challenges to complete, sending daily 'Random Acts of Wildness' that prompt the user to go out into nature. This increasing creative approach is centred around bringing some fun and joy into the nature connecting experience as well as connecting with others in an online community, and the data is also being used to help these organisations better understand the real state of nature in the UK. The RSPB's annual 'Big Garden Birdwatch', has encouraged people to spend a day identifying and logging the different birds that appear in their back gardens. This alongside their 'Giving Nature a Home' app has seen record numbers of people, nearly seven hundred thousand, creating data on the commonality of bird species that the Trust could never have known in such detail before. Another area where technology is proving useful and popular, is in helping people name species of animals, birds and plants. Apps, like 'Chirpomatic'[226] and 'Warblr'[227], enable the user to hold their phone in the air and the app will tell them what birds are in the vicinity by identifying their birdsong. Accuracy is limited but improving all the time and, at the very least, it causes the user to stop and listen, to appreciate the sound and from a consistent listening, create a more familiar and known natural landscape. Similarly, and more accurately, apps such as, 'PlantSnap'[228] and 'Garden Answers'[229] allow the user to hold their camera to almost any tree or plant and the app will identify its species but can also tell them if the plant is diseased and give advice on how best to care for it. As noted in the literature, by writers like Robert Macfarlane, there is something incredibly important and evocative about knowing,

[226] 'ChirpOMatic, An App For Automatic Bird Song Recognition', accessed 22 April 2022, http://www.chirpomatic.com/.
[227] 'Warblr', Warblr, accessed 22 April 2022, https://www.warblr.co.uk.
[228] 'PlantSnap - Plant Identifier App, #1 Mobile App for Plant Identification', accessed 22 April 2022, https://www.plantsnap.com/.
[229] Garden Answers, 'Free Plant Identification', *Garden Answers* (blog), accessed 22 April 2022, http://www.gardenanswers.com/.

and not knowing, the names of the things that are around us in the natural world. In this kind of technology, we see something far removed from the virtual world that was imagined, instead encountering a more hyper-realised natural world that was previously unknown to the user. What might be perceived as just playful taxonomies of learning, has the potential to bring to the user the dual benefits of a personal, experiential interaction with nature as well as creating greater care for the thing observed through the increased provenance.

3.3 The Activities: Renewed Activity

3.3.1 Birdwatching

The renaissance of birdwatching in the UK is yet another affirmation of a genuine cultural shift in new accepted abilities of once derided practices, and one that is having beneficial impacts for both people and nature. This most often solitary activity is subsequently hard to quantify in terms of popularity, but the RSPB estimated that in 2004 'some 3 million' people engaged in birdwatching in some way or another[230], with more recent research putting that figure nearer 6 million, making it Britain's 'most popular hobby'[231]. The RSPB has seen year-on-year records for its membership and now have over 1.1 million members[232]. Whilst an article in the *Financial Times* charted the phenomenal impact that the Covid pandemic had on birdwatching in the UK and claimed that it, 'turned us into a nation of birdwatchers'[233]. Using data collected from the RSPB and the Wildlife Trust, they describe significant increases in people viewing their respective websites between 2019 and 2020, with a 69% increase for

[230] 'Watching Birds | The Birdwatchers' Code', The RSPB, accessed 20 April 2022, https://www.rspb.org.uk/birds-and-wildlife/wildlife-guides/birdwatching/the-birdwatchers-code/.
[231] 'Bird Watching | Bird Spot', 17 October 2019, https://www.birdspot.co.uk/bird-watching.
[232] 'RSPB Membership Hits All-Time High | News', Birdwatch, accessed 19 May 2017, http://www.birdwatch.co.uk/channel/newsitem.asp?cate=__16298.
[233] Clare Barrett and Ian Bott, 'How Britain Became a Nation of Birdwatchers', *Financial Times*, 29 August 2020, https://www.ft.com/content/51f9520b-2677-4c2e-aa45-fa16cc6bf3b2.

the RSPB, with 72% of that increase being new users for the RSPB, and 183% increase for the Wildlife Trust. The RSPB also saw sales of bird boxes 'nearly treble', bird food increase by 68% and sales of bird baths by 440%[234]. There was also a significant increase in people watching live webcams of birds, with the Wildlife Trust seeing visits to its cameras, trained on bird boxes and perches around the country, increase from,'20,000 to 430,000' from the same period in the previous year[235]. This has led to another useful introduction of technology in the form of personal, household webcams in birdboxes and birdfeeders, allowing people to keep an eye on previously unseeable activity. These types of cameras, once the domain of specialists and too costly for domestic use, have dramatically reduced in price and ease of useability and seen a surge in popularity[236]. Even before this latest surge in back-garden interest in birds, growing evidence supports the fact that this kind of behavioural shift is having an effect on bird populations in the UK. Kate Plummer, the Senior Research Ecologist for the British Trust for Ornithology, reflecting on a large-scale empirical study of the subject, concludes that the simple act of people feeding birds in their back gardens is having considerable, positive impact:

> Individual decisions by homeowners to feed wild birds can impact cumulatively upon bird communities across large spatial scales. This growing, global phenomenon has profound potential to influence biodiversity further and should not be underestimated.[237]

Alongside this benefit to the birds, and essential to the transformation in attitudes towards birdwatching, is the claimed benefits for the birdwatchers themselves. Few personal hobbies

[234] Barrett and Bott.
[235] Barrett and Bott.
[236] For example: 'Nine of the Best Bird Box Cameras in 2022', BBC Gardeners World Magazine, accessed 3 April 2022, https://www.gardenersworld.com/product-guides/nature/best-bird-box-cameras/.
[237] Kate E. Plummer et al., 'The Composition of British Bird Communities Is Associated with Long-Term Garden Bird Feeding', *Nature Communications* 10, no. 1 (21 May 2019): 2088, https://doi.org/10.1038/s41467-019-10111-5.

have such unfashionable reputational baggage as birdwatching, with its solitary and specialist status, but in stark contrast to this, the renaissance of the practice is being found in both its universality and its social credence. Ornithologist and author, Christopher W. Leahy argues that the practice can 'make you happy'. He contends to the ubiquity of birdlife, making it an accessible activity from almost anywhere on the planet as well as describing it as solution for those who have become so removed from nature that they require tools to learn how to access it.

> A lot of people don't know what to do when visiting a natural area, thus increasing rather than reducing anxiety. Once introduced to the possibility of looking for and identifying different bird species, this problem is solved. And once the avian objective is identified, the rest of nature tends to enter the picture.[238]

Leahy goes on to state that the love of birds that manifest itself to the participant in 'four fundamental ways', namely 'as pure pleasure', 'an ever-widening curiosity that leads to new found knowledge', 'concern for the fate of the world's birdlife' and 'as a source of personal joy, solace, and relief from the all too prevalent stresses of modern life'[239]. It's this last point that is most salient, where personal, salvific themes emerge, that others have recognised and are keen to promote. An increase in peer-reviewed research exists around these claims. As example, Ratcliffe et al studied the impact of a variety of sounds and the affect that they had on individuals. They concluded that, 'bird songs and calls were found to be the type of natural sound most commonly associated with perceived stress recovery and attention restoration'[240]. Much like Forest Bathing, organisations are proactively promoting

[238] Christopher. W. Leahy, *Birdpedia: A Brief Compendium of Avian Lore (Pedia Books): 4* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021).
[239] 'Teaching Your Mind to Fly: The Psychological Benefits of Birdwatching', accessed 10 August 2022, https://press.princeton.edu/ideas/teaching-your-mind-to-fly-the-psychological-benefits-of-birdwatching.
[240] Eleanor Ratcliffe, Birgitta Gatersleben, and Paul T. Sowden, 'Bird Sounds and Their Contributions to Perceived Attention Restoration and Stress Recovery', *Journal of Environmental Psychology* 36 (1 December 2013): 221–28, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jenvp.2013.08.004.

birdwatching as more than a hobby for the lonely but as a good health practice and one that connects the participant with nature and with others. Care UK, one of the largest providers of health care for the elderly in the UK, recently published a campaign entitled '7 therapeutic benefits of birdwatching'[241]. Alongside expected benefits, such as 'getting out in the fresh air', 'physical activity' and 'connecting with nature', they are also keen to suggest that the activity can help 'connect you with friends and family…and can help create a close bond with those living with dementia.'[242] This image of a potential cross-generational appeal of birdwatching is another almost unimaginable transition that the practice has undergone in recent years, with some suggesting that it is a 'making a comeback as one of the most popular activities for hip youngsters'[243].

A similar renewal of interest has been seen in other outdoor activities where seemingly solitary and passé pursuits have been transformed into of-the-moment, wellbeing crazes that are being organised as group undertakings. This is exemplified when considering the common practices of walking, swimming and gardening.

3.3.2 Walking and Wild Swimming

Data from research company Mintel, suggests that people hiking in the UK increased from 16% to 23% between 2018 and 2022, and that the demographic of those doing this kind of walking is diversifying, with 24% of 16-24 year olds taking part[244]. They go on to state, 'The

[241] '7 Therapeutic Benefits of Birdwatching | Care UK', accessed 10 August 2022, https://www.careuk.com/company/care-uk-campaigns/bird-watch/7-therapeutic-benefits-of-birdwatching.
[242] '7 Therapeutic Benefits of Birdwatching | Care UK'.
[243] Kevin Hinton & Ryan Mckenzie, 'Vancouver Magazine', Vancouver Magazine, accessed 14 February 2022, https://www.vanmag.com/hipster-alert-bird-watching-is-the-next-big-thing.
[244] Mintel Presss, 'These Boots Are Made for Walking.', Mintel, accessed 18 August 2022, https://www.mintel.com/press-centre/leisure/these-boots-are-made-for-walking-nearly-a-quarter-of-brits-are-hikersramblers.

balance between physical and mental wellness that consumers now seek is reflected in the growing popularity of 'mindful' exercise such as yoga, and outdoor sports such as hiking that allow participants to feel connected to their environment.'[245] This comment confers meaning upon the de rigueur practice of walking and highlights the transformative element, where this isn't just walking but is mindful practice, whilst also naming it as a consumer practice. This consumerisation of such basic exercise is seen in initiatives like GoJauntly. This app based approach seeks to connect people with local walks and says, 'From long walks, step-free jaunts to wheel-friendly wanders. We want to help break-down the barriers to walking.'[246] As seen previously, the stated aims of the app are not contained to merely helping people to find places to walk but also to, 'Take pics, add details that other people may find useful and share with our growing community'[247] adding an essential communal qualification to the activity.

Writing for the BBC in 2021, Ulrike Lemmin-Woolfrey summarises well the shift in projected image that the place of swimming in the sea or rivers, ubiquitously now referred to as 'wild swimming', has undergone in the last decade. An activity open to anyone with access to open water, Lemmin-Woolfrey describes it as 'an antidote to loneliness' and containing the 'potential for mental and physical health benefits'[248]. Outdoor Swimming magazine published a report into the increase in popularity of the activity, concluding that there had been a 94% increase in participation between 2019 and 2020[249]. Whilst there is no obvious need to

[245] Mintel Presss.
[246] 'Walking App - Go Jauntly - Discover Walks, Curate Your Own and Share Outdoor Adventures', Go Jauntly, accessed 19 April 2022, https://www.gojauntly.com.
[247] 'Walking App - Go Jauntly - Discover Walks, Curate Your Own and Share Outdoor Adventures'.
[248] Ulrike Lemmin-Woolfrey, 'Why Wild Swimming Is Britain's New Craze', accessed 22 April 2022, https://www.bbc.com/travel/article/20210603-why-wild-swimming-is-britains-new-craze.
[249] 'Trends in Outdoor Swimming Report - Outdoor Swimmer Magazine', accessed 18 August 2022, https://outdoorswimmer.com/news/trends-in-outdoor-swimming-report-available-now/.

become part of a group to wild swim, the Outdoor Swimming Society saw their membership grow 38% in 2020 alone[250] with hundreds of local, independent, and informal groups forming to set up group swims. One of the most organised and successful attempts to do this is the Bluetits Chill Swim group. Started in Pembrokeshire by a group of female friends in 2014, the movement now has over 30,000 members and hundreds of groups that gather all over the world. 'The Bluetit mission is to create a confident, capable community through outdoor swimming and adventures.'[251] This statement is another example of the expansive, personally advantageous claims of what people have always done in some form but it's the clarification of the beneficial that has transformed the image of the practice. As one adherent puts it, 'I feel like me, the one that had gotten lost under responsibility and chores, I go in the sea and all of those worries leave and I emerge as me.'[252]

[250] Lemmin-Woolfrey, 'Why Wild Swimming Is Britain's New Craze'.
[251] 'The Bluetits Chill Swimmers', The Bluetits Chill Swimmers, accessed 18 August 2022, https://thebluetits.co/.
[252] 'The Bluetits Chill Swimmers'.

4: Nature Connection: What is the Church doing?

Considering the argument from the previous chapter, the task ahead is to explore and map out the response of the Church to this cultural moment. In the first instance, I want to contend that there has been a specific and intentional response which has occurred in two different movements. Through the course of my research, it became apparent that some people, connected to the Church in some way or another, have been engaged in nature-connecting practices for many years. These people and small groups have had little influence on wider church behaviour and attitudes, being seen as outliers and practitioners of unfashionable and niche interests at best, and as encouragers of anti-establishment, sub-Christian behaviour at worst. However, over the last couple of decades, the renewed cultural interest that I have described in the previous chapter has brought these same attitudes much greater attention and credence.

In this chapter I will consider, in terms of nature connecting activities, what exactly is the Church doing, how is it being done and why is it being done? Through a discursive process of an in-depth, multi-voiced, qualitative case study of the Forest Church movement, as well as a broad scan of the current landscape of other ways that the Church is responding, I will answer these questions before moving on to consider the efficacy and theological faithfulness of this response.

4.1 Forest Church: What is it?

The very nature of this hyper-localised activity, where the focus of the activities in question are organic gatherings of small numbers of people, means that the advertising of Christian

nature-connecting groups is not centralised in any one place and corroborating their existence is therefore not a straightforward task. For this reason, I have chosen to focus on the Forest Church movement as a lens through which to better understand the types of activities and groups that are happening across the UK. Forest Church, launched as a movement in 2012, is by far the most efficacious attempt so far to gather a group of like-minded people and associated groups, all seeking to connect Christian spirituality to the inspiration of God through and in the natural world.

Forest Church, to be properly understood, has two interchangeable meanings and practices. In the first instance, it is a specific movement with an informal membership, some espoused theological stance, practical guidelines on how to run a group, and whose groups also relate to other Forest Church groups. However, it has also become the nomenclature of a broader and more over-arching term for any nature-based activity that has some sort of Christian, missional or ecclesiological element or origin. As discussed in more detail later, an analogous image, to aid understanding, is that of Forest School. In the UK, there are several thousand Forest Schools[253], where children spend the majority of their time outdoors, where the curriculum is described as fluid and the totality of learning comes from the inquisition towards and exploration of the natural environment that is initiated by the child. However, since the inception of these Forest Schools in the early 1990s, educational practitioners have seen elements of the practices of Forest School that have been appealing and efficacious in certain ways for certain pupils and therefore integrated these practices into the wider 'normal' curriculum. So it is with Forest Church. Launched by a small group of people a decade ago,

[253] 'Welcome to the Forest School Association Website', Forest School Association, accessed 11 July 2017, http://www.forestschoolassociation.org/.

who were trying to formulate a response to a perceived need, Forest Church has since grown into a semi-organised, inter-relating movement of people and gatherings who share many similarities and values. Alongside this attempt to launch a connected movement, just as Forest Schools have brought change to the regular curriculum of many mainline schools, so Forest Church as an ideology has agitated and encouraged a series of thinner but more pervasive activities that are growing within the practices of churches across the UK. I will focus on Forest Church as the movement and explain what it is and what Forest Church groups do, before moving on to consider what else is happening through the activities that share in the ideation and elements of Forest Church practice.

In the simplest sense, Forest Churches are gatherings of people, generally in small numbers, always in some outdoor space, seeking to make a connection with God through the stimulus of the natural world that they encounter in that space. The leaders and facilitators of Forest Church groups would argue that it is much more than this, but in essence, if someone was to attend a group, what they would most likely be asked to participate in, would be some form of hands-on, experiential activity and within that activity, be encouraged to find meaning that either speaks of God or allows God to speak to them.

> 'The bottom line for a Forest Church is that it meets outdoors and that connection with the natural world is a core part of the gathering. A church that does outdoors what could equally be indoors may well be the right thing to do in some situations, but it is not Forest Church.'[254]

When a Forest Church meets it won't feel like a church service outdoors, there is neither the structure nor hierarchy, nor rarely the singing, but there will probably be prayer of some

[254] Cate Williams, *Forest Church: Earthed Perspectives on the Gospel*, 2019, 7.

sought, often a prewritten prayer, read from one of a small pool of writers that populate this nature/faith space[255]. There will usually be a theme, commonly tied into the current season and reflecting on the cyclicality of nature, that can be evidenced in the immediate environment. These themes will likely be connected to what the leader will interchangeably call either Pagan, Celtic or ancient rhythms. There will be a beginning where the leader explains the aim of the session, either an activity to do or some space in which to go away and consider something, and there will be a regathering to close, often with feedback and usually with cake (homemade, never shop bought). From my research, which I will analyse and expand upon throughout this chapter, it is highly likely that you will find more women in attendance than men and less likely to meet young adults or teenagers with more elderly, middle-aged and children in attendance. In terms of who is leading the group, again this is more likely to be a woman and it may be facilitated by someone who is being paid to do this task, often in a pioneer ministry position but it's equally likely to be led by a keen volunteer or as an extra-curricular activity of a local church leader. The name of this group will most often locate it to either it's community, like 'Musselburgh Forest Church', be more aspirational as in 'Open Sky Forest Church', or it might be more tightly connected to a particular local church, like 'Thornbury Baptist Forest Church'. It may not even use Forest Church in its title, but it will 'belong' or relate to the Forest Church movement in some way (most often through the Forest Church Facebook group), as in 'Wild Spirit' or 'Wilderness Worship'. Whatever it is called it will be set outdoors. 'Forest Church can only meet in places

[255] See for examples: Annie Heppenstall, *The Book of Uncommon Prayer: Liturgies and Prayers Exploring Inclusive Language and Biblical Imagery of the Feminine Divine and the Natural World* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Books, 2020); Tess Ward, *The Celtic Wheel of the Year: Celtic and Christian Seasonal Prayers* (Ropley: O Books, 2007); Mary Jackson and Juno Hollyhock, *Creative Ideas for Wild Church Taking All-Age Worship and Learning Outdoors.* (Canterbury Pr Norwich, 2016); See for examples: Rachel Summers, *Wild Worship* (Place of publication not identified: KEVIN MAYHEW LTD, 2017).

where engagement in the natural world is possible, as this is central to the practice'[256]. This could be in somewhere quite remote, in an actual forest, or on a beach but it could equally be somewhere more suburban, in a local nature reserve, on some allotments or in a park. The most common pattern of meeting is monthly, with very few gathering more frequently than that.

I offer these presumptive statements about what Forest Church is, purely to give a broad and over-arching image of what the movement is doing. The reality is far more complex and polyvalent on every level that it is considered; this is after all, human interaction where feeling and perception is at the core of the activity in question. I am essentially considering expressions of experience here, with multi-layered and multi-voiced opinions and understandings of a still fledgling movement all trying to coalesce under the banner of Forest Church. As Swinton and Mowatt remind us, the task of Practical Theology 'tends not to be (sometimes quite self-consciously), a unified, systematic discipline. Instead, it offers fragments and themes that emerge from particular situations and contexts. It uses the language of themes and patterns, rather than systems and universal concepts'[257]. In this chapter I offer some 'fragments and themes' that have emerged in the years that I have observed the development of the Forest Church movement. I cannot claim to be able to paint the fully complexified picture of all that is going on but contend that these fragments offer up enough questions, affirmations and concerns that will allow and inform a dialogical focus that can suggest some theological resource to the movement, enabling it to offer a more faithful practice.

[256] Williams, *Forest Church*, 7.
[257] Swinton and Mowatt, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research*, 12.

Moving towards the empirical, descriptive task ahead and in order to most faithfully reflect what Forest Church is in its practice, it is essential that three groups of people are heard. These three separate but interrelating groups make up the wider community of practice of the Forest Church movement and all view the movement from a different perspective. In the first instance, I will describe my listening to and interactions with those who are the progenitors and gatekeepers of Forest Church. This is primarily in order to enquire; how was it founded, what were its original intentions, and who is maintaining it now? Secondly, who are the local leaders, those people who started these various groups, inspired by the founding vision, and lead or facilitate what happens in them; what do they think they are doing and how are they going about doing this? And thirdly, who are the participants or recipients of Forest Church, the people who attend these gatherings; who are they, what do they think they're attending and what are their experiences of attendance?

4.2 The Progenitors: What was Envisioned?

4.2.1 The Origins & Founding Myths

At the very genesis of the Forest Church movement, we find a conception story that evokes and exemplifies much of the foundational, creedal statements of the movement, and is essential in gaining an understanding of what was originally intended. In almost any conversation, web search or literature about Forest Church, the name of Bruce Stanley will be found. In some cases, Stanley is credited with being *the* person who 'started'[258] or

[258] 'The Forest Church', The Green Parent, accessed 5 March 2022, https://www.thegreenparent.co.uk/articles/read/forest-church-where-nature-and-worship-meet.

'pioneered'[259] the Forest Church movement. However, Stanley himself is quick to credit a small team of other like-minded leaders who helped conceive and create Forest Church, but those other leaders acknowledge Stanley as being the catalysing force that moved coinciding conversations and activities into the actualised movement of Forest Church.

As Stanley tells the Church Times, it was at a conference, in April 2012, entitled, 'Reaching Out in Mind, Body and Spirit', where a conversation with Revd Paul Cudby, an Anglican priest who has strong connections with the Pagan community and has written extensively for a more generous understanding of Paganism[260], provided this catalytic moment. The two had been discussing Stanley's intentions to run a nature-based retreat, when Cudby first mentioned the name Forest Church:

> "I was talking to him about what I was trying to bring to birth," Mr Stanley says, "and he said: 'That's interesting, because I'm having similar ideas about starting a group called Forest Church.' I thought, 'Well, instead of going for this retreat thing, why not start a local group? Matt and Jo Arnold [who now lead East Midlands Forest Church] were ready: they just needed the seed of an idea. A couple of others also heard about it, and, again, had that same: 'Yeah, this is the name for what I'm thinking about.' They all started their own groups."[261]

Also present at the conference was Revd Steve Hollinghurst, who was working for the Church Army at that time, as 'researcher in evangelism to post-Christian culture'[262] and who was leading the conference. Along with a handful of other names[263], these three men, Stanley,

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[259] 'Bruce Stanley', Greenbelt, accessed 1 February 2022, https://www.greenbelt.org.uk/artists/bruce-stanley/.
[260] Paul Cudby, *The Shaken Path: A Christian Priest's Exploration of Modern Pagan Belief and Practice* (Winchester, UK ; Washington, USA: Christian Alternative, 2017).
[261] 'If You Kneel down in the Woods Today', accessed 3 September 2018, https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2013/4-october/features/features/if-you-kneel-down-in-the-woods-today.
[262] 'If You Kneel down in the Woods Today'.
[263] There is no 'formal' list of Forest Church founders but it's clear through the research that people like Rev Cate Williams, Matt Freer, Dan Papworth and Simon Cross, all of whom contributed to the anthological work,

Cudby and Hollinghurst, were the founding group and are still seen as the gatekeepers of the movement today. Stanley describes this group as a 'centred set' and set up a core group as being the holders of the original and purest understanding of what Forest Churches are, or at least, should be doing.

> I think we're making it up as we go along. Forest Church works as a centred set which means that participants can see what those at the core believe and are hopefully drawn to those ideas themselves.[264]

As Stanley reflects, it appears that several people, undoubtedly sensing the cultural shift that has already been described, sought to couple their Christian faith and personal spiritual practices to the zeitgeist of connecting with nature.

> Our part in Missio Dei ('The Mission of God') is relationship and respect: friendship with no ulterior motive, and an openness and willingness to journey together as valued friends who learn from each other and honour the different paths we may tread. We count ourselves as spiritual explorers in the Christian tradition making creative use of liturgy that expresses this belief.[265]

Before the fateful conversation with Cudby, Stanley had already begun gathering a group in and around his home in Wales. He expressed his motives behind the establishment of what he later called 'Mid-Wales Forest Church'[266] in an article for the influential but now defunct, Third Way magazine, in 2013:

> I'm occasionally asked what my 'hidden agenda' is by understandably suspicious people thinking about attending our local Forest Church in Mid Wales. I'm not reticent

'Earthed', that I go on to review, were all part of these very early conversations. They were all also early adopters of Forest Church practice, setting up the first flush of groups that ran from 2012 onwards.

[264] 'Third Way Magazine - Forest Church', accessed 11 July 2017, https://thirdway.hymnsam.co.uk/editions/june-2013/features/forest-church.aspx.

[265] 'Forest Church | Facebook'.

[266] In an interview I conducted with Simon Cross, an early adopter of Forest Church and a friend of Stanley's, he told me that Bruce was using the name 'Earth Abbey' to describe his idea, before the conversation with Cudby where 'Forest Church' was first mentioned.

> about admitting that I do have one. My personal hope is that through deep, participative nature connection we'll grow to understand and love nature better and care for it more effectively.[267]

I visited Stanley in his home in 2019, spending a day with him and his wife Sara, in his remote homestead in the heart of the Cambrian mountains. In conversation, Stanley expressed again this notional, theoretical germination for setting up a group but also shared a much more pragmatic and personal reason for initiating a gathering. He said that his primary purpose to begin something "came out of loneliness"[268].

The couple and their young daughter, moved from a busy life in Bristol, where Stanley was involved with several initiatives that were a part of what he referred to as, "the alt worship scene"[269]. This included being involved in the development of the 'ReJesus' website, which was a designated Fresh Expression of the Anglican Church, a virtual hub of information and activities for those outside of the church, launched in 2002[270]. It was also here that Stanley first met Steve Hollinghurst where they were a part of a 'creative expression of church'[271] together. Upon arrival in this new, remote and overgrown homestead, a good distance from anywhere and anybody, Stanley failed to find a local church that worked for them as a family. Out of a desperation to meet with other like-minded Christians, he approached the Anglican church in the nearest village of Llangurig and proposed to them that he lead an informal, outdoor gathering in a bid to "connect the bit of those people with Christ in a way that they've

[267] 'Third Way Magazine - Forest Church'.
[268] Stanley, Bruce. Interview with Bruce Stanley. Personal interview. Wales, 22 November, 2019.
[269] Ibid.
[270] This influential website, full of links and resources for more creative ways of finding out about the Christian faith, aimed at 'seekers', was removed and replaced in 2020. rejesus.co.uk now links to christianity.org.uk for what appears to be a less creative and more conservative explanation of Christianity.
[271] Bruce Stanley, *Forest Church: A Field Guide to Nature Connection for Groups and Individuals*, 2013, 8.

never done in church". Much to Stanley's disappointment, the church declined the offer. Then, through a stroke of coincidence, Stanley met Dr John Bimson. Bimson, a prolific Old Testament scholar at Trinity College Bristol, retired after 34 years of service[272] and moved just a few miles up the hill from the Stanleys. Not only was Bimson a biblical scholar, he was also a keen ecologist, teaching sessions at Trinity on creation care and the problems facing the environment. Whilst Bimson's name does not appear in any of the literature about the beginnings of Forest Church, Stanley was keen to acknowledge that it was the friendship and support of John and wife Maya, that enabled him to start the first Forest Church gathering in their area and emboldened him to try what the local church had been against. Through posters in local shops and handing out leaflets to people, Stanley said he received "a good 70% of people saying that they were interested in attending, and about 20% of them actually turned up!"[273].

I include this story here, because this is the genesis story of Stanley's Forest Church venture and is illustrative of much of the epistemological understanding of what Forest Church says about itself. It is important to understand that much of what Stanley expresses through his writings and is further echoed by so many of the other key voices of Forest Church, is that it places itself, ecclesiologically, outside of the mainstream and under suspicion from the established church. This attitude may be changing as the movement has matured and grown beyond the control of Stanley et al, but the epistemology of this early intent runs through much of the writings and attempts to quantify and qualify just what Forest Church is. This wasn't just an attempt to start a new thing, connecting with a cultural moment, it was a

[272] 'Trinity College Bristol, UK John Bimson Retires from Trinity - Trinity College Bristol, UK', accessed 2 February 2022, https://www.trinitycollegebristol.ac.uk/blog/latest-news/john-bimson-retires-from-trinity/.
[273] Stanley, Bruce. Interview with Bruce Stanley. Personal interview. Wales, 22 November, 2019.

deliberate attempt to fill a perceived void for people who had become disillusioned with traditional forms of church. In stating that, 'We recognise that many of those who have left the church departed because of poor treatment by Christians or because of a severe lack of space for spiritual exploration, not because of the person of Jesus.'[274], it is easy to extrapolate that Stanley didn't write this from a purely theoretical position but from what he had experienced himself.

This isn't to say that Forest Church has had no or little support from the wider church, far from it. By way of illustration, Jonny Baker, an influential blogger on 'alternative worship' and 'an explorer of faith in contemporary culture'[275] and Director of Mission Education for the Church Mission Society, states:

> 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?![276]

This at least intellectual or theoretical utterance of support for Forest Church and the desire to see the church do 'a lot more of this' type of activity, does not appear to be contentious in and of itself. Apart from a few what might be considered very conservative voices that have spoken out against the mere notion of this type of activity[277], the Forest Church movement in general has found support from several bishops and other senior clergy. As will be seen, the

[274] 'Forest Church | Facebook'. Found in the 'About' section.
[275] 'Jonnybaker', accessed 1 February 2022, https://jonnybaker.blogs.com/jonnybaker/.
[276] Stanley, *Forest Church*. Baker's endorsement is found in the opening pages, alongside Rt Rev Andrew John, Bishop of Bangor; Olive Drane, Fellow of St John's College, Durham and Tess Ward, Chaplain, author and leading voice within the Celtic/Pagan worship conversation.
[277] As example, and one that I will return to in the next chapter: Dave Brennan, 'What Is a Pagan Goddess Doing in a Place of Christian Worship?', brephos, 28 October 2021, https://www.brephos.org/post/what-is-a-pagan-goddess-doing-in-a-place-of-christian-worship.

tensions seem to arise on a more local level where Forest Church gatherings, such as the one that Stanley describes face more of an ecclesiological suspicion and misunderstanding.

The word 'church' is much contested within the Forest Church movement, with many of the central characters who helped form it, regarding the Church as a subjugating, negative force that has actively discouraged, or caused suspicion towards Christians who express nature connection as their chosen form of worship. In an interview on the popular 'Nomad' podcast in 2013, Stanley is asked why the name was chosen:

> I'd been struggling for over a year to think of a name, and with the name comes the model of what you might be doing as well. The closest I'd come to was 'Earth Form' and there were various other things that others had already thought of. What I like about Forest Church is, in my mind, there's a deliberate nod towards Forest School, which is not massively, widely well-known but there is this thing out there called Forest School which I imagine that there's this association, which is as Forest School is to normal school, you know, wow!, 'you mean we're going outside of the classroom?', well it's the same with Forest Church, that people might make this association.[278]

Whether or not people have made the association with Forest School, the comparison and alignment with it has merit. What Stanley describes as 'not massively, widely known' in 2013 is hard to level with what we know of Forest School today. As already stated, Forest School is a phenomenon, which has grown into some form of activity on most school curriculums right across the UK. In an Observer article in October 2021, highlighting the resurgence of outdoor-based school activity for children, they describe Forest School as being a place where, 'sessions are usually held either entirely or mostly outdoors and are intended to supplement, rather than replace, traditional education.'[279] We see here a potential divergence in Forest

[278] 22 November 2019.
[279] Bryant, 'Forest Schools Flourish as Youngsters Log off and Learn from Nature'.

School and Forest Church, as it has emerged since its 1993 inception in the UK. From a seemingly niche, fringe activity, deemed the domain of hippies and tree-huggers by the traditional education system, Forest School, with much the same mission as Forest Church, has flourished into mainstream acceptability. The core group of gatekeepers are insistent that Forest Church should not be seen as a supplementary activity, seeing no reason to argue against Forest Church's being church in and of their own right. If Forest School was to argue that they are schools in the same way, and not just an extra-curricular activity to complement wider learning, the obvious questions from parents might be, 'but where would my child learn physics, or algebra, or computer sciences?' It might be analogous to argue that if Forest Church is a church, then where will the adherents study the full scope of scripture, serve the poor or see the discipleship of children? The gatekeepers might argue that all of these things are possible within Forest Church, but you will struggle to find these core practices of the church enacted in Forest Church gatherings as they are being expressed today.

If 'church' is a contested word for Forest Church, then 'forest' is equally so. We can see why the gatekeepers would want to associate the movement with that of the highly successful Forest School but at what cost has tying the movement to the nomenclature of 'forest' had? Maybe it's obvious to people that these gatherings are not tethered to just meeting in forests, Stanley seems to think so 'And no, you don't need a forest!'[280] But there must be a dilemma for a church in the middle of a city or whose regular venue is on a beach or in a field, to name their gathering as 'forest' anything? As one local leader expressed, who calls their gathering 'Wild Church', "I know the Forest Church people say, it doesn't have to be under trees but

[280] Stanley, *Forest Church*, 4.

when you say ‘forest’ to people, what's the first thing you think of, trees…I mean, we do have a few trees but we're definitely not a forest where we meet. And so, I'm also thinking about the people that I'm trying to connect with. If I call it Forest Church they turn up to where I am, they're gonna be like, well it's not a forest!”[281].

The task to quantify exactly how many Forest Churches there are in the UK, and where these groups meet, is not a straightforward one. This is, in part, due to the nature of the movement. The hyper-localised type of activity, the relative newness of the initiative and the disorganisation of the umbrella organisation, means that no one single database of Forest Church exists. Even denominational structures, who are broadly supportive of the movement, have been unable to tell me how many Forest Church’s they know of and where they are happening.

The first attempt to gather the details of Forest Church gatherings was through Bruce Stanley’s own ‘Mystic Christ’[282] website. This site was originally set up for another of Stanley’s enterprises, as he describes it, ‘a site made for and by people exploring a journey in community with the Mystic Christ towards personal transformation and the renewal of creation.’[283] Launching in 2010 it had a flurry of blog posts, links to articles by several key names within the modern, Christian contemplative tradition in the UK, including writers Ian Adams and Annie Heppenstall and a call to establish a community of people offering, ‘a place for spiritual travellers of all traditions interested in exploring Jesus the Christ as a living reality

[281] This Forest Church leader is a Pioneer, Licenced Lay Minister and runs a group on the edge of a town, where most of the people who attend are unchurched.
[282] ‘Forest Church |:| Mystic Christ’.
[283] ‘About Us |:| Mystic Christ’, accessed 1 February 2022, http://www.mysticchrist.co.uk/site/about_us.

and mystical guide through ancient practices and contemporary thought and experience.'[284] There is also a home for the Mystic Christ Press, an attempt to 'publish resources in tune with the ideas and vision behind the Communities Of The Mystic Christ'[285]. Whatever was originally intended to be achieved by the site, the last blog post was added in 2016 and the only books published by Mystic Christ Press were two books by Stanley himself. However, as Stanley was the author and owner of the Mystic Christ site, he chose to add Forest Church as an addition here, presumably because he saw Forest Church as having a commonality with these 'communities of the Mystic Christ'. When I started trying to research Forest Church in 2016, this was the only place that offered a home for Forest Church groups to register and form some sort of database. Stanley refers to these groups as a 'loose collection of similarly minded groups that have chosen to connect'[286] and invites others to add their groups to the list. The site, somewhat incongruously given the previously loose and broad invitation to join, then states that you should at least be happy to sign up the 'vision statement'. Clicking on this link then leads you back to the vision for the 'communities of the Mystic Christ' which doesn't mention Forest Church and was written before Forest Church was conceived.

The site then lists the groups, with 10 being in the UK (8 in England and 2 in Wales) as well as 4 in America. From conversations with Stanley, I have since learned that he never planned to be the administrator of the movement and whilst he was enthusiastic about the possibilities of Forest Church, he didn't imagine he'd be the overseer or organiser, "I had no desire to facilitate the thing…all I wanted to do was to help the movement to grow, it needed to be on

[284] 'About Us |:| Mystic Christ'.
[285] 'Mystic Christ Press |:| Mystic Christ', accessed 1 February 2022, http://www.mysticchrist.co.uk/press.
[286] 'Forest Church |:| Mystic Christ'.

the map."[287] Mindful of this, Stanley set up a Facebook page where people could post news about their own Forest Church groups, offer support and share ideas[288]. This has proven to be a much more organic and efficient way of gathering these like-minded individuals and Forest Church groups. As of February 2022, there were nearly 2900 members, with the growth being exponential, seeing over a thousand joining over the last two of years and new people joining daily. It appears that, just as we saw when considering the cultural momentum of nature-connection growing during the Covid lockdown, so too the pull towards Forest Church was heightened. It's also clear that Stanley himself, along with the 'core group' described earlier, have now put their collective energy into the sustaining of the Forest Church Facebook page, and no longer maintain the Mystic Christ approach.

In a pinned Facebook post from June 2020[289], Stanley asks people to list their Forest Church group, their relationship to it under, 'facilitator, core group, participant or have heard of' as well as the location of where the group meets. In doing so, he gives the only tool that I could find, to most fully understand the breadth and reach of the movement. Before I summarise the responses, it's worth noting that this is just people who responded to Stanley's request and who also have already discovered the Facebook group. So, this is a somewhat limited view of Forest Church there will be other groups happening undoubtedly but it is the best attempt to collate the gatherings as it is currently the only option.

[287] Stanley, Bruce. Interview with Bruce Stanley. Personal interview. Wales, 22 November, 2019.
[288] 'Forest Church | Facebook'.
[289] 'Forest Church | Facebook'.

Of those who responded, through 287 different comments, 98 different Forest Church gatherings can be identified. These cover a large geographical area across most of the UK[290]. The majority, 86, are in England with 6 in Wales and 4 in Scotland, and one on the Isle of Wight. From further investigation, many of the groups have their own Facebook pages and these pages show a mixture of very active groups, at least from the content of their pages, through to seemingly dormant groups. In terms of 'likes' of these pages, numbers per group range from just 3 to the largest being River Dart Wild Church[291] with 869 members. In 88 of the listed groups, an individual is named as the leader or facilitator. The other 10 Forest Churches are named under a church or group of churches from a sub-group of another Facebook group (for example Hever Forest Church is under the 'Three Spires Benefice' in Kent and Suckley Church Forest Church, is under 'The Parish Church of St John the Baptist' in Suckley, Worcestershire.) Where the names of leaders or facilitators of the Forest Church groups is listed, 66 are female and 22 are male. This gender imbalance is also consistent within the day-to-day interactions of the Facebook Forest Church group as a whole, with the majority of these being initiated by women.

The progenitors argue that 'The setting might be urban or rural, Forest Church isn't bound by location; it's possible in the city as in the middle of nowhere.'[292] However, and as far as the information that is shared appears, only in Bristol where the Hazelnut Community Farm group meet in a smallholding on a housing estate to the North of the city, Walthamstow Forest Church who meet in small nature conservation site near an industrial estate and Downham

[290] Somewhat surprisingly, only two Forest Church's outside of the UK are mentioned here, with one being in Jersey and one considerably further afield in Puerto Rico, none of the Forest Church's in America, identified on the original Mystic Christ website, responded in this way.
[291] 'River Dart Wild Church', accessed 3 September 2018, http://www.riverdartwildchurch.com
[292] Stanley, *Forest Church*, 13.

Forest Church which is in Lewisham, South London, meeting in a local park, could be referred to as urban areas. The other groups all appear to be in more suburban and rural settings, with the commonality being woodlands, hilltops or some other nature park or reserve, that is beyond the edges of the town or city that the group who come travel out from. There also appears to be several groups that meet in the churchyards or the vicarage garden, of more rural churches. In one sense, this is not surprising. Having beautiful, natural environments on your doorstep and churches with easy access to them is more likely to stimulate the thought of joining the Forest Church movement. However, a critique of Forest Church could therefore be, that it is predominantly placed where nature is most obviously already present. The most active groups are in places like the River Dart in Devon, the Yorkshire Moors, the fens of Lincolnshire or the wilds of mid-Wales. This might be obvious when considering who and where people are likely to meet given the subject matter of Forest Church, but from a missiological point of view, is it happening where the greatest need for greater spiritual connection with nature is found? Are the people who are most in need of connecting with nature, because of their lack of access to it, much less likely to encounter a church that is actively trying to encourage participation in it?

4.2.2 The Founding Literature

> Forest Church isn't just normal church happening outside, instead it attempts to participate with creation. And it isn't just a fellowship group doing an outside activity, we aim to learn, worship, meditate, pray and practice with the trees, at the spring, along the shore.[293]

In producing two books, the Mystic Christ Press have provided some helpful source material, which give a concrete and definitive outline to both the praxis of Forest Church but also of

[293] Stanley, 12.

the theoretical and theological justification for the movement. Beginning with Bruce Stanley's 'field guide' for those wanting to run a Forest Church, called 'Forest Church', before moving on to consider 'Earthed', an anthology of essays from a broader group of Forest Church facilitators and outdoor worship organisers, it is possible to establish something of the desired shape and substance of the movement from the perspective of the progenitors.

4.2.2.1 Forest Church: A Field Guide to Nature Connection for Groups & Individuals

Published in 2013, Forest Church by Stanley, is still *the* key resource that people are using as a guide to set up Forest Church gatherings. Stanley stated in 2019 that it 'has sold more than I could have ever imagined, over 4000 copies and it's now on its sixth print run'[294]. In more recent correspondence, asked if it was still selling, he states that it had continued to sell and the effect of lockdown 'saw a real boost to Forest Church' where sales of the book on Amazon had, 'doubled during the peak of the Covid months to nearly 50 copies a month, up from perhaps 10 averagely over the preceding years.'[295]

At the beginning of the book, Forest Church is described as, '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 benefit of spending time in wild places.'[296] Stanley then goes on to begin to describe what Forest Church looks like:

> 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

[294] Stanley, Bruce. Interview with Bruce Stanley. Personal interview. Wales, 22 November, 2019.
[295] Stanley, Bruce. Email to author. 4 February, 2022
[296] Stanley, *Forest Church*, 2.

> 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.[297]

In this we begin to hear the theoretical voice of the movement, or at least what Stanley views as the essence of what Forest Church is or should be. Stanley makes it clear that he sees Forest Church as a form of church, inspired by more ancient ways of doing church and yet associates it in more missiological ways through an of-the-moment connection with those outside of the church, as an opportunity afforded to the church. The book is both hopeful and aspirational and yet a subtext of suspicion or antipathy towards the Church from Stanley is clear and ever present. He states that 'there is plenty of low-level discouragement against the idea of finding Divine Meaning in nature.'[298]

In his work, Stanley is clearly keen to show that he has depth behind his own hunches with a methodology reliant on his understanding of psychological and philosophical writings as well as some expertise concerning ecological matters. Where he is less clear is what his theological convictions are. Stanley refers with regularity to non-Christian authors such as Richard Louv, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, Petran Kockelkoren and John Haidt, all worthy voices in the psychology of nature-connection but for a manual on creating a form of church, he overlooks any contemporary theological sources[299]. In taking this approach it is unclear whether Stanley doubts the need to offer a deeper theological reflection and justification, or that he is

[297] Stanley, 12.
[298] Stanley, 42.
[299] The exception to this is a mention of Alistair McGrath's, The Open Secret, an excellent piece of theology, which would be perfectly placed to address Forest Church's obvious connections with the work of Natural Theology but is not expanded upon.

unaware of the theological writings that would support his argument[300]. This despite going on to say that 'Christians are undoubtedly concerned about what is of them, of God, of harmful spiritual influences because they don't want to get involved in the latter. So anything that at first glance seems spooky can be worrying, especially things that don't have a clean and clear biblical reference or orthodox tradition in their support'[301]. In showing he is aware of how some Forest Church activity might be perceived negatively he still chooses not to defend his approach in this space, giving an asymmetrical theoretical framework, where theological or biblical support is a very weak supporting character. In defence, Stanley confesses his lack of qualification for the task that he nevertheless attempts to complete:

> 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 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.[302]

The closest Stanley comes to acknowledging a Christian orthodoxy of sorts is in his description of nature as being 'God's second book'[303]. We are here encouraged to 'read' this second book in three ways; in awe, study and meaning[304]. This is one of the most helpful sections of all that Stanley writes and crucially begins to form what could be a theological framework for Forest Church leaders and facilitators to build activity upon. In doing so, I believe that Stanley offers a helpful taxonomy of sorts, and a possible beginning point of a hermeneutic of nature

[300] Having spent a good day with Stanley, this apparent ignorance did not appear the case at all. He was thoughtful, well read and despite a reluctance to provide theological justification, when he did talk about it, he referred to the works of theologians and authors that would greatly have enhanced this work. The impression was of a man who was reluctant to become the theological sounding board for anyone suspicious of the movement, and who could blame him for not wanting that mantle? He told me, "I'm not a theologian, and don't really care whether or not I have that myself, I'm happy to pass the buck on the theology".
[301] Stanley, *Forest Church*, 62.
[302] Stanley, 14.
[303] Stanley, 25.
[304] Stanley, 33.

connection for Christian activity. These three movements, cover nearly all the activities that I've observed and taken part in over the years of studying the movement and are crucial to the theoretical theology of it.

4.2.2.1.1 Reading Nature: Awe

> 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.[305]

'Moments of Awe are perhaps the least formal encounters with the Divine in nature but also the most powerful and absorbing.'[306] states Stanley, tapping into the most common response that people have when asked about nature connection. If there was one single, consistent narrative that correlates and acquiesces the ground between the literature and activities of the new nature movement and the literature and activities of the Church's response, it's found in the act of the recounting of personal moments of experience. It is remarkably present, to the point of ubiquity, that before any author or group organiser, begins to tell their theory or practice, whether in work of deep theology or anecdotal conversation, they start by recalling numinous, unexplainable, and overwhelming happenstance experiences with the natural world. The words used to describe these moments might differ; 'theophany', 'numinosity', 'transcendence' or 'other-worldly'. They all coalesce around an unplanned moment, where nature, be it in observing flora or fauna, a phenomena like the Northern

[305] Stanley, 26.
[306] Stanley, 34.

Lights or just an everyday weed that has forced life to break through between paving slabs, unite people of faith and no faith to reflect in affective ways.

Stanley urges Forest Church session leaders to encourage the adherents to 'go mindfully, open and present to the reality around'[307], in order to increase the availability of what he calls these 'wow' moments.

Through the experience of talking to Forest Church leaders and facilitators, this sense of awe and transcendence is a core element of what they are hoping to achieve when they plan a gathering. This feels particularly salient in a time where people are more distant, in every sense of the word, from the stimuli of the natural world and the wonder that it can evoke. Robert Michael Pyle, influential naturalist and conservationist, coins the phrase 'the extinction of experience'[308] as a way to understand the malaise of current, Western living, disavowed as it is from hands on connection to nature, where a moment like a sunset or a tree in full bloom are seen, if noticed at all, through a phone camera and uploaded to Instagram, rather than being experienced. Forest Church, at the very least, is being offered here as a way to experience this experience. Awe, and the very possibility of feeling it, may be the most basic of opportunities that Forest Church could facilitate, and whilst that is hard to manufacture, being outdoors and receptive to God, greatly enhance the possibility.

[307] Stanley, *Forest Church*, 27.
[308] Robert Michael Pyle, *The Thunder Tree: Lessons from an Urban Wildland* (Corvallis: Oregon State University Press, 2011), 35.

4.2.2.1.2 Reading Nature: Study

Another consistent theme that we encounter when observing Forest Church is what Stanley calls nature's ability to cause us to ask, 'What, how and why?'[309]. As noted in the previous chapter, when it comes to nature, we are a generation who have forgotten the names of almost everything. Robert McFarlane and Jackie Morris', 'The Lost Words' book and subsequent project[310] was set up in a desperate attempt to teach children the names of nature objects that are so little in use these days that the Oxford Children's Dictionary have removed them[311]. We're not talking about 'mycorrhizal networks' or 'Bar-tailed Godwits' here but words such as 'Acorn', 'Heron' and 'Lark'. Many are concerned about the paucity of knowledge that people in general have about their comprehension of nature, and it is certainly a subject that consistently appears when Forest Church's gather. The ignorance of something remains if one isn't regularly confronted with the subject – why would someone feel any need to know that a Heron is called a Heron if they don't ever see one? I witnessed first-hand, on more than one occasion, the phenomena of children, who see or pick up something, and then return to the group to ask, 'what is this?!'. The knowing and naming of something is directly connected to the care for that thing, and the regular exposure to these lesser seen nature items will often act as the catalyst for enquiry. Stanley names six types of study that Forest Church facilitators can encourage[312]: *Scientific*, the understanding and naming of something at a botanical or geological level; *Creative*, where someone might chose to draw an object or to write poetry about it, *Experiential*; the getting-in-to element of nature,

[309] Stanley, *Forest Church*, 34.
[310] 'Lostwordsbook | The Lost Words'.
[311] Robert Macfarlane and Jackie Morris, *The Lost Words: A Spell Book* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2017).
[312] Stanley, 38.

such as swimming or climbing, *Nature-Sociological*, the study of ecological methodology such as permaculture; *Nature-Spiritual*, where Stanley suggests that nature can help us study Druidry or Shamanism (but fails to mention Christianity) and Eco-Therapy, which he describes as the use of nature in ecopsychology or spiritual direction.[313] Other Forest Church practitioners also talk about the role of Forest Church in educating people about nature, but are more verbose in the purpose of this as a way of honouring God in the creativity of his creation.

4.2.2.1.3 Reading Nature: Meaning

In describing 'Meaning' as the third way of reading the 'Second Book', Stanley takes us into a realm of praxis that, in my observations of Forest Church gatherings, is the most universally reflected upon practice. 'Meaning is about discerning God's messages in and through nature and asking what the creation reveals about its Creator.'[314] The most basic of the Forest Church rituals is to 'give people space' and to see what meaning comes to them in this moment. These times are often prefaced by giving some form of informal information about the surrounding area to stimulate and focus. This might be the age of the trees around or the hill fort that is buried beneath their feet, or there might be a reminder about the season that they're about to enter or a particular sensory focus like birdsong, the smells of the meadow, or the sound of running water of a nearby stream. Participants are then encouraged to go off, on their own, for a set time and essentially asked to go and find meaning in what they see, hear, or feel. More often than not, when the time is up, people are asked to come back

[313] 'Forest Church |:| Mystic Christ', 38–39.
[314] Stanley, *Forest Church*, 41.

together and share anything that they felt God might have said to them, or to show something they found that spoke to them in some way. In a bid to explain what is going on here, Stanley argues that 'Communication happens in two ways; it is initiated by us or by God'[315], going on to suggest that when we initiate the meaning we are doing something, 'like Jesus did when referring to wild flowers in Luke 12'[316], and summarises it in saying our meaning making enquiry comes in the form of 'What is this telling me about God?'[317] The second way, where God is the initiator, Stanley says, 'God initiates the communication, or sends us a message through nature', here he explains that we need to firstly be 'open to the idea' of the possibility of God speaking to us but secondly we need to be 'in connection enough with nature to spot the message'. This triadic conversation between God, nature and the meaning-making person is a central tenet of this kind of practice and warrants further analysis and theologising, but Stanley acknowledges its complexity and contested nature of the theory. 'There is plenty of low-level discouragement against the idea of finding Divine Meaning in nature. For example it isn't scientific or quantifiable; it's too close to superstition, geomancy or shamanistic fortune telling.' This is no small self-critique. In an attempt to qualm this discouragement, Stanley understates the complexity of the issue:

> The task of interpretation and Meaning-making places a challenge on the interpreter, but be encouraged; Jesus, when seen as a theologian, rather than the subject of theology, was very comfortable with this. Of course he was well versed (no pun intended), in scripture and its interpretation (and I'd recommend the same for any Forest Church participant; the same God who speaks to us in nature has revealed much already in the Bible, and the two messages, if authentic, aren't going to contradict each other.)

[315] Stanley, 42.
[316] Stanley, 43.
[317] Stanley, 43.

I believe that Stanley makes an erudite note of caution here, but fails in any real sense, to give any assurances that people shouldn't have more than a little 'low-level discouragement' about it. In practice, how does the leader of a Forest Church gathering respond to an adherent who, after being asked to go off and either initiate an enquiry of nature, or allows themselves to be open to God's initiating discourse, know that what they are feeling, thinking, or experiencing is not just 'superstition, geomancy or shamanistic fortune telling'? And is there a problem if that is what it is?

Where Stanley puts the onus on the participant to be 'well versed...in scripture and its interpretation', how does this work in practice, if the participant isn't well versed? And what burden of responsibility rests on the shoulders of the gathering's facilitator to maintain a Christian orthodoxy?

These movements of awe, study and meaning are all helpful lenses through which to consider a deeper, more faithful theological reflection and form the basis for further analysis in the next chapter.

4.2.2.2 Earthed: Christian Perspectives on Nature Connection

To gain a broader perspective on what the advocated theological grounding of the Forest Church movement is, 'Earthed'[318], published in 2014, reintroduces us to the gatekeepers of the movement and promises much in terms of the unanswered questions that arose in 'Forest Church'.

[318] Bruce Stanley and Steve Hollinghurst, eds., *Earthed.* (Powys, Wales: Mystic Christ Press, 2014).

> This book is a resource for people practically exploring the relationship between spirituality and nature connection… There is plenty written about ecology, environmentalism, and creation from a Christian perspective but that writing might not tell you much practically about nature connection as a spiritual practice… Our intention is to pull together a collection of thoughts, theological perspectives and practical suggestions'[319]

The book is a collection of sixteen essays from a variety of authors who all have connections with Forest Church in some form or another and is edited by Bruce Stanley and Steve Hollinghurst. Hollinghurst was appointed as 'Evangelism Enabler with an Environmental Focus' in January 2020 for the Diocese of Lichfield, where they describe him, amongst other things, as 'part of the team that developed the Forest Church movement'[320]. In terms of the other contributors, these are predominantly Anglican voices, with nine of the sixteen, who tell us where they work, working for the Church of England in some form or another. There are ten male and six female authors and from the information available, all fall broadly into what might be called middle-aged. These are not random nature and spirituality writers though all have been invited to contribute because they are in and around the core group who started the movement. We therefore hear differing arguments but essentially these are all supportive voices of the Forest Church movement there are no critical ones here, with nine of the authors identifying as leading Forest Church groups.

It is worth noting that whilst 'Forest Church' has sold in the thousands of copies (a remarkable achievement when considered the relatively niche nature of the work), Stanley told me that 'Earthed' had 'hardly sold any' and 'less than 400 copies'. When I asked him recently for the

[319] Stanley and Hollinghurst, 8.
[320] 'Diocese of Lichfield | Good News for the Whole World', accessed 5 February 2022, https://www.lichfield.anglican.org/news/good-news-for-the-whole-world.php.

latest figures, he told me that 'Earthed isn't selling but then it doesn't get any marketing'. So, this is not a widely read piece of work with the 'how to do' manual far outselling the 'why might you do' companion book, by a margin. Where 'Forest Church' claims to be a manual in how to set up a Forest Church group, we are being promised within this collection of 16 essays a more grounded theological justification for the movement itself.

In introducing the work, editors Bruce Stanley and Steve Hollinghurst are keen to tell us that, 'It is not a work of academic theology…though there are some chapters from people with backgrounds in academic theology.' However, they go on to argue that 'There is in all of these (essays) much that is profoundly theological.'[321] I would contend that the latter assertion is a fair one, with most of the essay contributors at least attempting to bring some theologising to the subjects they seek to cover. Such is the current paucity of theological writings about the praxis of Forest Church type activities that, as far as I'm aware this work remains the best attempt at a theological articulation.

In the first chapter, Cate Williams' writes on 'Contemporary Spirituality, Theology and Nature Connection'. It is an excellent piece and should be required reading for anyone leading a Forest Church group. In her essay Williams offers a precise and convincing piece of practical theology concerning the activity of Forest Church. While others who follow, offer helpful and stimulating pieces on thematic issues pertaining to nature connection and Christian spirituality, Williams tackles the main theological questions head on. Where others are more content to act out of a sense that this feels good and right, Williams seeks to straddle any

[321] Stanley and Hollinghurst, *Earthed.*, 9.

divide between the orthodoxy and the orthopraxy of the movement's beliefs and practices. In doing so she shifts from being just an espoused theological voice to one that speaks well within the normative or formal setting and warrants a deeper study within the next chapter.

In her offering, 'Do I not Fill Heaven and Earth?', the author and influential figure of Annie Heppenstall, brings some biblical justification for the work. Drawing on Old and New Testament scriptures, she circles around the concept of Panentheism, a ubiquitous concept that throughout my interaction with Forest Church practitioners is the *prima facie* argument when questioning the theology of Forest Church. Whilst this theological argument was mentioned in the response of all the of the interlocutors of Forest Church it was less clear if they fully understood the theological concept or that it was at least contested. In her attempt to define and defend the use of the concept Heppenstall suggests that these verses offer a 'nugget of Gold' to support the notion of panentheism:

> "Am I only a God nearby," declares the Lord, "and not a God far away? Who can hide in secret places so that I cannot see them?" declares the Lord. "Do not I fill heaven and earth?" declares the Lord. (Jeremiah 23:23-24)

Whilst Heppenstall uses these verses as confirmation for the ever-presence of God being a justification for the panentheistic argument, an argument that might well be perfectly theologically faithful, she fails here to show the context of the Jeremiah verses. The very verses that she basis her essay on are found in the middle of a passage about God's anger at those Israelites who have turned towards the worship of Baal. The irony of course being that Baal was considered by the Pagan, surrounding nations, as the god of the sun and the storm and responsible for the fertility of the earth, this might therefore be a very analogous critique

of the Forest Church movement today. By the texts own admission God is not present in the image of Baal, he speaks against it and calls it idolatry.

The rest of the essays in 'Earthed' range to cover such themes and subjects as exploring the motif of the 'Green Man'[322], the 'human priesthood of creation'[323], and the 'place of bathing in the Christian tradition'[324]. If, why and how Christians can and should be involved in nature connecting practices is the primary theme, the intersectionality of the Christian faith and Pagan, Wiccan, Druidism, Animism practices as well as constant referrals to 'Celtic Christianity', with very little clarity about the difference between the former and the latter, is almost as prevalent. There is a conviction that Christianity needs to listen again to these, other-faith stories and origins. Paul Cudby, who has given much of his personal focus to Pagan/Christian dialogue, writes a compelling argument of what can be constructively learned from Paganism. He gives a series of different encounters with nature that he and his wife (Alison Eve, who also contributes an essay here and co-leads a Forest Church with him), experienced when out in nature and talks about the lack of language and understanding that his Christian faith had so far failed to supply. He speaks for many who could echo this sentiment and argues that whilst there are obvious differences between Christianity and Paganism, Pagans have a much richer iteration of nature connection that we might find useful, giving language to intrinsic sensing and intuition. He acknowledges that 'Many of us within the Forest Church movement have had to cope with suspicion that we are a syncretistic group who seek to bind Christianity and Pagan into a new religion'[325] but argues that through

[322] Stanley and Hollinghurst, 118.
[323] Stanley and Hollinghurst, 148.
[324] Stanley and Hollinghurst, 272.
[325] Stanley and Hollinghurst, 236.

friendship and listening to Pagans he has found a deeper connection within his own Christian faith'. In being inspired by Pagan focus on 'learning how to be still, to be silent, to listen' in nature he says that he has been inspired to 'nature connection is actually a call to prayer.'[326]

In summary, whilst 'Earthed' is a broader and more theoretically supportive argument for Christian nature connection than Stanley's pragmatic 'Forest Church', both books, in their entirety, can be seen to coalesce around three identical narratives or claims. These three, interweaving, dominant claims, form a different but natural frame through which we can view the basic, theological premiss of the movement as espoused by these gatekeepers.

Firstly, each author, implicitly or explicitly, argues that nature connection is a universally experienced and appreciated activity by all humankind. This connection is intrinsically woven into the very fabric of what it means to be human, going as far to argue that nature connection is salvific, being essential to human flourishing. Secondly, if this first premiss is true, then the mission of the church must engage in this activity or risk both failing to tell a significant part of an holistic salvation story. It also risks being out-of-sync with a world that is moving away from purely transcendent spirituality and towards more, earthed, tangible experiences. In an honest and personal reflection, vicar Simon Marshall speaks of the wrenching pain of having to oversee services and activities that his church expects of him, whilst finding increasingly lifeless and at odds with what his own nature connections are stirring within him, where, in his words the 'accepted teaching of the church and my personal experiences of the created world do not match'[327]. To be clear, there is no ambiguity here: all of the authors, at some

[326] Stanley and Hollinghurst, 226.
[327] Stanley and Hollinghurst, 72.

point or another, accuse the Church of culpability towards both suspicion of nature connection and our care of the earth. They argue that at best the Church has failed to engage well in the issue and at worst it has been a major contributor to the narrative that nature connection is a Godless and sub-Christian activity and that it has been a significant contributor to our dominant, arrogant and destructive attitude and relationship towards the natural world. Thirdly, we hear a very consistent, working theology, that the way forward is to return to a 'lost understanding'[328] of ancient practices, where Christians in the past naturally connected with nature. There is a positivity about the future here, that Forest Church and initiatives like it can offer something that either sits alongside, or instead of, the 'normal church service'. Whether it's in the origin myth of Stanley's first gatherings in the forest of mid-Wales or within every chapter of this work, we hear a deepening dissatisfaction with the form and function of the church as it's currently expressed within the confines of buildings and 'traditional' services. Again, this is not a hugely contested reality by many senior church figures. Along with many others who I spoke to, Bishop Graham Usher laments that within nature he could sense awe and wonder, 'in ways that I simply don't in church, and that's with me leading it!'[329].

In explaining about the beginnings of her Forest Church, Alison Eve comments, 'As we've developed in our ritual practice together in the place of unknowing…we have explored this new space, which feels and tastes ancient and primal somehow…How can I have missed this before, I wonder.'[330] Unlike with many other forms of Fresh Expression or similar movements within other denominations, that aim to bring a greater relevance to the church, Forest

[328] Stanley and Hollinghurst, 125.
[329] Graham Usher, recorded Zoom conversation, 18 January, 2022
[330] Stanley and Hollinghurst, *Earthed.*, 245.

Church is arguing here for a return to ancient practices, rituals and rhythms that have somewhere along the line been lost, forgotten or perhaps purposefully erased.

4.3 The Practitioners: What has emerged?

If the essential enquiry of the progenitors and gatekeepers of the Forest Church movement was, to discover what their intentions in setting the movement up, the question I wanted to understand from the local leaders of Forest Church groups is, how have they interpreted this and therefore, what do these groups look like in actuality?

If Forest Church is church, which is the unanimous insistence of those who formed the movement, not an activity of the church but 'a fresh expression of church'[331], then by extension, those who lead Forest Church groups are church leaders. It is these leaders, perhaps even more so than the progenitors and gatekeepers of Forest Church, who influence both current practice and, working within their own sphere of the wider community of practice, are forming what Forest Church is and what it will become. Richard Osmer, whilst establishing a more reformed theological taxonomy of church leadership than Forest Church leaders might subscribe to, makes a point applicable to any theological or ecclesiological posture in saying, 'Leadership in the Christian community is inherently a spiritual matter. Using influence to modify the attitudes and behaviours of others is not to be taken lightly, even when this is carried out in a collaborative form.'[332] Forest Church exists almost entirely because of the inherent hope that people might 'modify their attitude' towards church as an institution, an institution whose practices are seen as negative and deficient. This was

[331] Stanley, *Forest Church*, 12.
[332] Osmer, *Practical Theology*, 27.

expressed by these leaders either as a personal negation or rejection of traditional church or in the insistence of Forest Church as somewhere where non-Christian people are more likely to attend.

To gain further qualitative detail from the perspective of the Forest Church local leader, I chose to conduct a series of semi-structured, informal interviews. Richard Osmer calls the discipline of interviewing, 'a very important part of attending in qualitative research'[333] and, if done well, it allows the interviewer to 'move beyond preconceived perceptions and evaluate judgments and attend closely to what others are actually thinking, feeling and doing'[334]. This was an important aspect of the qualitative process for me personally. I chose to consider Forest Church as a loci for my research out of an attractional but also, repellent, personal interest in the movement. On one level, Forest Church seemed to practice a form of spirituality that I was finding myself more and more responsive towards personally, in contrast to what traditional church worship had become, but simultaneously I was suspicious of the theological motivations and foundations of the movement. In conducting these interviews, I was aiming to play that attending role that Osmer describes in seeking to discover deeper and richer insights into the movement and the people who are delivering it. It was an enlightening experience and one that changed the course of my research. Agreeing with Pattison's observation, Swinton and Mowatt, describe these 'concentrated human interactions' as possibilities to 'enable the researcher to access and understand the unique meanings, interpretations and perspectives that the participant places on the chosen subject'[335]. And it was spending these long hours, being with and listening to these leaders, along with the further reflection that the transcribing process forces upon the researcher, that enabled a richer, more realistic impression of what these leaders are doing and how they personally view their task and vocation.

The process of selecting which leaders to speak to was decided pragmatically around, (i) who I could clearly identify as leading a Forest Church, and just as pertinently, (ii) those who

[333] Osmer, 61.
[334] Osmer, 64.
[335] Swinton and Mowatt, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research*, 63–64.

responded positively to my request and agreed to be interviewed. I did this through observing the Forest Church Facilitators Facebook group and contacting twenty active leaders, nine of whom agreed to be interviewed. In terms of process, I was able to interview three, before Covid lockdown, face-to-face, with all the others being over Zoom.

In interviewing these nine different leaders, I chose a semi-structured approach, enabling me to drive towards some commonality of themes, whilst also giving space for the conversation to go in other directions should they arise.

4.3.1 Observations from Interviewing Local Leaders

The first observation, when all the interviews were reviewed in their entirety and alongside each other, was just how consistent the genesis story of each group was. Whilst it might be imagined that groups like this start because a leader hears about Forest Church and thinks it's a good idea to start one, the reality for all the leaders I spoke with was that this was something that they were already practicing personally or even with others, but the Forest Church movement merely gave them credence and confidence to formalise their practice and invite others to join in. Rather than the theoretical teaching or writing of the Forest Church founders inspiring someone to start a group, the impression gained here was that these are people who all shared two correlational pre-conditions; they expressed dissatisfaction with their experience of worship within traditional church (identified negatively as 'evangelical' in five cases) and they each had found being outdoors, connecting with the natural world as a more efficacious way to connect with God. Forest Church had neither converted them to church nor nature connection, but the nomenclature and some methodology was the needed catalyst to bring these two spheres together. As one person put it, 'I thought, this is lovely, it scratches an itch'. It's also worth noting that six leaders specifically mentioned Greenbelt, the

Christian arts festival, as being the place where they first heard about Forest Church, with four specifically mentioning sessions that Bruce Stanley led there[336].

> "I was at a Greenbelt it must have been at Cheltenham and yeah Bruce was doing a session and I was just like, you're kidding this can be a thing?! Like I can actually gather people and they won't think I'm a crazy Pagan? Because this natural stuff I try to hide under everything else you know, I've never told anyone apart from my spiritual director that I'm closest to God when I'm out in the air, ha, because that seemed a bit heretic and then I spoke to some friends over the next month and they were like, we could do this, let's gather, let's do it!"

> "I think I like being outdoors. For a long time I've got a practise, a daily private one, being based outdoors in the garden and we had a big garden and then, yeah so it resonated with that I think…and I thought Forest Church seemed like something that would, might fit quite well with that."

> "So, yeah, so how I kind of ended up here I suppose is outside is always kind of my happy place so we'd do camping as a kid, and I was always being chucked in the garden because I would trashed the house less…I think it's kind of somewhere I feel comfortable, and, I suppose we were at Greenbelt and I found some Forest Church stuff happening and I thought, this is really lovely, it scratches an itch. And, but there wasn't anything locally and I thought well maybe that's kind of a nudge that I need to sort something out myself."

> "And for me, its purpose is also for me. I get a lot from it so me turning up and being part of nature and having that set time to focus on creation and what that speaks to me of is really important. And then I need to help open that space up to others."

> "I just love nature, I just love being outdoors. I've always been quite an outdoor girl, like camping and all that stuff. And then, when I discovered Celtic Christianity and the fact that they worship God in nature, that just made sense to me because I love being in nature, I feel peaceful there. I feel God's presence I love the mountains I grew up going for walking holidays in the mountains in the Lake District, because my auntie lives there and I just, it just all seemed to make sense, and I thought oh, I'm not the only one that, you know, worships God in nature through nature as part of nature, because it's his creation. For me it's a bit of a no brainer really if we want to find God, why are we looking for God in a man-made building with our, our human concept of,

[336] 'Bruce Stanley'.

> of who and what God is surely we should be looking at what actually God created, which is far more amazing and beautiful and wonderful, wonderful and full of awe and all that stuff as creation is…and I discovered about, I don't know how long ago, was maybe 10 years ago…I discovered this thing called Forest Church, thought well, that sounds cool."

Alongside this positivistic, deeply personal reasoning, a somewhat altruistic sense that 'if this is helpful to my personal spirituality and expression of worship, then maybe others could benefit', there was an equally prevalent negativistic reflection on traditional forms of worship:

> "I struggled more and more with traditional church services for me that I just couldn't connect with where they were coming from spiritually and I would look at the songs on the screen or in the books or whatever and just, I didn't know the words just felt empty. I just thought I just, this isn't where I'm at, I'd rather go for a walk with the dog! That's where I worship God, you know, for me worship isn't just singing a few songs and then sit down and listen to somebody talk about whatever they're talking about."

> "We just began to pick up contacts of people who were looking for this kind of thing because they felt they didn't fit, their faces didn't fit in church. And that was really a part of the, of the reason as far as I was concerned was to have a Christ centred place outside for people who felt like they didn't fit inside, but they felt spiritual, far more spiritual outside."

> "My own personal spirituality increasingly needs to be outside. I increasingly find worship indoors, in a church building, I, I can put myself in that space but it's, er, I seem to be drifting, moving, that that's no longer my natural place in the way that it once was."

These responses were unprompted by a specific question but invariably came when asked why they decided to start a Forest Church. Three of the leaders also spoke of another reason for starting their Forest Church groups, in response to their LGBTQ+ friends feeling unwelcomed by the church.

> “I just started to struggle with some of the theology, mainly around their views towards homosexuality or any anything, actually, that wasn't married male female marriage relationship”.
>
> “I don't want any barriers to be in the way I want to be completely inclusive it’s really difficult and, but for the LGBT stuff. Yeah, the church has been so damaging to that group of people. And I want to be a voice for those people, and I want that to change.”

This aligns with a positioning of Forest Church as being opposed to a more conservative, traditional church where inclusivity towards people of other faiths, or none, extends towards other groups who have been made to feel excluded, and might find welcome. And yet, instead of doing something other than church, every single leader was adamant that what they were doing was a form of church.

> “Whether it's church? I would say yes, it definitely is.”
>
> “We’re both really clear it is church. If you ask the congregation, ha, they might say, it’s an activity put on by church. But no, it’s a fresh expression of church, it’s church in its own right. It absolutely is church.”
>
> “I would definitely say it is church. Yeah…It's, I think, what I would call it is very Christ focused very Christ centred but, it doesn't look like church.”
>
> “that's what I'm trying to grow I'm trying to grow a new form of church, and kind of form a Christian community that is outside the structures…to challenge the norm of what people mean when you say ‘church’, the norm of what people think that is.”

One leader, who has been involved in starting three different Forest Church gatherings, was able to differentiate between them in terms of the ecclesiology of the groups. In overseeing one of the very first Forest Churches, which grew out of an intentional desire to connect with Pagans who had become personal friends, the leader spoke of that Forest Church as being a ‘missional expression of church’, where the use of the word ‘church’ in the title was ‘very deliberate’. He now runs a Forest Church which he launched soon after arriving as Vicar in

his current Anglican church, which he described as, ‘more like Messy Church’, in that he viewed this more as an activity of the church but held within the overall remit and responsibility of his Anglican church and attended ‘mainly by people who are part of my church’. This is not a unique position, from observing the Facebook page of Forest Church, there appear to be a few other church leaders who run Forest Church in much the same way that any church might run a single-interest, small group, where attendees predominantly come from a local congregation, but these appear to be the exception.

The other leaders all gave some sort of justification to defend their claim that what they were doing is church:

> “I understand church as being a collection of people. So, when there’s more than two Christians meeting together with the intention of focusing on Christ, or God, whatever aspect of God you want to nurture, doesn't matter what it looks like, doesn’t matter what day it is or where you meet. So, in that sense, yeah it’s church… in its most ancient sense, the ecclesial, the gathering of God's people.”

> “And so yes in my understanding of what church is, more than two people gathering together for spiritual purpose and Christocentric purpose, then yes.

> “And so it is church because for me it's that's about coming together and learning about each other and learning about what kind of, for me it's about God and Jesus, but it's trying to help people understand that and connect with something other, and so many people have such wide varying beliefs around what that other is…For me it's coming to a church is coming to a place for me, for me church is about a coming together of people. And it's not about having a building. I think they're important I think they have their place. And, but it's about coming together for a specific purpose and at a time when we're sharing. Sharing together.

One leader, who works as a Pioneer Minister within the Church of England, was keen to actively distance themselves from the church that she is placed in and was operating out of. In talking about Forest Church, she referenced how sometimes the congregants, many of

whom help her run Forest Church, don't 'quite get' what Forest Church is trying to do. By way of illustration, she talked about one particular person who, when the weather is bad, will often say, ''oh well, we can always do it in the church', and I'm like, no! Because it's not Forest Church then because the whole ethos of Forest Church is all about being in nature, surrounded by nature, you know, engaged in all of that, yes okay you can physically take nature crafts and bits and pieces into a building, of course you can. But for me, that's not Forest Church, then you're just doing like Messy Church, but doing it with natural materials. So, we go outdoors whatever the weather or we definitely cancel it!' This was a claim echoed with regularity, the belief that not only is Forest Church a far easier place to invite friends to, it was also keen to be seen as distinctively apart from 'normal' church.

Where there was less cohesion within the responses around these ecclesiological themes, was in the role that the leader therefore saw themselves playing. In the most extreme response, one leader, a local church minister but who led his Forest Church as part of a wider denominational role, said, 'I don't feel any pastoral responsibility towards these people at all'. The context within which he said this, was in his description of there being very little consistency of who comes, so it was perhaps more of a reflection of the inability to connect with people on a pastoral level because they might have only attended as a one-off, rather than a description of the role he'd like to have, but this is conjecture on my part. It was also noticeable that of all the leaders I spoke with, this particular leader was the most discouraged about his group, feeling frustrated that people would show interest in coming along but then wouldn't turn up, saying in exasperation, 'I'm now at a loss to know how to promote it'. Other leaders were far more positive about their groups, but several also mentioned the phenomena that they felt was peculiar to Forest Church, in that, whilst it very often elicited

interest from people, in a way that an invitation to traditional church wouldn't, that didn't necessarily mean that people would actually come along. One leader said they'd paid for advertising space on Facebook, 'and by the morning of it, 62 people said that they were interested in coming, and I thought, well we won't get 62 but I thought we might get 6 new people, and then we didn't get any!'. Another of the very early adopters of Forest Church, who has led his group since 2014, was keen to distance himself from being seen as pastorally responsible for his well-established group, but explained that this was pragmatically connected to the inconsistency of attendance:

> "And I don't mean I'm pastoring a congregation because there's, there isn't really an intentional pastoring going on within those who are regular. There is also regular contact between the sessions, we have our own kind of WhatsApp group, we have our own Facebook page and individuals within it will be helping each other out doing a kind of pastoral work with each other. But that's all very organic and relational based…So I don't feel like I'm pastoring a congregation, partly because of that and partly because at least 50 to 60% are very, either infrequent or not the same people so they'll come to one or two and then won't come again…it's difficult to keep regular pastoral contact with people that you only see maybe two or three times a year, and for a couple of hours."

Whilst this leader doesn't work for a church, and doesn't attend a traditional one, another, who works for a Diocese with the specific aim of encouraging people to run activities like Forest Church, expressed her viewpoint in a slightly different way:

> "I don't really see myself as pastoring except perhaps as the community we have friendship. It's that sort of level but, you know, pastoral conversations happen along the way but not me leading with the pastoring with a capital P, but just so people share their stuff and I share my stuff and friendship happens."

Other leaders were somewhat evasive around the issue of their particular role. Two leaders were keen to employ 'facilitator', as the best description of what they do, with both expressing that this was 'something Forest Church used'. Throughout the interviews, there was an interesting tension and interplay that surfaced, around the relationship between

'Forest Church' as an overall umbrella movement and the version, or interpretation, of what the leader was choosing to do in their expression of Forest Church. Most saw this as a positive thing but three expressed some scepticism about the wider movement. It appeared that these leaders who were so keen to be seen as unorthodox in terms of organised religiosity, carried that resistance of the institution over into their feelings about the 'mother' church of the Forest Church movement, with one expressing:

> "As I researched what Forest Church was about, I thought it was quite prescriptive, and the group as well, I found very much, like, always, if it's not a certain thing, and it doesn't fit then you can't call yourself Forest Church. And I'm not someone that likes prescription, I like to be outside of boxes so that was my very first thing is, actually I don't want it to be restrictive."

In contrast, another local leader and one of the founding members of the movement, acknowledged this tension in reflecting:

> "Part of the reason people are leaving churches, is I think the same reason why they're leaving political parties. It's that whole sort of post-modern death of organised anything really. And I think there is a kind of anarchic spirituality about the nation as a whole…And I think, if Forest Church has to occupy that space where we say okay, actually there's no way, we're not telling you how to do this. Each group will do it the way they want to do it and, and that's fine."

The subject of sacraments came up in five of the interviews[337]. This came out of my question about whether Forest Church is church and was used as an affirmative argument. For

[337] I acknowledge here that the relationship between the nature of church and the performance of sacraments is a complex theological issue with varying perspectives across Christian traditions. In my own tradition of Baptist ecclesiology, the tendency is towards a less sacramental view, preferring to talk of 'ordinances' rather than sacraments. This is as opposed to Catholic and Orthodox traditions where the general view is that the administration of sacraments is integral to the church's identity and mission. This is also true of most Anglican settings and is seen in these responses when a Forest Church is connected to Anglican churches and is why, in part, Forest Church's ecclesiology is under such scrutiny. In my setting, where sacramentalism is 'low' on the agenda, there is no tension in this aspect of what Forest Church does. For a comprehensive exploration of Baptist perspectives on this issue, see Anthony R. Cross and Philip E. Thompson, eds., *Baptist Sacramentalism 3* (Eugene, Oregon: Pickwick Publications, 2020). For a broader overview of sacramentalism and ecclesiology see, Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction*, 25th Anniversary Sixth Edition (Chichester, West Sussex ; Malden, MA: Wiley, Blackwell, 2017)., for a helpful summary.

instance, one leader told me that they regularly offered the eucharist at their gatherings, three others said that they planned to but needed to find a priest or minister to oversee it, as they weren't ordained and were Anglican, and one leader said she's got the Bishop to do it at her gathering, 'because Bishops like to have something to do when they come along!'. This same leader also said she'd led baptisms in her Forest Church and another leader said that they'd been approached by a couple who have asked to be baptised, and she was planning on doing that. Two leaders pointed to nature in itself being sacramental, 'I see nature as a sacrament, you know, all of that so it depends again how you define these things'. Another leader quoted Anthony of Egypt in saying, 'nature is my script, nature is my book' as his foundation for where the sacramental is found.

In posing the deliberately provocative question of, 'is what you are doing Christian?', and having read Bruce Stanley's book, the expectation was that some of these leaders might want to distance themselves from using that label, but this was simply not the case. All nine leaders were unapologetic that what they were doing was explicitly Christian, and as with the question about church, they all gave justification as to why this was so. These explanations, tended to fall into two different styles with some people responding in a more personal way, giving the sense that their sessions are Christian because they as a leader were leading them as Christians, where the explicitness of their motives was enough to justify the claim, whereas others gave a more theological justification for the whole practice. This alluded back to how that individual leader saw their role; in the four examples below, it was noticeable that these came from the four leaders who exuded the most passion for their locality, for their place and for their people. These embedded leaders met in their neighbourhoods, they all met in urban

or suburban settings, and all expressed a kinship with the people who came in ways that the other five leaders didn't.

> "Yeah. So, how it's Christian is because often the themes that are the things that we use, our link with what's happening naturally in the seasons, as much as possible, so for the autumn equinox we talked about balance balancing and balance in our lives and stuff, but I will link that then to a Bible passage. So, whether it's, I don't know, I can't remember what I use for that now I can't remember, but it might be a parable, it might be a song, it might be something in the Bible. And I will say it's in the Bible, it says this, you know, so it's quite clear what I'm reading from about what I'm sharing, or what we're doing. So that's very overtly Christian. Often, not always, because the Bible doesn't always talk about Jesus the Psalms don't talk about Jesus. But, you know, often it will talk about Jesus. So, you know, that's the Christian element."

> "I suppose it's explicitly Christian in that, I would be making reference to Jesus and God. And I'm always quite careful to make sure that people can engage with it at their own, where they're coming from as well. Because, the nice thing about Forest Church is it has those really like porous edges, because people aren't having to step inside somewhere because they're not having to necessarily kind of join in a particular set of things people can relate like to it on whatever level they come in, and I think that God can use that I don't think we have to necessarily sell something or make sure we say these magic words for it to be of worth."

> "It's Christian. It's God, the Trinity, it's the Spirit that's with us. I'm a minister, so every part of my life is part of God's vocation on my life. I know some people, some Forest Churches, worry about saying God or Jesus or Holy Spirit, but for me, that's just part of my life, part of my vocabulary."

> "I mean the name, church, people kind of see that, and then think, well, it's probably Christian. And we do try and have something specific that focuses on the Christian faith. So, I would say yes because it sometimes could err on the side of just the nature part of it, which is great. I mean I love nature and I'm really passionate about looking after it, but it's also for me that that spiritual element. And I am there as a Christian."

The second approach to answering this question, was to locate the justification within a theoretical, theological position, broadening out the response, that it wasn't the fact that

Forest Church is led by Christians or is called church that makes it Christian but a more esoteric allusion to the whole practice being Christian in and of itself.

> "The big one is the sense that God, salvation, the cross, whatever language you want to put on to it, is for all of creation and not just for individual human beings. I think that sense that whatever it was that was achieved through incarnation, life, death, resurrection that was for all that is, all that was made. And, the sense of kinship, it's in the Franciscan tradition in a sense isn't it, this sense that this tree is my sister, and that rabbit is my brother and that sense that we all stand before God together and that we are part of one another. And when we talk about community, that community is not just human, it's bigger than that.
>
> "So, I guess the theology is panentheistic…So that's what we try to explain to those who visit. We are sitting in the midst of the presence of the Holy Spirit at all times, and a part of the work of Forest Church is to wake us up to that. So, when we connect with the natural world. We must be connecting with the presence of God within the natural world because if that presence wasn't there, nothing could hold together."

Finally, and more pragmatically, all the interviewees gave an idea of where their group meets and what they actually do when they meet. Four of the groups met in a rural setting, with two gathering on the outskirts of a city in woodlands and the other two being in more remote areas well away from any major conurbation. Four others met in more suburban areas, with an allotment, a large garden and two local nature parks providing the space. One leader spoke with great affection about her urban Forest Church and how she discovered their, 'tiny, tiny, third of an acre' home:

> "My youngest…was kind of at the buggy stage, and you know, when you're walking around as part of a larger loop trying to get them to fall asleep…and I found this path around this completely overgrown patch of land, like the wrong side of the railway tracks behind the allotments. Waste ground but next to the industrial park. And it was just like, all this bird song and clouds of butterflies and I thought this is extraordinary, that we have this in walking distance and yet nobody uses it, except for rough sleepers and big scary dogs, piles of human faeces and syringes…And I knew, that's where I wanted to do run it!"

On further analysis, it also became apparent that the kinds of activities, and the overall approach of each Forest Church, was clearly delineated and defined by the venue and its local demography. One leader reflected this well, 'unlike something like Messy Church for example where the idea is replicable, the same in different situations, Forest Church is much more, it kind of organically grows out of the situation and the people who it is being created around.'

The four groups that met in suburban areas, along with the urban Forest Church, all had play and craft at the heart of their activities, whilst the other four groups, meeting in more expansive, wilder settings, all focused their gatherings around a more contemplative approach. This was strongly the case with three rural groups, who, when asked about what they did all described a similar outline and approach:

> "We generally tend to start with an introduction of five or ten minute introduction of a theme. Then give folks between 20 to 40 minutes just to go out and be in nature, with the theme in their head, and they can either do that individually or they can go out and different groups or couples or whatever… and then we gather back together and just have a, an open reflection about the experience people have had, thoughts that have come to them, or anything like that."

> "We gather in a circle at the fire at the centre. We normally have north, south, east and west marked out so that people sort of feel located in the area. And then will be an opening prayer, and some silence, some way of just earthing people where they are. We quite often use a Gaelic chant, at some point, because again, there the language is usually quite open…Usually there will be a short Bible reading, and then a meditation. And then an invitation to look at what's happening around in the natural world around us that reflects what it is, I've said, so people sort of sent us to just haven't had a mooch. We gather back into the circle and. And we provide space for people to share, so we can learn from each other what we've what we felt."

In the other group that met in a rural setting, the leader described something similar but also included, 'always doing something at some point, that the kids can engage in, so we build dens, or make collages out of stuff that's around, stuff that adults don't mind doing as well'. The suburban and urban group leaders, all talked about more playful or hands-on activities being the central, focus of their gatherings.

In terms of commonalities between all the groups, three themes emerged and were mentioned within all the interviews. Firstly, a very strong conceptual theme shared between these quite disparate groups, was the fact that they all used the seasons of the year as a grounding point for their activities with eight leaders mentioning either the 'eightfold year' or the 'Celtic Wheel of the Year'. Seven of the leaders mentioned marking moments like Imbolc, Lammas, Samhain or Beltane, words or concepts that might be unfamiliar to most church goers but are the names of Pagan festivals (in this case, marking the beginning of the seasons and the midpoint between these solstices and equinoxes) and are used liberally within Forest Church gatherings.

In the settings where play and craft were the main focal activity, they all mentioned craft that was tied into the seasons. This makes sense when meeting in a natural setting, but also appeared to be fuelled by groups using similar resources to find inspiration. Sally Welch's, 'Outdoor Church[338]; Mary Jackson and Juno Hollyhock's, 'Creative Ideas for Wild Church'[339], Rachel Summers 'Wild Worship'[340] and Tess Ward's 'The Celtic Wheel of the Year'[341], were all

[338] Sally Welch, *Outdoor Church.*, 2016.
[339] Jackson and Hollyhock, *Creative Ideas for Wild Church Taking All-Age Worship and Learning Outdoors.*
[340] Summers, *Wild Worship*.
[341] Ward, *The Celtic Wheel of the Year*.

mentioned within the interviews, and I saw first-hand from personally attending Forest Church gatherings, one or other of these books was used to explain the activity or to read a prayer from. All of these resources use the seasons as their structure and all mention these either Pagan or Celtic notions of the cycle of the year. The influence of these resources manifested themselves in very tangible ways. For instance, four of the leaders mentioned Imbolc, the demarcation of the start of Spring, and the making of a Brigid Cross as the craft activity. This simple cross consists of reeds, or string, or twigs, wound around two sticks to form a cross. This cross originates, according to which sources you enquire of, either as a pre-Christian, Pagan symbol to ward off fire from your house, or as a Celtic symbol synonymous with Brigid of Kildare, a patron saint of Ireland whose feast day is celebrated on 1st February. Similarly, at the festival of Lammas that heralds Autumn, different leaders described the baking of bread over a fire or making corn dollies. Both of these types of activity, and the reasoning for doing them, are found in the books mentioned. Whilst all the leaders acknowledged this cyclical rhythm, they also shared more pragmatic and immediate activities that they'd run.

Secondly, a further commonality was found in that all of the leaders mention prayer as an activity. Again, two approaches emerged, where prayer in the rural settings was described as 'silent prayer', 'reflective time' or 'prayer walks', in the suburban and urban settings prayer was described as either 'a quick prayer' or it was an activity. These activities were explained as 'a prayer trail on the trees', 'writing our prayers on leaves' or the creation of a 'prayer tree'. Or as in one leader's case, prayer was couched as conceptualised activity, connected with the doing of the activity.

> “and kind of play is very close to prayer, in that when you watch children in that deep sense of play, they're kind of completely absorbed they can't hear you call them for dinner, they can't even hear you call them to an ice cream they’re just so in the zone…I talk quite a lot about play and about how to play the state of flow, flow state, which is when the learning and, and the kind of bedding stuff into your brain, and growing emotionally and all of that happens. And I think that's actually very, it feels very akin to prayer to me.”

Where the groups who gave people space to go off, ‘and mooch’, finished their sessions by coming back together and asking people to share what they’d discovered, heard or noticed, the groups that centred on craft activities all spoke of a similar conclusion to their times.

> “We always end with a prayer, usually one I’ve found in a book”.
>
> “And I do a quick talk, like a few minutes literally a few minutes long about what the theme is so normally involve a Bible passage, or a parable or something about God, but very quick and short, and in very much everyday language… And then we end with a prayer, and I always say, I'm going to say a quick prayer, if you want to join in, that's great, but you don't have to, but if you want to say the word amen at the end, it just means I agree, but again, don't feel that you have to do that.”

Thirdly and finally, every leader mentioned that food was involved in some way when they met. This wasn’t incidental, but a central practice of the groups. Most often it was explained in terms like, ‘doing coffee and giving homemade cake the boot of the car, or the actual activity of the day providing the food, ‘we made bread over a fire’, ‘we gathered up berries and apples together and ate them’, ‘we made some pesto from wild garlic’. This alludes to the social aspect of Forest Church gatherings, even the more esoterically focused gatherings sharing in this together.

4.4 The Participants: What is Experienced?

From my research, I believe that the only online gathering point for both Forest Church attenders as well for those who lead the groups, is a Facebook page simply called 'Forest Church'[342]. The group has over 4,500 members and has seen significant growth in the last few years. This is the common ground for the Forest Church community of practice to share ideas, ask questions and where some moderation can take place by the gatekeepers of the movement. This is therefore the primary portal through which I have watched the movements growth, interactions and influence. Like any other researcher seeking qualitative data of gathered activities of any form, the two years which were been dominated by the Covid pandemic, have been extremely challenging. Through this period, Forest Church groups and their essentially embodied, in-person practices have either been much curtailed or completely unable to meet during lockdowns. This limitation aside, the Facebook group has continued to be very active and increasingly so throughout the pandemic. So, unable to conduct face-to-face, informal interviews with attenders of Forest Church groups as initially planned, a simple online questionnaire, originally intended to give some broad data to support these interviews, became a more necessary source than it was designed for. This is not the rich description of Forest Church attenders that would have been more revealing, but it gives some illustrative data that points to commonalities and contentions that exist within Forest Church. See Appendix 2 for a copy of the questionnaire.

4.4.1 Observations from the questionnaire of attenders

Of the 72 responses, 50 (70%) were female and 21 (29%) were male with 1 (<1%) person preferring not to give their gender. In terms of ages, where a range was given, 46 (75%) were

[342] 'Forest Church | Facebook'.

in the above 45 years old category, with the majority, 23 (37%) being in the 55 to 64 years age range, with only 1 person between the age of 18 years and 25 years responding.

In the question asking for their stated religion, all but one of the responses, which were free form, gave some form of 'Christian' as their answer. Of the answers given, 57% simply used the word 'Christian' with a further 19% qualifying this by adding their denominational adherence. There was no particular dominance of any one denomination from these answers, with no more than 3 saying either Methodist, Baptist, Catholic or Church of England, and single responses specifying Mennonite, United Church of Canada and Quaker. Of the other assorted additions to Christian included, 'Christian/Druid', 'Quasi Christian', 'At the recent census I wrote Christian Druid, although I am a confirmed Anglican and regular church goer', 'Christian – also earth based goddess', 'Celtic Christian' and 'Spiritual, I suppose Christian but with First Nations and other influences'. The only answer to not mention Christian chose to express their religion as 'Spiritually Fluid' (though that responder later goes on to say that they attend a Methodist Church).

One of the central claims, found in many sources, is that Forest Church is a more inclusive form of church, connecting with a much broader group of people then 'normal church'.

> 'They are open to, and attract, a diverse group of participants, some of whom wouldn't attend a traditional church'[343].
>
> 'Forest Church is intended to be for all ages, and when it is planned well, it will be accessible by all. And being so visible and accessible means people can join in, whoever they are…'[344]

[343] Stanley, *Forest Church*, 14.
[344] Siggy Parratt-Halbert, 'Worshipping With and Within God's Creation', n.d., https://www.rootsontheweb.com/media/21278/forest-church.pdf.

> 'Forest Churches are seeking to provide a space in nature where a specifically Christian spirituality can be explored by those who find their most natural spiritual connection occurring when outdoors. These may be people exploring spirituality through the earthed religious traditions such as paganism, others are simply nature lovers. Either way, they are unlikely to be attracted to gatherings in church buildings.'[345]

With the limitations of this data acknowledged, it is still stark that the gender, age groups and religious affiliation do not affirm the movement's own view that it is broader and more inclusive, in any demographic sense, than traditional church. From observing several different gatherings, in all settings, there were significantly more women than men, with older people the most regularly attenders. The exception to this, where the data wouldn't be picked up by this questionnaire, is where a group makes specific provision for children. As shown in the local leaders' reflections it can be concluded that Forest Church groups have been successful at attracting younger children well.

In response to question 4, 2 people responded saying that they hadn't ever attended a Forest Church gathering, but both said they would if they were aware of one locally, with the rest of the responses ranging from 1 attendance up to '70+', with the next highest answer being '30+'. Excluding that top result, the average attendance was around 12 gatherings attended.

Contradictory evidence to the inference that Forest Church is more attractive to those 'who wouldn't attend a normal church' is found in the responses to question 5, which asked whether or not the Forest Church attender also attended 'normal church' as well. Of the 71 responses to this question, 63 (89%) said that they did also attend another church with just 8 (11%) saying that they either didn't attend church or that they used to but don't anymore,

[345] Williams, *Forest Church*, 7.

with one specifying that they don't go to church but, 'belong to a remote Celtic community'. One of the most intriguing aspects of Forest Church, and groups like them, is in the claim that this is a missional opportunity that reaches outwards 'beyond the walls' of our churches, connecting with people who are not in our buildings already. This is certainly the view where of the founders of the Forest Church movement who describe it as a 'Fresh Expression' of church[346]. Many have written about Fresh Expressions, and this is not a focus here but by their own definition, 'Fresh Expressions are new forms of church that emerge within contemporary culture and engage primarily with those who don't 'go to church.'[347] This is certainly where the founders and leaders of Forest Church want to situate themselves, they believe that this is a movement driven by 'contemporary culture', the evidence is overwhelming that people are seeking these nature-connecting activities, but there may be some dissonance between who they think they are currently attracting and who actually attends.

Where there is greater agreement with the working theory of Forest Church, and strongly so, is in why people might want to attend Forest Church. 'Forest Churches are seeking to provide the space in nature where specifically Christian spirituality can be explored by those who find their most natural spiritual connection occurring when outdoors.'[348] This claim was affirmed by almost every one of the respondents, in some form or another, when asked about why they attend Forest Church. The most common response of this free-form answer was around a consistent theme of nature being where people felt most naturally connected to God.

[346] Stanley, *Forest Church*.
[347] 'Fresh Expressions – Enabling Mission Shaped Networks', accessed 9 February 2022, https://freshexpressions.org.uk/.
[348] Williams, *Forest Church*, 7.

> ‘We left our old church and wanted to see what it was like as most of us tend to feel closer to God in nature’[349]
>
> ‘I have always felt connection with God through creation and I saw a friend talking about it on Facebook’
>
> ‘Love spending time with God outside … feels like the natural place to do church in!’
>
> ‘I started it for deeper connection to the Divine in the thin space of the forest’
>
> ‘Wanting to deepen my connection with nature framed in the Christian tradition’
>
> ‘I was journeying from paganism to Christianity and it became a way in- and it made me realise that I had been Christ-centred all along but was searching for something like Forest Church, without knowing it existed.’
>
> ‘God is still creating our web of creation where all living things are interrelated’.
>
> ‘Connection with creator God through His amazing creation. With bare feet, I can connect with the soil, the leaves, the earth. To contemplate on the voice of nature and God’s still small voice of calm. To breathe...’

Others expressed another over-arching theme that is present wherever Forest Church type activities are being discussed. As well as expressing what they were hoping to find in attending Forest Church, many responders also chose to express what it was they were wanting to leave behind.

> ‘Found being outdoors life giving and spiritually-deepening; became increasingly frustrated with the narrowness of the evangelical church's patterns of worship. Exploring Forest Church was part of a deconstruction of my mainstream evangelical faith.’
>
> ‘I feel very connected to God when I'm outside in His creation. Sometimes even more so than in church!’
>
> ‘Initially invited, I prefer encountering God within Gods creation but most who I meet who go to churches do not share this.’

[349] These are the answers given to the online questionnaire, all quoted here as the entirety of the answer unless otherwise stated, including any spelling or grammatical errors.

> ‘I have a strong embodied sense of God as Creator Mother/Father, so church makes more sense being out on the land than in a man-made building; have had profound spiritual experiences in woodlands and mountains; Forest Church for me is less restricted and dogmatic; more fluid and creative.’
>
> ‘Because church walls don't invoke any real deep sense of the divine for me’.
>
> ‘We left our old church due to constant verbal abuse for our alternative style, and turned to forest church as our friends recommended it as a safe place.’
>
> ‘We left our old church and wanted to see what it was like as most of us tend to feel closer to God in nature and wanted to try a less pentecostal style church.’

Whilst some also alluded to the feeling that Forest Church was the more inclusive space that they were looking for, using inclusive to mean, those from other faiths or ‘spiritualities’ as well as those who wouldn’t normally come to church.

> ‘I started a group because it used the church resources well and connected with others who wouldn't normally come to a church building.’
>
> ‘It sounded like a more open and relational approach.’
>
> ‘We formed it as part of our mission to our community’.
>
> ‘Bridges with other spiritualisties (sic) better than inherited church’
>
> ‘As I enjoy earthy gatherings. I enjoy the creativity, being outdoors in a beautiful space with no walls is nice. The service feels lighter and use of language less structured. Seems more inclusive, and I like this. Fits in with more feminine styles of gatherings, e.g. sitting in circle, nature, plants, light, and dark with fire, elements. Less man made. Animals and wildlife welcomed in too. A great vicar who understands alternatives rather than just replicating a service outside. I needed to integrate my multi faith outlook.’

When describing the activities that happen at a Forest Church gathering, the expectation is that this will be something quite distinctive, different from ‘just normal church happening

outside; instead it attempts to participate with creation.'[350] There is also a consistent image of each group planning and delivering their activities, as a reflection of and influenced by the environment around them, with this inevitably leading to each Forest Church being somewhat distinctive from any other group. 'Gatherings should relate to, and be in dialogue with the specific setting they're in.'[351] Therefore there isn't a prescribed, set form of Forest Church although there are 'guidelines' on how to run them, with an assumption therefore that 'Forest Churches vary enormously'[352]. '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.'[353]

The responses to question 7, asking about what activities and rituals take place at the gatherings attended by the responders, gives some support to these propositions. These free-form answers affirm that there are different activities than would ever likely be practiced within a traditional church service, but at the same time, the types of activities and especially within the described rituals, there are specific practices that arise with great consistency. The most commonly described activities were forms of quiet reflection ('meditation', 'mindfulness', 'silent prayer', 'stillness', 'listened for/to God'), exploration or study ('foraging', 'harvesting', 'butterfly count', 'bug hunting') craft activities ('den building', 'making an advent wreath', 'fire making', 'making seed bombs', 'made a bug hotel') preparing and eating food ('made Wild Garlic pesto', 'made soup', 'roasted marshmallows') and sharing reflections

[350] Stanley, *Forest Church*, 12.
[351] Stanley, 13.
[352] Williams, *Forest Church*, 7.
[353] Stanley, *Forest Church*, 12.

within the group (‘sharing what God has taught us in nature’, ‘sharing our thoughts’). There were also some mentions of singing, walking together, reading the Bible, children’s story time and the use of liturgy. Some answers gave a fuller description, giving a helpful picture of what has gone on in these groups:

> ‘have done contemplating in a wild space including throwing pebbles into the sea and watching the ripples, looking at ecosystems and how all creation works together, sitting in the calm and quiet under a tree listening to God, counting sounds. I have also created art from nature as worship and talked about it's meaning, done chanting or singing as worship, walked a prayer labyrinth and prayerfully placed things on a fire or into a pot on the fire.’

> ‘>Made a soup over a fire whilst remembering some of our loved ones who have a passed on. >Made art out of nature >Threw pebbles into the sea and watched the ripples and roasted marshmallows >Burnt rosemary and eucalyptus to let go and start a fresh >Sat in nature (such as under a tree) and listened for/to God’.

Question 8, asking what people have found most helpful about attending Forest Church, confirmed that all the responders had a strong affection for their Forest Church gathering. Many reflected with gratitude for finding something different that they’d found wanting in their experiences of traditional church worship. Of all the responses given, two very strong concurrences emerged. The first is universally expressed in all the literature about Forest Church, what appears to be the very essence of the movement, that of ‘connecting to’ or ‘hearing from’ God through nature. This warrants much further investigation, the terms used here are loose and with little or no qualification, but such is the frequency of the admission that this is certainly what people are expressing can and does happen at Forest Church.

> ‘Personally, this idea of the God of Creation being just as real and meaningful as Jesus of Nazareth/Jesus Christ or the Holy Spirit, has pushed me in a new direction’.

> ‘I found it a safe place where I could be an alternative Christian and connect with God through nature. Its where I really started to connect to God and understand him better.’
>
> ‘It evokes a sense of the innate divine in all things, it helps me remember to be compassionate because all of us are interconnected.’
>
> ‘Ability to explore new ways of worshipping and celebrating Jesus outdoors. Recognising divine feminine and spirit of nature/holy spirit outdoors. Liberalism.’

The second coherent claim is more intriguing because it is a subject that is so understated in the theoretical claims about Forest Church, with most of the literature failing to acknowledge it at all. Social connection, companionship and finding other like-minded people was specifically mentioned by 25 people (40% of those who gave a response to this question). This is certainly true of my experiences of attending Forest Church, where the encouraged activity or discussion starter was regularly overshadowed by the sense of friends catching up with one another and conversations that had little to do with the set task. This isn’t a criticism of Forest Church in any way, but the insistence within the literature of a kind of ‘sola natura’, that the natural, non-human world is the only or main mitigating or mediating factor when groups meet is to overlook the essential and equally elemental factor of person-to-person connection.

> ‘I have found there are other people like me!’
>
> ‘Meeting others who also encounter God within creation. Being able to have more indepth conversations and deeper meetings with others’.
>
> ‘Worshipping with other people who connect best with God when outdoors.’
>
> ‘Be equal and opening up with others but also having stillness time to reflect’.

> ‘Meeting with like-minded fringe Christians. A bit weird, like me, but also wonderful (like me?)’
>
> ‘Awareness, being open to nature teaching us, being set free from expectation, wonder, connecting with nature with God and with the other people there.’
>
> ‘Having a chance to meet with those who wouldn't normally come to church, and being able to speak about how God interacts with the whole of creation, not just our minds, and not purely anthropocentrically.’

This theme is continued within the responses to the next question, where the significance of the other people in the group was echoed even though the framing of the question could have been regarded as asking for an especially internal, singular experience. In asking for the description of, ‘a particular moment within a Forest Church gathering, that had spiritual impact upon you’, many responses reflected the criticality of the role that other people played in the meaning-making of the moment.

> ‘During a beach church when I saw the kids playing in Rock pools, and realised that was worship’.
>
> ‘Sitting on a hillside in companionable silence looking at woods in the rain - a healing moment’.
>
> ‘I was watching young children learning about wild flowers and become enthusiastic.’
>
> ‘Inter generational group of people gathered around the tree of Hope using the poppies we had created to make a memorial. The silence gave me goosebumps. The presence of God was tangible’
>
> ‘Sitting in silence in a wood with complete strangers, listening to the rustling of the wind and feeling the presence of God in that space’
>
> ‘In pairs, one person with their eyes closed, being led to explore a piece of the forest, guided by another eyes open’

There is also plenty to encourage those promoting Forest Church who do so in the hope of eliciting numinous experiences, where some sort of threshold between the observation of the natural world and the revelatory abilities of it to reveal something of God are bridged. '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… 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'[354]

> 'During a service we had to go off on our own and sit and listen for God in nature. I sat beneath a yew tree and really felt this sense of calmness and peace. Almost as if I were receiving a big hug from the tree I was sat again, I felt safe and untouchable. I really felt God's present in that moment and it impacted me'.
>
> 'At time of consecration, wind lightly blew through the trees, rustling the leaves, and reminding us of the closeness of the Holy Spirit'.
>
> 'meditating on a tree speaking of God's steadfast love'
>
> 'Lie down under a tree, bare feet, look up and watch the leaves, rays of tangental light throwing a haze of greens and yellows, eerie, peaceful, healing! God slowing me down in my rush of life - a reminder to listen, reflect and take my peace to others...'
>
> 'Sitting beside a lake watching the wildlife in and around it and feeling God speaking to me quite clearly through their activity.'

Finally, I gave people space to respond with anything else they wished to comment on. These were mixed, with several people simply encouraging the sharing of the findings of this research, but also many choosing to share their support for Forest Church, often in stark and evocative ways.

> 'Forest Church has been crucial for keeping my spirit alive during the darkest time of my life.'

[354] Stanley, 13.

> ‘I think forest church is so beautiful. Its more eco friendly, more open and kinder to all members of the community and explores God in a deep way than any church I've ever been too.’

> ‘I've been a Christian a long time. This is for me a way of connecting with God in new ways, because the ways I know have become too familiar for me.’

Two more critical or cautionary comments stand out as they are reflective of concerns that others have expressed around Forest Church in more general terms. Firstly, this respondent raises two significant issues, that warrant further investigation and reflection:

> ‘Main worry I have is that locations and temperature exclude some dear elderly and disabled friends and altering location to accessible parks etc just not consistent with need to find more wild quiet places.... Just hard not to feel like we are exclusive. And also want to do more silence but balancing needs of children present is difficult.’

4.4.1.1 Forest Church and Inclusion

As shown already, Forest Church wants to be seen as ‘inclusive’ on every level, but by its very nature, desirous to get people away and into wilder, natural settings, becomes exclusive towards many people with physical disability. Emma Major, leader of Oakwood Forest Church[355] who has had numerous debilitating, physical disabilities since her time starting Oakwood nine years ago, has been a keen champion of this issue. As well as starting a Facebook group[356] to try and gain further discussion around the making of Forest Church more accessible for everyone, she has also produced a comprehensive ‘Accessibility

[355] ‘Oakwood Forest Church’, St Nicolas Church - Earley, accessed 12 February 2022, http://www.stnicolas.org.uk/oakwood-forest/.
[356] ‘Access Forest Church Group’, accessed 12 February 2022, https://www.facebook.com/groups/1038457179903934/about/.

Assessment and Proforma' for anyone planning a Forest Church meeting[357]. This is an undoubtedly helpful tool, but the responder is correct to draw attention to the dilemma faced by group organisers, where the very settings which so naturally evoke awe and wonder, are rarely those with paved and level access. As *Wild Church Toolkit*[358] a resource from the Diocese of Norwich advises, at the very least, Forest Church groups should ensure that they have 'advertised what access is available' in order that people can make their own assessment, before attending.

4.4.1.2 Forest Church and Children

The responder also raises a further practical issue that reflects a tension that anyone leading a Forest Church will have had to consider. As seen in previous responses, one of the strong appeals of doing church outside is that it is seen as appealing to all age groups and especially so to children, allowing them the freedom of more expansive spaces and playful interaction with the natural world. Visiting and observing Forest Church gatherings, it becomes clear that where children are present, there are often activities that are designed to include those children. This is invariably seen as a strength of Forest Church, where traditional, indoor church services remove the child to a back room for Sunday School or equivalent activity, the emphasis here is to keep all ages together and to learn from one another. This can however create something of a lowest common denominator, where adults without children attending are left to observe a craft activity, listen to a children's story or some other child-focussed observational exercise. Charlie Houlder-Moat, leader of Norfolk Wild Church reflects on this

[357] 'Access Forest Church Accessibility Assessment', *Oakwood Forest Church* (blog), 20 October 2020, https://oakwoodforestchurch.wordpress.com/2020/10/20/access-forest-church-accessibility-assessment/.
[358] 'Wild Church Toolkit', *Diocese of Norwich* (blog), accessed 14 February 2022, https://www.dioceseofnorwich.org/resource/wild-church-toolkit/.

when asked about the session that I attended, where the activities we were invited to participate in seemed to be particularly directed this way. I asked if this was always the case. 'Yes, that is something I've been thinking about. Yes, activities have seemed to be focussed on the younger children but encouraging the adults to work with them. And adults enjoy the craft and activity elements as much as the children sometimes. It's good to encourage a sense of play for the adults too.'[359] She goes on to talk about ways that she has also tried to make a 'space to explore and when less windy set up a 'breathing space' area which includes books, the Bible, mindfulness colouring, a finger labyrinth and prayer resources'[360], in a bid to create a more reflective area for adults. There is a dissonance here though, where the intention of giving people space for silence and stillness, the creation of an opportune atmosphere in which the numinous, awe-filled, overwhelming sense of God that is so often reflected as a key element of these outdoor gathering, is unobtainable or inaccessible to a child who wants to run off and play – and by extension, is therefore equally distracting to the adult responsible for them. When writing about Forest Church for the Church Times, Christine Miles attends a gathering in Wales and reflects what many parents feel, 'It was fun and friendly, but, with a toddler in tow, I found it hard to connect.'[361]

Cate Williams, in her Grove Booklet on Forest Church, separates these two seemingly incompatible activities, into two different types of Forest Church groups when stating, 'Some are quite formal and liturgical, others and more informal. Some use silence, mindfulness and time alone in nature; others are full of the boisterous energy of children with silence less likely

[359] Charlie Houlder-Moat, email to author, 10 February, 2022.
[360] Ibid.
[361] 'If You Kneel down in the Woods Today'.

to be a workable option.'[362] This might be a good theoretical way to run a Forest Church but there begins to feel a creepingly familiar tension that every traditional church has had to contend with in how to keep all-ages together and all-ages content. The theoretical framework of all generations learning from one another falls on the pragmatic issue of either focussing on children, potentially providing a shallow experience for adults as well as becoming exclusive, often harmfully so, towards the child-less, or veering towards an esoteric, deeper experience that is beyond the grasp or attention span of a child. The option that Williams offers, of delineating individual Forest Churches around these child/adult lines, is not being practiced by any group as far as I could tell. No Forest Church gatherings specify that theirs is for 'adults only'. Whilst there is a growing movement towards more specifically child-focused expressions of Forest Church type activity, invariably using the name of 'Mossy Church'[363] or 'Muddy Church'[364], this is not seen as a substitute for Forest Church. This might be understood in much the same way that a church that runs children's work is not doing so as though that activity is, in and of itself, a church but is instead a form of appropriate learning activity within the setting of a wider church. This leaves the leader of any Forest Church group with an unavoidable burden of discernment as they seek to navigate and find balance between playful and engaging activity as well as creating space for stillness and contemplation. As the movement grows and matures, this crucial and problematic issue will need further thought and experimentation if Forest Church is to succeed in its hope to be an intergenerational expression of church.

[362] Williams, *Forest Church*, 7.
[363] 'Mossy Church | Facebook', accessed 14 February 2022, https://www.facebook.com/mossychurch/.
[364] 'Community | Muddy Church', accessed 14 February 2022, https://www.muddychurch.co.uk.

4.4.1.3 Forest Church and Paganism

It may be an understated reference, but the final observation from a Forest Church attender that is worthy of reflection upon is found in this comment:

> 'The overlap between some Forest church formats and pagan ritual seemed a bit odd at first'.

One of the primary purposes of considering Forest Church, as the exemplar of the Church's response to nature connecting activities, is to enquire whether its praxis can and should be considered 'church', but that claim loses any efficacy at all if it fails to firstly convince that what it is practicing is intrinsically Christian. Other responders to the questionnaire, use phrases like 'nature based spiritualities' and describe Forest Church as 'multi-faith', whilst one referred to 'calling to the energies of the four directions for wisdom and guidance' as one of the activities they experienced. These comments do not necessarily evidence non-Christian activity, context and further questioning would be required to make that judgement, but they do bring in to question the epistemological understanding of what these Forest Church attenders themselves believe they are doing when they gather. As Ballard and Pritchard state, 'Christian people are always thinking theologically, whether in rudimentary or sophisticated ways their discussion will always betray a theological stance.'[365] Is there more than etymological semantics going on when someone describes their worship towards 'the earth goddess' or is encouraged to 'call on the energies of the four directions'? Or is this just a kind of missional, linguistic compromise in order to speak to those of other faiths, to aid those

[365] Paul H Ballard and John Pritchard, *Practical Theology in Action: Christian Thinking in the Service of Church and Society* (London: SPCK, 2006), 118.

coming from Pagan understandings to make connections through a sharing of common language?

In the extended Church Times article, where journalist Christine Miles attends her first Forest Church gathering, she shares her own 'wobble' in encountering unfamiliar and threatening language:

> 'I…had a wobble during the opening liturgy. I can relate to calling God "the Source of All", the "Great Spirit of Creation", and the "Divine Spirit", but felt a momentary pang of unease at the mention of the sun-child, Mabon, even if the reference sought to trigger thoughts about darkness and light, and, ultimately, about Jesus.'[366]

Cate Williams is aware of this when she adds caution to her recommendation for use of language that is more inclusive of those who follow 'earthed faith traditions' when adding, 'though with care taken to remain trinitarian and Christ-focussed…Each FC practitioner needs to listen closely to the people they are working with and discern what language is most appropriate for their gatherings'[367] Either way, this interplay of concepts and language that would be unfamiliar to most Christians, will make many guardians of more traditional understandings of church wary of the foundational, theology of Forest Church and its practices. As Dr John Bimson, co-leader of Mid-Wales Forest church says, 'To do that, (make Forest Church accessible to non-Christians) you've got to tread a delicate balance between making it user-friendly, without making it sub-Christian, or unchristian.'[368] The very fact that there is a cautionary ask to ensure that Forest Church 'remains' trinitarian and Christ-focused

[366] 'If You Kneel down in the Woods Today'.
[367] Williams, *Forest Church*, 27.
[368] 'If You Kneel down in the Woods Today'.

and not ‘sub-Christian’, alludes to the theological discrepancy that potentially exists within the foundation of the movement.

4.5 New Christian Nature Writing

To conclude this chapter, I want to give a brief overview of the ecclesiological response that falls outside of the remit and nomenclature of Forest Church. Whilst Forest Church undoubtedly dominates the space in terms of organised, nature-connecting activity, there is an emerging correlative movement within Christian nature writing over the last decade as well as some equally reflexive activity that shares ideology with Forest Church but expresses praxis in different ways.

As observed in Chapter 3, within popular culture, there has been a significant surge of interest in the production of what has been termed, ‘New Nature Writing’. I want to draw attention to the literature produced within the Christian space where the conceptualised differentiations of this new form of nature writing, as opposed to a more traditional approach, have been mirrored stylistically so faithfully that I want to consider these works as being ‘New Christian Nature Writing’. This particular style is marked by an intersectional discourse that brings together the two traditional approaches to writing about nature and defies both categories; namely the genre that focuses on overly romanticised or poetic images of nature in prose and the more forensic, ecological taxonomies or field guides of the natural history genre. These works by Christian authors, reflecting the methodology of the new nature writers but with Christian faith clearly present and central, are far from profligate but there are some and the suspicion is that others will seek to fill this space, a space that social

historian, Joe Moran, says 'can be accused of an opportunistic vogueishness'[369]. Just as New Nature Writing shares in similar stylistic methodologies but still expresses a broad categorisation of foci, so too does the Christian response. Here, I want to reflect upon the four categories I used in Chapter 2 to appreciate where Christian equivalence is found: Nature as Epistemic, Topophilic, Participation and Salvific.

4.5.1 Christian Nature Writing as Epistemic

The first category where attempts by Christian writers bid to emulate New Nature Writing is in the methodology of where the movement first emerged and has since flourished. This use of an exploration of a broad nature based meta-theme, such as mountains, rivers or weather is then used, in oblique or substantial ways, to act as metaphor for the human condition. In this Christian response, a natural meta-theme is explored with similar elucidative observations and scientific knowledge given about a subject where these are then used as underlying metaphors to teach the reader some aspect of Christian spirituality and the nature of God. Examples of this methodological equivalence are Brian McLaren's *God Unbound: Theology in the Wild* [370], Barbara Brown Taylor's *An Altar in the World* [371], Graham Usher's, *Places of Enchantment: Meeting God in Landscape '*[372] and *The Way under Our Fee'*[373].

[369] 'A Cultural History of the New Nature Writing', *Joe Moran's Words* (blog), 30 May 2015, https://joemoran.net/academic-articles/a-cultural-history-of-the-new-nature-writing/.
[370] Brian D McLaren, *God Unbound: Theology in the Wild*, 2019.
[371] Barbara Brown Taylor, *An Altar in the World: Finding the Sacred beneath Our Feet* (London: Canterbury Press Norwich, 2009).
[372] Graham B Usher, *Places of Enchantment: Meeting God in Landscapes*, 2012.
[373] Graham B Usher, *The Way under Our Feet: A Spirituality of Walking* (London: SPCK, 2020), https://public.ebookcentral.proquest.com/choice/publicfullrecord.aspx?p=6142081.

In a clear attempt to profit from this, 'opportunistic vogueishness' McLaren confesses that his work came about as a direct response to a request from a publisher to produce, 'a book that would be one part travel guide, one part spiritual memoir, and one part ethical/theological reflection'[374]. McLaren uses a visit to the Galapagos Islands to reflect on what he refers to as 'theology in the wild'[375] claiming that, 'Most theology in recent centuries, especially white Christian theology, has been the work of avid indoorsmen, scholars who typically work in square boxes called offices or classrooms or sanctuaries, surrounded by square books and, more recently, square screens, under square roofs in square buildings surrounded by other square buildings, laid out in square city blocks that stretch as far as the eye can see.'[376] Many would want to argue that this is a lazy assertion, as though theological thought only happens for theologians when they are at work and indoors, with McLaren himself only presenting half of this work written in situ, in the form of a travelogue and the other half reflecting upon his trip. However, McLaren uses the background of his journey throughout the Galapagos Islands to reflect on a Christian response to evolutionary theory, asking where God might fit into the origin of our species, as well as forming something of an eco-theological call to care for the planet. In visiting this cradle of evolutionary theory, a place of hugely disputed scientific and theological tension, McLaren stands, literally, on this contested ground and observes lessons from the profligacy of creaturely life on the island in an unapologetic invitation to find Christian spiritual inspiration from within Darwinist theory. 'For 245 million years, and for 99.999 percent of the 66 million years since, God was happy to have a good universe that included neither a single human nor a single religion but lots and lots, and lots, of reptiles.'

[374] McLaren, *God Unbound*, 4.
[375] McLaren, 7.
[376] McLaren, 13.

It isn't a work of theology in any academic sense, it feels polemical and unconvincing in places, but it is nature writing seeking to use the stimulus of the natural world as metaphor for Christian spirituality.

Writing from a similar theological space as McLaren, Barbara Brown Taylor[377] has become synonymous with earthed Christian spirituality after becoming disillusioned with traditional church leadership. In her most concise work on this theme, 'An Altar in the World', Taylor uses a variety of leitmotifs, which she argues are the very things 'underneath our feet'[378] as metaphors to suggest devotional practices. It is lyrical and whimsical, perhaps open to accusation of mawkishness in places, but is as close to its 'secular' equivalent as anything else written. An example of the prose as well as a good, overarching manifesto of the whole canon of the literature of this movement is found here:

> People encounter God under shady oak trees, on riverbanks, at the tops of mountains, and in long stretches of barren wilderness. God shows up in whirlwinds, starry skies, burning bushes, and perfect strangers. When people want to know more about God, the son of God tells them to pay attention to the lilies of the field and the birds of the air, to women kneading bread and workers lining up for their pay. Whoever wrote this stuff believed that people could learn as much about the ways of God from paying attention to the world as they could from paying attention to scripture. What is true is what happens, even if what happens is not always right. People can learn as much about the ways of God from business deals gone bad or sparrows falling to the ground as they can from reciting the books of the Bible in order. They can learn as much from a love affair or a wildflower as they can from knowing the Ten Commandments by heart.[379]

[377] Taylor, like McLaren, has been hugely influential in her writing and speaking at events and on podcasts. She travelled an almost identical pathway as McLaren from years of church leadership and wide influence and support, to moving towards a more liberal or progressive theological position that saw them both leave local church leadership. They both occupy a space that arguably doesn't exist in British church culture, that of wise sage or spiritual teacher that is seen as unorthodox or even heretical by the American church but adored by the progressive followers of Christian spirituality.
[378] Taylor, *An Altar in the World*, 14.
[379] Taylor, 33.

For a more prosaic and understated view, Graham Usher writes two excellent books using the metaphors of landscape and walking to make his theological and devotional suggestions. In introducing 'Places of Enchantment', Usher claims a desire to produce a resource for 'preachers and study groups'[380], offering an approach that is for both the individual, who might take inspiration for their Christian faith within it, but also as an encouragement to the Church. Where McLaren and Taylor call people out of the Church as a religious institution that is working against nature and into the natural world in order to find God, Usher aims his critique at forms of church worship and not at the institution itself. He argues instead that the redemptive power of nature might be both transformational for the individual Christian but also the liturgical life of corporate Christian worship; suggesting that the power of nature connection might be for the redemption of the whole church, not as alternative to it but as an enlivening reagent within it. He describes the experience of hearing that people are leaving the church because they no longer find God in these buildings, as being both, 'sad and exciting', 'Sad because our liturgy, prayers and music, the very aesthetic of our worship, often do not connect with people. Exciting because it allows us to ask questions to ask new questions and to explore new avenues.'[381] In expanding on this, he directly contradicts the mantra of Forest Church that 'If what is happening could have happened inside, it might be wonderful but it isn't really Forest Church'[382] Usher is far more positive and expansive, emphasising that all kinds of activity benefit from being done outdoors, even traditional church worship practices.

> How can some of the challenge, continuity and community found within formal liturgy be taken out into landscape so that encountering and worshipping God within

[380] Usher, *Places of Enchantment*, 16.
[381] Usher, 8.
[382] Stanley, *Forest Church*, 13.

> landscape might be part of our everyday life, and a continuation of ancient Christian traditions, rather than left to a New Age interest? And how can the natural world be drawn into the life of our liturgy within our church buildings again? Can landscapes be a resource for faithful people overburdened by church life to rest a while away from all the baggage that comes with praying in their own church buildings so that they might relax, enjoy and be re-energized by and in the life of God?[383]

He then goes on to describe how views of different topographies might enlighten the reader, revealing something of the nature of God and acting as inspiration for personal worship and spiritual practice. Whether considering land, forest, river, mountain or desert he skilfully balances the dialogical landscape of theology and this of-the-moment nature writing. He also manages to draw on many different theological and sociological sources and interweaves these so that whether he's using a bible passage or quoting Simon Sharma, Walter Bruggemann or Gerard Manley Hopkins there is no hierarchical distinction, only using them as best fits the point he wants to illustrate. He paints descriptive and affecting images of these topographical features, but avoids overly romanticising, often giving personal stories of numinous moments and theophanies alongside informing in factual ways what might not already be known about the subject that's being considered, as well as using the Bible to give credence and illumination to what is being observed. In doing so, Usher gives us the beginnings of a hermeneutical methodology which we will return to when considering possibilities for a more robust theological response. And, in summarising his reflections on landscapes he also gives a clear Christological remit for further consideration in asserting, 'Landscape is sanctified by the incarnation, and it is Christ that we are bidden to meet, even

[383] Usher, *Places of Enchantment*, 14.

in part, in the moments of enchantment that we glimpse all around us in the created world.'[384]

4.5.2 Christian Nature Writing as Topophilic

Where New Nature Writing has seen such a prolific rise in topophilic writing, with a singular focus and reflection upon a specific site or species, there does not appear to be anything of quite the same equivalence by any contemporary Christian writers. This feels somewhat anomalous with the schema of the genre fitting so perfectly as it does with within the theory of the Christian spiritual contemplative movement and Christ's call to consider the birds of the air and the flowers of the field in Matthew 6. Where New Nature Writing has offered deep and reflexive studies on a specific field in John Lewis-Stempel's 'Meadowland'[385], or Helen McDonald's hawk in 'H is for Hawk'[386] yet, nobody has considered *a* field or *a* bird in quite the same way from a Christ-centred perspective. Further irony is found when considering one of the most repeated, ubiquitous tropes within Christian nature writing, that of Julian of Norwich's vision of a hazelnut, often presented as *prima facie* for how nature can speak to us of God.

> "And in this [sight], he showed a little thing the quantity of a hazelnut, lying in the palm of my hand as it seemed to me, and it was as round as any ball. I looked therein with the eye of my understanding, and thought: "What may this be?" And it was answered generally thus: "It is all that is made." I marvelled how it might last, for it seemed to me it might suddenly have fallen into nought for its littleness. And I was answered in my understanding: "It lasteth and ever shall, because God loveth it. And so hath all things being by the love of God."[387]

[384] Usher, 139.
[385] Lewis-Stempel, *Meadowland*.
[386] Macdonald, *H Is for Hawk*.
[387] 'Julian and the Hazelnut', Julian's Voice, accessed 22 October 2021, http://www.juliansvoice.com/1/post/2021/07/julian-and-the-hazelnut.html.

And yet, even though this mystical insight and deep revelation, so valued and reached for within the New Nature Writing and exemplified in this example, it is not repeated or expanded upon by any contemporary Christian author so far.

Although very different in genre, not sharing the same personal reflexivity or stylistic prose as the New Nature Writing, 'The Nature of God's Acre'[388] by Miles King and Mark Betson is refreshingly focussed, as it is, on the 'acre' of the churchyards of 25 different churches spread across the Diocese of Chichester.

> Churchyards are beautiful places. They are also unique, they are neither gardens, fields nor parks. They are owned by the church but belong to the community. Above all they are the places where generations past have found their rest. But it is not just the generations of people who have found their rest in these places - plants and animals increasingly pushed out from other surroundings, through development and changes in agricultural practise, have also found a haven.[389]

This work is the summation of a 2013, empirical study carried out by a group of five people all with a personal and/or professional interest in nature, a role of some sort within their Anglican church and with the two authors of this work also having an academic background in the subject[390]. Through a questionnaire sent to 25 parishes across Sussex, asking a series of questions about how responders might describe their church's churchyard, what they noticed about nature within that space and how they felt when they spent time there, the authors draw conclusions and recommendations. Whilst this is not in the same genre as the topophilic work of the New Nature Writing, the authors deserve great credit for at least

[388] Miles King and Mark, Betson, *The Nature of God's Acre.* (Hove: Nature of God's Acre Project Team, 2014).
[389] King and Mark, Betson, 2.
[390] King and Mark, Betson, 4.

emulating the evocative and convincing spirit of the genre in their call to care for these 'sacred grounds'. What could have been a dry observational exercise is not the case here, what appears from the data is a rich and affecting piece of theological reflection on place.

> Churchyards have been set apart from the beginning as sacred ground with the intention that the divine is given priority in this place…they are places where those who have died are entrusted to God's care and where we have the opportunity to come and take hope and comfort in that belief. How we tend and care for those places reflects our faith in that belief…These are places where we can witness the cycle of life remembering our dependence on much more than ourselves. [391]

4.5.3 Christian Nature Writing as Participative

'The call to participate in nature encompasses Forest Church; it's not an option within it'[392]. One of the strongest thematic claims, central to what Forest Church calls its practitioners to, is that of participation with nature. This is seen where 'connection with the natural world is a core practice'[393] and is opposed to anthropocentric observations of nature, where there is an expectation that you will enter into the natural world, touch it, listen to it, taste it. Here we see numerous pieces of literature that support this notion and emulate the more pragmatic, instructional approach to what it actually looks like to incorporate this into practice. These exercises might be suitable for a group to do together, but this emulative genre is more individually focussed and sits within what might be called devotional practices. These are not one-off-events but rather rhythmic mechanisms that Christians might adopt as practice and return to with regularity, using the natural world as stimulus for personal spiritual development and revelation.

[391] King and Mark, Betson, 47.
[392] Stanley, *Forest Church*, 49.
[393] Williams, *Forest Church*, 22.

Contributions towards this genre include Dan Papworth's *The Lives Around Us*[394] Tess Ward's *The Celtic Wheel of the Year*[395], Christian Valter Painter's *Water, Wind, Earth, and Fire*[396] Brian Draper and Howard Green's *Soulful Nature*[397], Sally Welch's *Outdoor Church*[398] and Mary Jackson and Juno Hollyhock's *Creative Ideas for Wild Church*[399].

Dan Papworth firmly positions his book when telling the reader that the purpose of his work, 'The Lives Around Us', is 'to tap into the present public interest in nature connection and encourage this to be formed in concert with Bible reading and regular (daily or weekly) prayer'[400]. Papworth offers a unique contribution here, bringing a correlatory approach that reflects a natural and unforced reciprocity between a taxological reflection on an aspect of the natural world, an apposite passage of scripture and an applicational approach to what an individual might do in response. He repeats this trifold method by considering forty different animals, plants or fungus, all found and encountered in the UK with most being common placed, such as Ash, Magpie, Ivy, Fox, Oak and Blackbird whilst some would need more careful searching for: St George's Mushroom, Stoat and Kingfisher. To give just one example, in introducing the Water Vole, Papworth firstly expands on how one might be recognised, 'commonly mistaken for a Rat' but 'Rats don't like getting wet, so if you see a swimming rat, you are almost certainly looking at a Vole and if you're still confused check the tail: the Water Vole's is furry and only half the length of her body'[401]. He goes on to consider how this shy

[394] Dan Papworth, *Lives around Us - Daily Meditations for Nature Connection.* (Christian Alternative, 2016).
[395] Ward, *The Celtic Wheel of the Year*.
[396] Christine Valters Paintner, *Water, Wind, Earth, and Fire: The Christian Practice of Praying with the Elements* (Notre Dame, Ind: Sorin Books, 2010).
[397] Brian Draper and Howard Green, *Soulful Nature: A Spiritual Field Guide* (Canterbury Press Norwich, 2020).
[398] Welch, *Outdoor Church.*
[399] Jackson and Hollyhock, *Creative Ideas for Wild Church Taking All-Age Worship and Learning Outdoors.*
[400] Papworth, *Lives around Us - Daily Meditations for Nature Connection.* Back cover.
[401] Papworth, 47.

animal 'seeks a quiet life' but is the prey for many different predators, 'so alertness and awareness, listening and intuition are embodied here'[402] especially because they can have up to five litters a year and the females' maternal duties to feed and protect her young dominate all she does. The bible passage to contemplate upon is Psalm 131, 'O Lord, my heart is not lifted up, my eyes are not raised too high; I do not occupy myself with things too great and too marvellous for me. But I have quietened my soul, like a weaned child with its mother; my soul is like a weaned child that is with me.' This leads Papworth to offer 'for reflection and prayer', the thought that, 'We can and should be concerned about great matters – it would be irresponsible not to – but there are times when it is important to retreat and recover the sense that we are loved personally and individually…So listen to the ever present watcher and give your life, which means your time, to the things that really count.'[403]

Christine Valters Paintner, frames her work as, 'an accompaniment and guide for ongoing prayer and times of retreat. It is an offering - one window among many - into cultivating a more intimate and contemplative relationship to God through the natural world.'[404] Using both the four elements of water, wind, earth and fire, as well as the four directions of the compass as grounding motifs, she invites the reader, 'to open your hearts to the sacred presence in nature and experience yourself as deeply connected to the whole earth community of which we are all a part.'[405] Through these elemental experiences she offers a variety of practices, often juxtaposing the ethereal with the substantial in order to interact with the element in question. Where these can feel at times, shallow, asinine and privileged

[402] Papworth, 48.
[403] Papworth, 49.
[404] Paintner, *Water, Wind, Earth, and Fire*, 18.
[405] Paintner, 21.

(to 'get in touch with the power of the wind', she suggests 'blow bubbles', 'go sailing' or 'consider the power of a windmill'[406]) she gives a wealth of biblical texts and numerous quotes from a broad range of sources to support and inspire these activities.

Another motif that is often referred to in this type of literature, and ever-present in the plans of activities such as Forest Church, is the concept of the 'Wheel of the Year'. This division of the year into eight points representing the four seasons, each with a beginning marked by either an equinox (in the case of Spring and Autumn) or a Solstice (for Winter and Summer), as well as the marking of the mid-point of each season, give the eight points that make up a rhythm to mark and celebrate the turning of the seasonal calendar. This pagan practice, based on British agrarian cycles, is widely considered to have been transformed by the arrival of Celtic Christians to the British Isles, and shouldn't come as any surprise to those who recognise the similarities with Anglican church's liturgical year as it is perfectly overlaid on to these way points. Tess Ward picks up this theme and expands upon it in her book, 'The Celtic Wheel of the Year'. After giving something of the background the concept of the wheel and acknowledging the contested nature of exactly how this practice became Christianised, Ward is extremely wise to position her work around 'the spiritual quality of the wheel rather than the historicity'[407]. What follows is an extremely thorough and enlightening collection of prayers and liturgies, going through the year, month by month, whilst acknowledging the turning of the seasonal cycles and referencing the eightfold cycle within them. These daily prayer practices are arranged as a form of morning and evening prayers, with space for stillness and quiet reflection. Whilst Ward doesn't ask the reader to physically interact with

[406] Paintner, 28.
[407] Ward, *The Celtic Wheel of the Year*, 4.

the world in the way that Painter or Papworth do, the mechanism of practicing these liturgical prayers within the season that is happening in the natural world, roots and connects these poetic, ephemeral prayers and times of silence, into an order and rhythm that echoes beyond the natural world and into the everyday life of the reader. A typical example of evening prayer, that Ward calls 'Night Shielding', is for Friday evenings in September, as autumn begins to emerge:

> Still Spirit of God, midst the waning sun and the rolling moon
> sustain me in peace in the turning of my days.
> As I let go of the outdoors of summer, now gone,
> let me welcome the lustre of autumn.
> Still Spirit of God lead me inward
> To know the warming of your love as the colder season calls.
> Be with all who need your war, love this night
> Give us the contentment of the home within where you reside
> I shut my eyes to the world this night, and entrust it to your care.[408]

4.5.4 Christian Nature Writing as Salvific

Whilst all the Christian literature responses to New Nature Writing have salvific elements within them, sharing the much broader meta-narrative of an anthropocentric blessing received from nature when interaction takes place, some work also focuses on a specific malaise or crisis as the loci and genesis of it.

In *The Making of Us*[409], Sheridan Voysey writes a book ostensibly about Christian response to loss, grief and midlife crisis but chooses to situate his reflections within the context of him taking a 'life-changing' pilgrimage. With the backdrop of personal grief through miscarriages

[408] Ward, 199.
[409] Sheridan Voysey, *The Making of Us: Who We Can Become When Life Doesn't Go as Planned* (Nashville, Tennessee: W Publishing Group, an imprint of Thomas Nelson, 2019).

and infertility diagnosis and the loss of a 'dream job', Voysey muses, 'I'm definitely on a new path and I'm not sure where it's leading. But unexpected journeys can take you to good places'[410] In a rather crass and hackneyed observation, he declares, 'Abram embarked on his sacred trek and found his place in history'[411] before going on to talk about the journey of the Israelites and Cleopas on the road to Emmaus, 'Scripture is full of sacred journeys – from heavens to earth, from grave to sky – and as countless saints have proven since, a walk with God can bring clarity. *Yes. It's time. I'm ready to go on pilgrimage*'[412]. The rest of the book then takes us along this pilgrimage from Holy Island, Lindisfarne, to Durham in order to view the Lindisfarne Gospels, on display in Durham Cathedral some 115 miles to the South. As each day unfurls Voysey uses what he sees around him, as well as reflecting on the life of St Cuthbert, to reflect upon his own mid-life malaise.

Where we find something more vital and integrous in work such as Amy Liptrot's 'The Outrun', where the pilgrimage back home to her island is the numinous way in which she eventually finds salvation and sobriety, this isn't convincing in Voysey's approach. Liptrot's lessons come out of reflection and not, in Voysey's case, where meaning appears overlaid on happenstance or forced moments of attention that clumsily enhance a presupposed proposition. Where New Nature Writing concerning the salvific abilities of nature flows from an exegesis of event or observation, 'The Making of Us' employs a more eisegetical approach which is both an unconvincing method and an opportunistic mechanism.

[410] Voysey, 9.
[411] Voysey, 9.
[412] Voysey, 9.

A much more faithful, but stranger response is found in Alistair McIntosh's 'Poacher's Pilgrimage'[413]. McIntosh describes himself as, 'a human ecologist, writer, speaker, researcher and activist'[414] and a Quaker who is 'especially influenced by liberation theology'[415]. Whatever his self-description, McIntosh and his writings are extremely hard to define in terms of genre and even more so in terms of theology. Where Voysey treads the tropes of evangelical theodician theory in his pilgrimage reflection, McIntosh writes with impish enthusiasm and from beguiling, multifarious perspectives, saying that his writing 'can be too pagan for the Christians, too Christian for the pagans. However…there's something stirring in a lot of us that feels the urge to place the compass on the map, to let its needle swing – the wider and the wilder, the better…that was the force that pulled me to make this island pilgrimage'[416]. He describes how 'for many years' he felt a 'winnowing call…tugging like an umbilical cord that ran beneath the sea'[417], to return to the Outer Hebrides, and the place of his birth. So, in his 'mid fifties' he undertakes a 12-day trek, wild camping along the way, from the southern tip of Harris northwards to the Butt of Lewis. What follows is a dense and mesmerising account of the journey, following a man deeply rooted and connected to the landscape and people, reflecting upon the very terroir that produced and formed him. As he richly describes the flora and fauna, and weather, as well as the breadth of local people he encounters, he confidently asserts and interweaves themes of broad narrative and political theology alongside Scottish folklore about giants and faeries, topophilic knowledge about Hebridean customs, beliefs and poetry as well as quoting countless Scottish clergymen and their eccentric ways. He is as localised in his writing as the footpaths on which he walks; the theologians, sociologists and

[413] Alastair McIntosh, *Poacher's Pilgrimage: An Island Journey.* (Edinburgh: Birlinn Ltd, 2018).
[414] 'Alastair McIntosh's Home Page', accessed 20 February 2022, https://www.alastairmcintosh.com/.
[415] 'Alastair McIntosh's Home Page'.
[416] McIntosh, *Poacher's Pilgrimage* xix.
[417] McIntosh, *Poacher's Pilgrimage*. xvii.

political theorists he quotes are nearly all from Scotland. There's no one overarching thread, though the lament towards the struggles of the islanders and the spectre of the Highland Clearances is ever-present in his interactions with the locals. By way of example of just how wide-ranging this work is, McIntosh uses this historical atrocity to give thoughtful reflection to how the perceived violence of the cross and its attached theories of Atonement have contributed to the 'co-option of Christianity into just-war theory'[418]. It's here where McIntosh is outstanding in his more generalised ideographic explanation of faith and mystery discovered within his own personal pilgrimage, offering readers a vista of salvation that is broader. but no less than, personal. Where Voysey employs a nomothetic and simplistic 'this means this' approach, McIntosh is far more playful and open, allowing a destabilising but much more complex and interesting theological framework to emerge.

[418] McIntosh, *Poacher's Pilgrimage*, 277.

5: Analysis of the Research: Understanding Forest Church & Other Responses

5.1 Forest Church: A Community of Practice

Perhaps one of the most helpful ways to describe Forest Church, as a movement, is to consider it in terms of what educational theorist, Etienne Wenger calls 'communities of practice'[419]. This terminology feels particularly well situated to describe not just the activity but more importantly, the people of the Forest Church movement. Wenger simplifies his conceptualised social learning theory in describing it as 'groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly.'[420] As I have interacted with the Forest Church movement, I have been convicted time and again about the passion and integrity of what is being attempted through Forest Church. These are not church people glibly asking questions about styles of sung worship or even models of church planting. These are people enacting, in Peter Berger's provocative phrase, the 'heretical imperative'[421], asking deep and fundamental questions about ecclesiology at its core. They may or may not be theologically fluent in their current practice but one of the most affecting reflections on the movement is that it has evolved within my time of observing it. It has moved from a fringe, negativistic handful of people, evolving and learning as they go, into a broad and significant movement with a growing positivistic praxis. This is aptly reflected in Wenger's assertion of how groups learn together, in stating that:

> Over time, this collective learning results in practices that reflect both the pursuit of our enterprises and the attendant social relations. These practices are thus the property of a kind of community created over time by the sustained pursuit of a

[419] Etienne Wenger, *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning and Identity*, Learning in Doing (Cambridge New York Port Melbourne [etc.]: Cambridge University Press, 2002).
[420] Wenger, 45.
[421] Peter L. Berger, *The Heretical Imperative: Contemporary Possibilities of Religious Affirmation* (Garden City, N.Y: Anchor Press, 1980).

> shared enterprise. It makes sense, therefore, to call these kinds of communities, *communities of practice.*[422]

Wenger is clear that, 'not everything called a community is a community of practice' but gives three key characteristics that are crucial to support his theory of differentiation. He suggests that communities of practice will have a domain, a community and a practice. The domain is the 'identity defined by a shared domain of interest' before stating that membership shares 'commitment to the domain, and therefore a shared competence that distinguishes members from other people…the domain is not necessarily something recognized as 'expertise' outside the community…they value their collective competence and learn from each other.'[423] Forest Church displays a clear domain. This dialogical interaction with the equivalent domain of the cultural moment is the interrogational purpose of this thesis, with the domain being nature connection as salvific for the human condition. The 'collective competence' of Forest Church is what I have found most intriguing in my observations of the movement, as learning, meaning and language around the attentive activities have progressed over the last decade. This tendency bleeds into Wenger's second characteristic identified as community.

Wenger argues that community, in this sense, is one where 'members engage in joint activities and discussions, help each other, and share information. They build relationships that enable them to learn from each other…but do not necessarily work together.'[424] He likens this type of community to the Impressionist painting movement in the nineteenth century, a community of artists who met together, discussing ideas and techniques but generally

[422] Wenger, *Communities of Practice*, 45.
[423] Wenger, 7.
[424] Wenger, 7.

painted alone, sharing in style but each with individual expression. This is an analogous image of the evolving community of Forest Church practitioners, who are all interconnected in social and dialogical ways, but who rarely run any events or conferences together instead focussing their attention on the delivery of their local group.

The third defining characteristic is practice. This practice, as Wenger expresses it, is as opposed to simply, interest. Communities of practice are not people who simply share in a liking of something. As in Forest Church, these are not just people who like being outdoors, these are practitioners of purpose. They do not simply corral around an ideological predilection but share in a commonality of practice. As Wenger observes, 'They develop a shared repertoire of resources: experiences, stories, tools, ways of addressing recuring problems.'[425]

Finally, Wenger offers a helpful tension, one that he argues doesn't need to exist, between practice and theory. In his epistemological framework, the term 'practice' is not used as an antonym for theory but is both, 'the theoretical and practical, ideals and reality, or talking and doing'[426].

> Communities of practice include all of these, even if there are sometimes discrepancies between what we say and what we do, what we aspire to and what we settle for, what we know and what we can manifest. We all have our own theories and ways of understanding the world and our communities of practice are places where we develop negotiate and share them.[427]

[425] Wenger, 7.
[426] Wenger, 48.
[427] Wenger, 48.

This liminal space between 'what we know and what we can manifest', describes the creative tension that Forest Church dwells within at this time. I would suggest that this more explicit, descriptive nomenclature of Forest Church would serve the movement well in aiding its own self-understanding but also in how the movement might more healthily coalesce and communicate with a wider audience.

5.2 Constructing a Theological Framework

Reflecting upon the data that has been gathered regarding Forest Church, I want to now consider the theological cognizance of this movement and its activity. In analysing the empirical work, I want to suggest that there are several discrepancies or weaknesses that appear within both the espoused and enacted forms of Forest Church. These queries, that need further interrogation and response, fit into two categories. The first might be broadly understood as concerning the Christian orthodoxy of the movement, used here as to describe 'right teaching' and challenge some of the theoretical and theological propositions of the movement. The second category is where issues were raised, either explicitly or implicitly in the empirical work, to do with the orthopraxy, or 'right practice', of the Forest Church movement. These issues coalesce around the activities, rituals and practices of Forest Church groups when they gather for their meetings.

When thinking theologically about Forest Church, perhaps the most significant discrepancy that consistently arose throughout the empirical work, was around the lack of a reliable or convincing underlying theological narrative to support and endorse this work as being inherently Christian. In some places this was expressed as a kind of theological anxiety, a

discomfort that this activity might not be entirely orthodox, whilst elsewhere it appeared in more supercilious ways, as though it was unneeded and unnecessary. This was seen in the laconic response of one of the founders, “I’m not a theologian, and don’t really care whether or not I have that myself, I’m happy to pass the buck on the theology” or as one local leader expressed it, “I know some people, some Forest Churches, worry about saying God or Jesus or Holy Spirit”. Time and again, there appeared either a lack of confidence that the theological cognizance existed at all, or that it is a deeply complex issue, beyond the grasp of these practitioners of Forest Church. As Dr John Bimson opined, “…you've got to tread a delicate balance between making it user-friendly, without making it sub-Christian, or unchristian."[428] One must therefore ask the question of just where is the delineation between Christian and sub-Christian practice within Forest Church gatherings? And how can steering the correct side of this delineation be achieved by these practitioners if they are unable to express even a basic Christian orthodoxy of practice?

I am not suggesting that the data shows no theological reflection from those who oversee Forest Church, this would do a huge disservice to these passionate, on-the-ground leaders. In at least two cases the local leaders espoused some very thoughtful and convincing arguments, whilst others expressed ideas around their sense of calling to do this work as an evidential approach of God at work in their practices to justify them. The issue that I raise here is one of a lack of a deeper nomothetical understanding of the practice. Simply put, what is and where is the clear foundational, theological justification of what Forest Church is doing?

[428] ‘If You Kneel down in the Woods Today’.

Within both the interview process and the questionnaire responses, as well as my observations of the interactions of the Facebook group, this overall sense of inability to articulate the justification for the practice, with consistent clarity, was pervasive. Considering the claim that this is a 'fresh expression of Church'[429] it was clear that many people had neither an ecclesiology that allowed them to convincingly situate their work within the wider body of the church, nor did they have a theological understanding for the phenomenological responses that they hoped their activities would elicit. Again, I am not suggesting that these people are wilfully acting outside of a theological normalcy. I do not believe that this is an inherently sub-Christian practice, quite the opposite, but I do think it is problematic that there doesn't appear to exist in any coherent way a clear espousal of the theological and ecclesiological justifications for this work. Whilst there was an impression of an almost adolescent, rebellious denial of the need for this work to be done by some of the founding group, such was their baggage of rejection by 'the Church' and contentment for Forest Church to sit outside of any orthodoxy ("I don't really care whether I have that myself or not"), this was not reflected in my interactions with the local leaders. Here, there was a clear desire to be seen as situating their practice in ecclesiastical normalcy and therefore demanding of a theoretical coherence for their work and calling. This can and should be a simplification of these complex issues, accessible for all those interested in this activity, but the fact that the movement itself hasn't codified and published this work is concerning. They can't keep 'passing the buck' on the theology, leading to the inevitable accusations that the lack of theological coherence is because the movement is indeed sub-Christian. This does not need to be the case.

[429] Stanley, *Forest Church*, 2.

I now want to propose some theological themes and voices to address some of the issues that arose from the empirical study of the movement. Firstly, I want to reflect theologically on two theoretical themes that clearly appeared; the issue of panentheism and the hermeneutical approach to reading nature connection as a Christian practice.

5.2.1 "Forest Church is Panentheistic": Establishing a Theological Foundation

As was seen in the empirical enquiries of the Forest Church, there was one theological term that was ubiquitously used to support the theology and activity of the movement. Whether in the writings of the founders, the interviews of the local leaders or in the questionnaire comments of the attenders, at every level, people referred to 'panentheism'. There is therefore a necessity to establish just what this word means, what its theological context is and is this being rightly appropriated by activities like Forest Church.

In terms of a simple definition, John W. Cooper, in his extensive work on panentheism, explains it this way: 'the being of God includes and penetrates the whole universe, so that every part exists in [God], but [God's] Being is more than, and not exhausted by, the universe.'[430]

The first thing to say about panentheism is that it is not straightforward to understand, as illustrated by Cooper's attempt to define it. It is complex, misappropriated and contested as

[430] John W. Cooper, *Panentheism--The Other God of the Philosophers: From Plato to the Present* (Baker Academic, 2006), 27.

a core doctrine of the Christian faith. I offer a simplified version of this here, not attempting to produce either a process or systematic theological explanation of it. I aim to try to find terminology that is accessible to Forest Church practitioners, whilst remaining convicting and theologically faithful.

The second thing to say about panentheism is that it is a mistake by nature-connecting types to claim it as *the* doctrine to justify all their activity, as though it alone brings orthodoxy to their practices. Properly understood it is undoubtedly a helpful mechanism to bring meaning to the work, but it is not the panacea that some consider it to be. It is not even, in its essence, a theological concept that is specifically concerned with the issue of Christian nature connection, it is much broader than just that. Panentheism is primarily concerned with the ontological nature of God and how He relates to the universe and sits at the intersection of philosophy and theology.[431] Crucially, and realising that this just my conjecture, in the over-use of the term panentheism by those in Forest Church, there was a feeling that in the same way that the espoused ecclesiology of the movement was 'outside' of the church, so the theology, being panentheistic, was also edgy or outside of the Church's theological normality. I want to show that this there is no need for this assumption.

Whilst the concepts concerning panentheism have existed for as long as people have been considering monotheism, the word appears for the first time in the written form when used by German philosopher Karl Krause in 1821[432]. It appears that throughout its long history of

[431] For further understanding of the historicity and the conflicts that exist within both philosophy and theology regarding panentheism see John Culp, 'Panentheism', in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, Winter 2021 (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2021), https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2021/entries/panentheism/.
[432] Culp.

usage it has had varying degrees of influence, but there is an argument that it is experiencing a renaissance in more recent years, lending it an undeserved reputation for being a 'new' understanding of God. All that considered, I want to use the more contemporary theological works of Sallie McFague[433] to bring some clarity to the concept as it has emerged within this more recent resurgence of it as a theological focus.

In using the work of theologian Sallie McFague and employing her imagery of the universe as 'the body of God', we find a provocatively framed theological concept that is both sufficiently theological and peculiarly cogent with the practical theological task in hand. However, this concept alongside McFague's other theological metaphors and models must be properly understood.

In the first instance, McFague herself is keen to stress the metaphorical nature of her language and its adherent limitations. Unlike systematic theology which she argues organises 'all the dominant models…with a key model of its own'[434], she refers to a 'heuristic theology' that acts as 'scaffolding' and not as a completely constructed theology[435]. When observed across the wider span of her theological work she advocates for the 'body of God' as a worthy and culturally attractive metaphor to use but is well aware of the danger of this metaphor becoming an all-encompassing model that cannot and should not bear the weight of describing God in any sort of totality. She warns that, 'when a model becomes an idol, the

[433] Sallie McFague was a feminist Christian theologian who was once Dean of Vanderbilt Divinity School in Nashville and, before her death in 2019, was Distinguished Theologian in Residence at the Vancouver School of Theology.
[434] Sallie McFague, *Metaphorical Theology: Models of God in Religious Language* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 2010), 27–28.
[435] Sallie McFague, *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), xi.

hypothetical character of the model is forgotten and what ought to be seen as *one* way to understand our relationship with God has become identified as *the* way.'[436] McFague's work is therefore a helpful epistemic tool for Forest Church practitioners to employ in both self-understanding around individual connection with nature but also as a part, not a whole, of the construction of a theological framework to support the movements practice. Metaphors have limits and by extension, metaphorical theology shares this trait. By way of example, Grizzle and Barrett challenge the metaphors of 'creation care proponents' like McFague in saying,

'Clearly, God pronounces that creation is 'good' repeatedly in Genesis 1. And we in no way intend to trivialize these passages. However, they should not be taken to mean that everything about creation is to be valued and protected and simply declared 'good' in an unqualified way. For instance, should we strive to protect the AIDS or Ebola viruses so they do not go extinct? Are all species really equal and 'good'?' [437]

There is a playful provocation in McFague's destabilising theological approach where she suggests that these kinds of metaphors can bring 'radical revision'[438] to what she calls 'root-metaphors' when referring to the traditional 'dominant models'[439] of the Christian faith. She draws upon Jesus' telling of the parables as a form of metaphor creation, where they are constructed and told to create 'considerable shock value, for their intention is to upset conventional interpretations of reality.'[440] For some, this opens McFague to criticism around

[436] McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, 9.
[437] Raymond E. Grizzle and Christopher B. Barrett, 'The One Body of Christian Environmentalism', *Zygon®* 33, no. 2 (June 1998): 240, https://doi.org/10.1111/0591-2385.00143.
[438] McFague, *Models of God*, 87.
[439] McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, 26–27.
[440] McFague, 44.

more concrete and traditional models of theological methods. Shannon Schrein summarises some of the concerns of McFague's approach as: her disregard for traditional, systematic and biblical theologies, her low regard of Christ's specific salvific role in the redemption of the universe and a lack of engagement with other Christological themes, such as incarnation and resurrection, that many would like to see more fully integrated within her theological reflections[441]. This is a helpful caution from Schrein, undoubtedly shared by others arguing from the more reformed theological and 'sola scriptura' viewpoints but it is nonetheless still a potent and useful mechanism for this thesis, and for the wider Forest Church community to employ when its limitations are clearly acknowledged..

McFague gives a concise explanation and a provocative image to help illuminate panentheism. She states:

> 'Everything that is is in God and God is in all things and yet God is not identical with the universe, for the universe is dependent on God in a way that God is not dependent on the universe'[442].

This description of panentheism is clearly constructed to offer a 'third way' that avoids both pantheism and deism. In pantheism God is seen as being wholly within the universe and the universe is held wholly within God, this does not mean that they are the same ontologically, but that God and the universe co-exist in the same space. There is ultimate materiality in this model, in that God exists solely within the matter of that which makes up the universe and is therefore finite, bounded by the limitations of the matter and dimensions of it. Deism divorces God and materiality entirely. Deism states that God created the universe but after

[441] Shannon Schrein, *Quilting and Braiding: The Feminist Christologies of Sallie McFague and Elizabeth A. Johnson in Conversation* (Collegeville, Minn: Liturgical Press, 1998), 81–107.
[442] Sallie McFague, *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology*, 1993, 124.

setting up evidential 'natural laws' to govern how the universe then works, God has since moved on elsewhere. Both deism and pantheism have been therefore rightly acknowledged as heresy, but what of the 'classical' Christian position of theism, is that not sufficient for Forest Church and how is it any different to McFague's definition of panentheism? The answer is that, in one sense, there is no theological reason why theism can't support the work of groups like Forest Church. Theism is the 'belief in the existence of one God viewed as the creative source of the human race and the world who transcends yet is immanent in the world'[443]. This classical ontological understanding of God appears to hold both qualities that are necessary for Christian nature-connecting activities - namely, that God is transcendently 'outside' of creation and still creating it but is equally available to creation immanently by being 'inside' of it, sustaining it and omnipresent within all things. So, am I arguing that Forest Church should stop talking about panentheism and espouse this classic view instead? No, because there is a significant and salient difference between theism and panentheism.

To best clarify this, I want to return to McFague. In her definition of panentheism, the difference between it and theism is subtle but in the image that she gives to illustrate her explanation is more provocative and enlightening. As an overarching metaphorical image to understand panentheism she suggests that we see the universe as 'the body of God'[444]. This is a startling proposition, even as metaphor, but it reveals the essence of panentheism. In essence, nothing about the nature or ontology of God changes between theism and panentheism, it should not therefore be called heretical. In this model, God is neither constrained nor absent, the significant differentiation is located in the modality of God. In

[443] 'Theism Definition & Meaning - Merriam-Webster', accessed 31 March 2022, https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/theism.
[444] McFague, *The Body of God*.

theism, God acts upon and within the world (immanence) from outside of the world (transcendence). To use more crude language, God's resting state is transcendent, in the heavenly realm, but when he acts, if he chooses to act, he does so in the world, expressing his immanent ability. This can be characterised and critiqued as theism's tendency towards a 'monarchical' view of God and a preference for the immaterial over and above the material[445]. In panentheism God is both immanent and transcendent at the same time, in the same space and both states are completely equal. And it is this that McFague is trying to illuminate when she talks about the universe as God's body. The human body is in one sense, the totality of that individual human yet to be a human, one instinctively knows that one is more than one's body. I am feelings, memories, emotions, energy and much more. In Christian spirituality, as in other faiths, we might understand this as the soul. As McFague expands her analogous metaphor, she honours the materiality that is evidenced and enshrined in Christ's incarnation, thus showing that God is fully present (immanent) in his universal body, just as I am fully present within my physicality. But, at the same time, she acknowledges that the 'soul' of God is other than His body (transcendent), in a way that the soul of who I am is not constrained to my physicality. In giving this image she offers an avoidance of pantheism, that would see God just as body, constrained and limited by it, and deism that would situate God as purely soul and outside of the body whilst also challenging the modality of theism where God is situated outside of his body but can choose to act upon it. In panentheism, God cannot but act in the world because 'everything that is is in God and God is in all things'[446], it is his body, but he is more than just the matter of things that constitute his body. As theologian Philip Clayton puts

[445] For further explanation of this critique and how it intersects with panentheism see: Thomas Klibengajtis, 'The World as God's Body? Some Remarks about the Panentheistic Theological Tradition Exemplified by the Conceptions of Maximus the Confessor, Studies in Science and Theology, Volume 11 (2007-2008) 113-130.
[446] McFague, *The Body of God*, 149.

it, 'the Panentheistic Analogy also teaches us that God as personal should be *more than* his body. This is to say that God's consciousness or awareness is more than the world that he created and sustains.'[447]

Biblically, we see panentheistic themes in both the Old and New Testaments:

> *'Where can I go from your spirit?*
> *Or where can I flee from your presence?*
> *If I ascend to heaven, you are there;*
> *if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.*
> *If I take the wings of the morning*
> *and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,*
> *even there your hand shall lead me,*
> *and your right hand shall hold me fast.'*
> Psalm 138:7-10 (NRSV)

> *All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people.'*
> *John 1:3-4 (NRSV)*

> *For from him and through him and to him are all things.*
> Romans 11:36 (NRSV)

We see this most profoundly expressed in St Paul's description of the 'unknown God' to the people of Athens, 'For in him we live and move and have our being' (Acts 17:28 NIV). Here, Paul is describing the modality of God as well as his nature. He could have stated that 'God gives us life and movement and our being', but he acknowledges the immanence and transcendence of God in stating that our life and energy and being are situated and sustained 'in him'.

[447] Philip Clayton, 'Kenotic Trinitarian Panentheism', *Dialog* 44, no. 3 (2005): 250–55, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0012-2033.2005.00265.x.

If there is clear theological support for panentheism, as I have argued there is, then there's also a more pragmatic and missiological imperative for groups like Forest Church to continue to use this term. As mentioned previously, Cate Williams, one of the earliest adopters of Forest Church, has positioned herself as one of the very few theological voices within the movement (I mean this in a formal, adopted sense. I am not denying that many, if not all, of the Forest Church local leaders are 'doing theology' in their expressions of Forest Church). In her excellent essay in the book 'Earthed'[448], Williams begins her theological defence of Christian nature connection, by critiquing the Church's tendency towards the purely transcendent end of the theistic tradition and situates this against the desire within 'contemporary culture' towards a more 'earthed spirituality'. She cites this as a major reason why, in a post-secular society, the Church seems increasingly irrelevant and offering something that less and less people are looking for.

> Christians need to explore how our own tradition relates to this contemporary instinct. If Christians resist this impulse then it puts obstacles in the way of our conversations about the spiritual life…This move towards an earthed spirituality, and a focus on the immanent is part of the background in which Forest Church has emerged.'[449]

Williams is far from being alone in this assertion, with many commentators coming to similar conclusions about the growing separation of what people are increasing seeking but not finding in the practices of the church of today. Philip Clayton, in his promotion of the doctrine of panentheism, echoes much of what Williams says in urging for a more immanent earth-connected expression of God:

[448] Stanley and Hollinghurst, *Earthed.*, 10–26.
[449] Stanley and Hollinghurst, 11.

> For many people today, traditional notions of God?, they don't grab us, they don't communicate a sense of meaning of place in the universe…For many people it feels necessary to find more complex notions of the divine ways that, however false this picture may be, ways that God won't seem to be distant from the world but is more deeply involved with the world and with our lives.[450]

Both Williams and Clayton go on to point towards the Eastern Orthodox tradition as being a helpful and rich source of theology that supports, and has always supported, these more 'earthed spiritualities' or immanent practices. As seen in John Chryssavgis' brilliant work, 'Creation as Sacrament'[451], written as it is from his Greek Orthodox position, there is no tension whatsoever in supporting what we are calling panentheism, to the point where this a superfluous and unnecessary term. Chryssavgis reflects upon his Orthodox understanding of the Godhead, using terms that have been lost almost entirely in the Western tradition, as having both an 'essence' and an 'energy' (sometimes referred to as the 'economic Trinity'). Here the Trinity is the Creator of all things but has an essence that is fully separate from creation (transcendent) and an energy that is fully present (immanent). There is no need, as can often be seen, to assign different roles for the members of the Trinity in God's modality towards the world. In this understanding the essence and the energy sees all members of the Trinity involved in the perichoretic movements of immanence and transcendence. Seen this way, returning to McFague's image of the universe as God's body (energy) and soul (essence), where what at first might have seemed radical or other-than Christian, we can now see as an orthodox theological narrative.

[450] *Philip Clayton: What Is Panentheism?*, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bu7Ee8_W_tA.
[451] John Chryssavgis, *Creation as Sacrament: Reflections on Ecology and Spirituality*, 1 [edition] (New York: T&T Clark, 2019).

It is notable that this more ancient understanding, predating as it does the Western Catholic and Protestant traditions, is also invariably found as a foundational principle in other Eastern religions and spiritualities. This circles back to the points that Williams and Clayton raise, where Eastern spiritual practices such as meditation, yoga, tai chi and shinrin-yoku are seeing exponentially more interest in the West than the attraction to what most churches are offering on a Sunday morning.

In summary, whilst one could argue that classical theism does not undermine any of the activities that groups like Forest Church want to promote, panentheism does indeed lend itself to a greater emphasis of the immanence and materiality of the Godhead. Where Western teaching on theism has tended towards an asymmetrical approach that has favoured the transcendent qualities, panentheism is a helpful nomenclature to bring emphasis to the immanent modality of the Creator. It also makes a sufficient argument against attempts to support Christian Animism. Where God is fully present within each created thing, through the Trinity in its state of 'energy', there is no purpose or need to insist on the animising of all things as person, as some are keen to do[452]. In terms of nature connection, panentheism positions the Godhead in a consistently present state within every living thing, where its very living essence is proof of God's existence and ongoing interaction with creation. In understanding God this way there begins to open exciting and much more engaging ways that the church might faithfully act out within the world. Missiologically speaking, panentheism should not just be the fuel for further outdoor activities like Forest Church, it can and should be the basis of all that goes on inside the church buildings too.

[452] Noel Moules: 'Christian Animism… Earth-Based, Creation-Focussed Spirituality, God's Living Prescence within All Matter', accessed 23 April 2022, http://www.christiananimism.com/, http://www.christiananimism.com/.

5.2.2 "Forest Church is reading God's book of nature": Towards a Christocentric Hermeneutic of Nature

As stated previously, Stanley and others frequently refer to the metaphor of nature being the 'Second Book of God'[453]. Although not commonly used in Christian preaching and teaching today, much has been written about this metaphorical concept and all is broadly supportive of the usage of it. In his essay on the subject, theologian Peter J. Hess, describes this 'two book' theory as 'the metaphor most central to the natural theological tradition'[454]. He goes on to attempt to describe the historicity of the metaphor but argues that the closest patristic statement that supported the earliest belief of nature as a 'book' of God is found in St John Chrysostom's (c347-407) *Homilies to the People of Antioch*:

> If God had given instruction by means of books, and of letters, he who knew letters would have learned what was written, but the illiterate man would have gone away without receiving any benefit…This however cannot be said with respect to the heavens, but the Scythian, and Barbarian, and Indian, and Egyptian, and every man that walks upon the earth shall hear this voice; for not by means of the ears but through the site it reaches our understanding… Upon this volume the unlearned, as well as the wise man shall be able to look and wherever anyone may chance to come, there looking upwards towards the heavens he will receive a sufficient lesson from the view of them.'[455]

Hess argues that this teaching remained throughout the teachings of the early church and gained a renewed renaissance in the medieval period, where it was exemplified by the writings of scholar and natural theologian Raimundus Sabunde. Sabunde wrote 'there are two books given to us by God, the one being the book of the whole collection of creatures or

[453] Stanley, *Forest Church*, 36.
[454] Hilary D. Regan and Mark William Worthing, *Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Cosmology and Biological Evolution* (ATF Press, 2002), 21.
[455] Regan and Worthing, 25–26.

the book of nature, and the other being the book of sacred scripture.'[456] It is significant for this examination of the metaphor that Sabunde elevates the book of nature as preceding the book of scripture but also as a more accessible work in a time of illiteracy and pre-Reformation views of scripture. 'The first book was given to human beings in the beginning, when the universe of creatures was created…The first book is common to everyone, but the second book is not common to all, because only clerics are able to read what is written'.[457] Alister McGrath also supports the notion of the 'book of nature', but argues for an understanding of the ontology of nature as being an essential prerequisite before reading it. This is a helpful caution, McGrath is arguing from a cultural, postmodern viewpoint which is dismissive of overarching narratives where, 'the identity and intentions of the author are not of significance…the concept of nature, it would therefore be argued within postmodernity, is imposed upon a reading of the natural world, not discerned by it' but concludes that this 'does not pose any insurmountable challenge to Christian theology.'[458]

So, whilst it may be an overreaching claim to assert that this traditional understanding of nature as a book has doctrinal equivalence with the book of scripture, it is a worthy metaphor and one that Forest Church practitioners can employ. As John Chryssavgis puts it, referring to the theological teachings of Origen, 'the parallel between nature and scripture is so complete that the person exploring nature and the person examining scripture should inevitably and invariably arrive at the very same conclusion and creed'[459]. However, as with the book of scripture, the theological coherence of it is found not just in its being but more critically in its

[456] Regan and Worthing, 28.
[457] Regan and Worthing, 28.
[458] Alister E. McGrath, *Scientific Theology: Nature: Vol 1*, 1st edition (Edinburgh: T & T Clark International, 2001), 120.
[459] Chryssavgis, *Creation as Sacrament*, 8.

interpretation. How, therefore, should the book of nature be read and what is the theologically faithful hermeneutic that should be employed to ensure a faithful reading? I want to make the presupposition, that many have written about but isn't in the purview of this thesis, that there is an essential agreement that for Christians, the hermeneutical approach towards the whole of scripture, is through a Christocentric lens. If this is true of the book of scripture, then there can be no reason why this process isn't essentially the same as for the 'other' book of nature.

As a way to deepen Forest Church's working theological coherence and, in a bid to avoid addressing issues that aren't evidenced by the data that I've already considered, I want to return to Bruce Stanley's suggested taxonomy of how to read this book of nature. In 'Forest Church', Stanley helpfully suggests Awe, Study and Meaning as three primary hermeneutical approaches to nature, my critique is in the claim that he failed to bring anything that makes these practices inherently Christian. Taking these three positions in turn, I want to suggest some Christian ways of interpreting nature by framing them in Christocentric ways.

5.2.2.1 Reading the Book of Nature: Awe

> *"For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities - his eternal power and divine nature - have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse."* Romans 1:20

As shown in the data from observing Forest Church, for many, the most basic and often catalytic encounters with nature, that demands some explanation, is that nature can produce moments of awe. Invariably described as transcendence, numinosity or overwhelming, these moments appear to be commonly experienced by many even as they might seem

extraordinary. Examples of this are profligate but this was the experience of St Therese of Lisieux's as told from her childhood perspective:

> 'I was between six and seven when I saw the sea for the first time. I could not turn away my eyes: its majesty, the roaring of the waves, the whole vast spectacle impressed me deeply and spoke to my soul of God's power and greatness.'[460]

One of the faithful ways that groups like Forest Church can employ a Christocentric hermeneutic of reading Awe in nature is to root these transcendent, nature-connection moments in the language of witness. Unlike those with no religious faith, who are unable to direct their gaze beyond or behind what it is that they are seeing to make sense of the scene, Christians can bear witness here to the ongoing activity of God the Creator of all things. When a Christian is overwhelmed by an aesthetic sense of beauty or unexplainable moment in nature, they are seeing not just creation, but as shown in panentheism, are witnessing the ongoing creating and sustaining of creation. Theologian Elizabeth A. Johnson says, 'Continuous creation affirms that rather than retiring after bringing the world into existence at some original instant, the Creator keeps on sustaining the world in its being and becoming at every moment.'[461] Or as Dominican priest, Herbert McCabe poetically describes it, 'the Creator makes all things and keeps them in existence from moment to moment, not like a sculptor who makes a statue and leaves it alone, but like a singer who keeps her song in existence at all times'[462]. This means that awe can be properly understood to the Christian as a glimpse of the hyperdynamic quality of creation, not as static object but as evidential wonder at the ongoing interaction of the Godhead in the world today. At its most basic level

[460] Thérèse, *The Story of a Soul: The Autobiography of St. Thérèse of Lisieux*, ed. Agnès de Jésus, trans. Michael Day (Charlotte, North Carolina: TAN Classics, 2010), 54.
[461] Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Ask the Beasts: Darwin and the God of Love*, Paperback edition (London Oxford New York New Delhi Sydney: Bloomsbury, 2015), 128.
[462] Herbert McCabe, *God, Christ and Us*, New edition (London ; New York: Continuum, 2005), 103.

then, these moments of creaturely beauty or natural phenomena, bear witness to the fact that God is not dead or departed but alive and active in his creative sustaining of living things. As John Philip Newel describes it, 'It means growing in awareness of earth's sacredness, knowing that its moist greenness issues forth directly from the ever-fresh fecundity of God.'[463]

Perhaps we can go one step further though. If it is true that our biophilic nature innately needs connection with the natural world, then can moments of awe and transcendence in nature be described as a kind of perichoretic invitation by the Godhead? As the trinitarian relationship is described as perichoresis, a Greek word to describe the interrelatedness of the Trinity as an image of a coalescing movement, or dance, as we witness God's creating and sustaining activity, is the feeling of elation and overwhelm borne out of a momentary joining in of this dance? In her excellent work 'Ask the Beasts', Johnson considers that this is what St Paul meant when describing this 'ineffable mystery' to the people of Athens, in saying 'in Him we live and move and have our being' (Acts 17:28)'[464] She goes on to bring a helpful trinitarian understanding of creation as ongoing, dynamic process. She argues that the Latin word *vivificantem*, as found in the Nicene creed, to describe the Spirit as 'giver of life', that 'shines a spotlight on the dynamism that is intended'[465]. If it is understood that God, the Father, is Creator of creation and Jesus is the Redeemer of creation, Johnson illustrates the life-giving role of God as Spirit in Creation in saying, 'The Spirit is the vivifier, the one who quickens, animates, stirs, enlivens, gives life even now while engendering the life of the world to come.'[466] How might Forest Church practitioners evoke this pneumatological approach in

[463] J. Philip Newell, *The Rebirthing of God: Christianity's Struggle for New Beginnings* (Woodstock, Vermont: Christian Journeys/SkyLight Paths Publishing, 2014), 2.
[464] Johnson, *Ask the Beasts*, 147.
[465] Johnson, 115.
[466] Johnson, 128.

their work? Could the phenomena of awe in nature be helpfully recentred upon the witnessing to the charism of the Spirit at work in his animating of the waves upon the ocean, flow of the waterfall or colours of the sunset that has elicited these feelings of overwhelm?

In an influential paper written in 2003, social psychologists John Haidt and Dacher Keltner, tackle this issue through a scientific and empirical study of how people experience awe and make some helpful observations. The central proposition is that awe, as expressed by the people they studied, falls into two categories that they call 'vastness and accommodation '[467]. Vastness is used to explain the overwhelming awe of encountering something that is 'much larger than the self, or the self's ordinary level of experience or frame of reference', echoing the Psalmist who exclaims 'How awesome are your works, O Lord! (Psalm 91:5 CEV). Accommodation describes that sense of awe which necessitates 'adjusting mental structures that cannot assimilate a new experience', in other words, those epiphanic moments that go beyond our understanding and therefore beckon us into the need to accommodate a new thought, way of thinking or whole new belief. We see this kind of response often in reaction to the teaching and miracles of Jesus by those that witnessed them, as example: 'The men were amazed and asked, "What kind of man is this? Even the winds and the waves obey him!"' (Matthew 8:27 NIV) Interestingly, Haidt and Keltner use St Paul's experience on the Damascan road to illustrate the tension that is held in these two experiences of awe, where both experiences can be felt in the same moment. Paul experienced vastness as the 'light from heaven flashed around him' and he hears the voice of God, but the impact that this has upon him is one of discombobulating fear. They describe these feelings as, 'disorienting and even

[467] Dacher Keltner and Jonathan Haidt, 'Approaching Awe, a Moral, Spiritual, and Aesthetic Emotion', *Cognition and Emotion* 17, no. 2 (1 January 2003): 297–314, https://doi.org/10.1080/02699930302297.

frightening…since they make the self feel small, powerless, and confused. They also often involve feelings of enlightenment and even rebirth, when mental structures expand to accommodate truths never before known.'[468] Therefore, and as in St Paul's encounter, they propose that, 'experiences of awe can change the course of a life in profound and permanent ways.' Haidt and Keltner draw a particular distinction when awe is connected to encountering nature in stating that, 'nature-produced awe involves a diminished self, the giving way of previous conceptual distinctions…and the sensed presence of a higher power.'[469] Staying in the field of psychology, there is a very similar outworking of this theory within the work of Abraham Maslow. Maslow identifies certain life-changing moments that he calls 'peak experiences', that have such profound impact on people that they are moved towards a greater 'self-actualisation'. In his observations of 'enlightened' or 'self-actualised' people, Maslow concludes that one of the key commonalities that they all share is 'periodic mystical peak experiences producing a sense of union'[470] and describes them in remarkably similar ways that Forest Church practitioners told me of their own epiphanic experiences in nature:

> 'Feelings of limitless horizons opening up to the vision, the feeling of being simultaneously more powerful and also more helpless than one ever was before, the feeling of ecstasy and wonder and awe, the loss of placement in time and space with, finally, the conviction that something extremely important and valuable had happened, so that the subject was to some extent transformed and strengthened even in his daily life by such experiences.'[471]

[468] Keltner and Haidt.
[469] Keltner and Haidt.
[470] Mark C. Kasprow and Bruce W. Scotton, 'A Review of Transpersonal Theory and Its Application to the Practice of Psychotherapy', *The Journal of Psychotherapy Practice and Research* 8, no. 1 (1999): 12–23.
[471] 'Peak Experiences & Maslow', accessed 30 March 2022, http://www.timlebon.com/PeakExperiences.html.

In describing the outcomes of awe-filled moments this way, Haidt and Keltner along with Maslow, begin to bring forward the salvific qualities of these encounters and, as Christians, puts the soteriological focus onto Christ.

In what is perhaps *the* key text in all of scripture that should guide and inspire all the activity of the church but especially Forest Church, is found in the first chapter of St Paul's letter to the church in Colossae:

> *'He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.'*
> Colossians 1:15-20

5.2.2.2 Reading the Book of Nature: Study

> *'He brought them to the man to see what he would name them; and whatever the man called each living creature, that was its name. So the man gave names to all the livestock, the birds in the sky and all the wild animals.'*
> Genesis 2:19-20

When considering study as a way of reading the book of nature, there is precedent to be found in the 'other book' of scripture. In the Genesis account of creation, it is often remarked upon that God looks at what he has created and 'saw that it was good'. Whilst this is true, what cannot be overlooked is that in five of the six times that this occurs in Genesis 1, the utterance comes after an acknowledgment of the diversity of what has just been created. These biodiverse taxonomies are contained within the phrase 'of every kind' (NRSV), and

relate to trees, marine life, birds and animals. This phrase appears ten times within just fourteen verses and emphasises the specificity of Creation. These biological distinctions continue through the creation account, emphasising God's proclivity towards polyvalent creativity. In stating this cosmic biodiversity and ecological taxonomy we are being reminded that God didn't just create something but that he has made myriad things 'of every kind' and that this differentiation is an important one. In giving humanity the task of naming all these things, God offers a profound invitation to join in the creative work, a work that is still not finished.

One of the motivating factors of the New Nature writers that was highlighted in Chapter Three, is the desire to stimulate people to rediscover the lost art of studying, naming and knowing nature. This type of study is not study for any ascetic, scientific purpose alone but is argued as being essential for the salvation of both human and non-human life. Central to this, is the challenge towards a society that has become detached from nature and commodified it in such a way as to barely give it any thought at all, and it's from this stance of ignorance that humanity has behaved in such destructive ways towards it. In this sense, humanity is not seeing what God sees as good, because it is failing to barely look at it at all. Here, we find good reason for Christians to be involved in the study of nature, as a way of re-educating people to the natural environment that they see around them. As Thomas Berry succinctly puts it, 'we need to move from a spirituality of alienation from the natural world to a spirituality of intimacy with the natural world'.[472]

[472] Thomas Berry, *The Sacred Universe: Earth, Spirituality, and Religion in the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 133.

Sallie McFague, in referring to John Muir, paints the image of this need for further education, not as the kind of knowledge that was sought leading to the 'Fall', a proud knowledge that weaponizes dominion over creation because of superior understanding, but a knowledge that leads to humility and an intimacy of knowing. McFague describes Muir's stance towards creation as, 'neither sentimentalized nor objectified nature; rather his intention was to understand plants better by paying loving attention, careful, patient attention to the particularity of these others in their own worlds'[473]. She goes on to describe this 'patient attention' as, seeing through a 'loving eye' and the right expression of a 'second naïveté'. The first naïveté she describes as a 'childlike' approach of touch, where one realises for the first time that all things, the 'human ones' and the 'earth ones', are interconnected with one another. This approach is only a starting point for McFague though, where a maturing needs to take place in order to understand our relationship to all things, and the knowing or educative process serves to locate the other and honour the differences that are found within. 'The loving eye then is the eye of the second naiveté, educated so as to help us embrace intimacy while recognizing difference. This is the eye trained in detachment in order that its attachment will be objective, based on the reality of the other and not its own wishes or fantasies.'[474] In terms of Forest Church, there is much here to encourage the practices of simple knowledge giving, through horticultural and zoological naming, observing and knowing of that which might be encountered within the purview of the gatherings. McFague talks in terms of needed 'detachment' from things to re-approach them with greater humility and understanding, an understanding of what she calls its 'in itselfness'[475].

[473] Sallie McFague, *Super, Natural Christians: How We Should Love Nature* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 116.
[474] McFague, 117.
[475] McFague, 117.

This faithful hermeneutical approach is rooted in the activity of Creation but also in the Christ-like attitude of kenosis. This approach of 'self-emptying' is what the early church chose to describe as the central ontological characteristic of Christ towards the world, found in the kenotic hymn that St Paul extols in Philippians 2. Catholic theologian, Terry Veling suggests that when we approach any 'other' with this attitude, 'the presence of 'me to myself' is broken, and I am no longer able to persevere in my being, in the project of myself. 'I am no longer able to have power...true exteriority is in this gaze, which forbids me my conquest.''[476] This kenotic view removes both the objectification and sentimentalization of what is being observed. As a theological stance this approach apes some of the theoretical framework of Jane Leach's work around pastoral theology as attention[477]. Clearly Leach is concerned with the unheard voices of people in her work, in purely anthropocentric care, but does the care of the non-human, created order, what McFague provocatively calls 'the new poor'[478], not deserve the same approach? Pope John Paul II agrees, in writing his message for World Peace Day in 1990, he urges that 'respect for life and for the dignity of the human person extends also to the rest of creation'[479] and reminds us of a reciprocal interdependence with nature.

Robert MacFarlane et al are insistent that we have become the most ignorant generation to exist when it comes to the natural world, being unable to name and therefore know our local environs. And it's this distant un-knowing that has had the inevitable destructive

[476] Terry Terry. A Veling, *Practical Theology: On Earth As It Is in Heaven* (Maryknoll, N.Y: Orbis Books, 2006), 129.
[477] Jane Leach, 'Contact: Practical Theology and Pastoral Care', no. 153 (August 2007): 19–32.
[478] McFague, *The Body of God*, 200.
[479] 'XXIII World Day for Peace 1990,Peace with God the Creator, Peace with All of Creation | John Paul II', accessed 29 March 2022, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/messages/peace/documents/hf_jp-ii_mes_19891208_xxiii-world-day-for-peace.html.

consequences that we are seeing as trademark of the Anthropocene. McFague describes this anthropocentric viewpoint as a 'perspectival knowing' and caricatures this way of seeing the natural world as 'with the arrogant eye'[480]. She goes on to make the salutary and urgent challenge to change from this perspective in saying, 'we must do this because we cannot love what we do not know'[481]. Could it be part of the Christian hermeneutical approach to nature as a wounded 'other' to pay careful attention to it as an act of pastoral kindness? Not as items needing to be named in order to have dominion over, but naming as knowing, as a kenotic act of humility? McFague argues that this shift in attitude and outlook towards nature replaces the arrogant eye with 'the loving eye'[482]. Set in this context, this type of study of the natural world reintroduces people to the natural environment around them and becomes a sacramentalising task. The making known of unknown things and reminding people of that which is forgotten feels like a very priestly activity. It correlates to what social anthropologist Mark Auge refers to as the almost continual societal inhabitation of what he calls 'non-places'[483], the shopping malls, airports, supermarkets and motorways that make up the landscape of our 'supermodernity'. The move away from non-places towards slower paced places of meaning, calls to mind again the work that Rachel Summers is doing in her Forest Church in North London. Here, what was once described as 'desecrated wasteland', has been transfigured into a known and valued place as a gift for the local community. This transfiguration is not evidenced in its being made more aesthetically pleasing (although this is also true) but because it has been viewed through loving eyes. And it's this carefully attentive viewpoint that has allowed the appreciation of the particularity of the place and

[480] McFague, *Super, Natural Christians*, 33.
[481] McFague, 29.
[482] McFague, 33.
[483] Marc Auge, *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity: An Introduction to Supermodernity*, New edition (London ; New York: Verso Books, 2009).

transformed the desecrated space to be seen again as the holy ground that was always there but was hidden from view. Author Marilyn Robinson describes this kind of work as the 'resurrection of the ordinary'[484] and describes this further in her brilliant work of fiction 'Gilead':

> 'Wherever you turn your eyes the world can shine like transfiguration. You don't have to bring a thing to it except a little willingness to see. Only, who could have the courage to see it?'[485]

This is a vital piece of activity and work that Forest Church is doing so naturally and has much to offer an increasingly nature-detached society. It also picks up on a rich but long-lost tradition of the role of what became known as the role of 'parson-naturalist'. Prevalent in the seventeenth and eighteenth century, in a way that is hardly imaginable today, many country priests saw it as a natural extension of their ministerial role to discover and document the various flora and fauna that were found within their parish. In his extensive work on the subject, Patrick Armstrong says that there were 'hundreds of these people'[486], priests who, perhaps with more time on their hands than modern-day clergy, were driven to this work 'for theological reasons…seeing a delight in nature as an expression of Christian piety'[487]. These were some of the very first natural historians in terms of documented work, with many producing works that are still referenced today. These were not seen as religious hobbyists but acknowledged as serious scholars accepted within the scientific world and often members of the Royal Society (Armstrong argues that 'modern British geology was to a considerable

[484] Marilynne Robinson, *Housekeeping*, Reprint. (London: Faber and Faber, 2005), 18.
[485] Marilynne Robinson, *Gilead*, New edition (London: Virago, 2006), 245.
[486] Patrick H. Armstrong, *The English Parson-Naturalist: A Companionship Between Science and Religion* (Leominster: Gracewing, 2000).
[487] Armstrong x.

extent established as a discipline by those ordained into the Holy Orders of the Church of England'[488]). In a scene that recalls God's tasking of Adam to name each 'living creature' in Genesis 2, so these clergymen were the pioneers of not just naming unnamed plants and animals, they were also the constructors of the classification and numerous taxonomies of the various species and sub-species that are still in use today. Armstrong argues that Charles Darwin's original intentions were to follow a call to minister in the church as one of these parson-naturalists. Such was the accepted ubiquity of this kind of work within the church that when Darwin told his uncle, Josiah Wedgewood, of his plans to sail on the HMS Beagle, he 'ventured the opinion that natural history was a very appropriate work for a clergyman'[489]. Whilst Darwin returned from his venture to pursue a different vocation, the work of an earlier parson-naturalist, Rev Gilbert White, had had a deep impression upon him. White wrote a singular piece of work of such inspiration that it is hard to underestimate it's influence today. 'The Natural Histories and Antiquities of Selbourne'[490] was written in 1789 and has never been out of print since. It is credited to be the fourth most published book in the English language[491] and is ubiquitously referred to and quoted by many of today's new nature writers. What makes this work so affecting is the depth of knowledge that White displays about his small parish of Selbourne in Hampshire, documenting all that is going on in the natural world there and discovering and naming hundreds of animals, plants and birds. In writing this way he established himself as the world's first literary ecologist, pioneering natural history like no other, and yet, this was all done in clerical collar and under the auspices of his vocation as

[488] Armstrong, 110.
[489] 'The Parson Naturalist in Suffolk.', issuu, accessed 24 March 2022, https://issuu.com/suffolknaturalistssociety/docs/tsns56d/1.
[490] White, *The Natural History of Selborne*.
[491] Mark Brown and Mark Brown Arts correspondent, 'Fourth Most Published Book in English Language to Go Online', *The Guardian*, 11 May 2018, sec. Books, https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/may/11/gilbert-white-fourth-most-published-book-in-english-language-natural-history-and-antiquities-of-selborne-to-go-online.

parish priest. Eugene Peterson contemporises this and appears to validate this task as befitting those who minster today, 'I think the pastor's chief job is not to get something done but to pay attention to what's going on, and to be able to name it, and to encourage it – nobody else is going to do that.'[492]

This introducing or reintroducing of a community of people to their natural, local environment is something that Forest Church should be proactively pursuing as a theologically faithful practice. In a playful way Robert MacFarlane describes Rev Gilbert White's obsessive observation and documentation of his parish of Selbourne as the work of an 'islomaniac', saying he and others like him had been 'animated by the delusion of a comprehensive totality, the belief that they might come to know their chosen place utterly because of its boundedness'. Whether a local park, an allotment or a church yard, the study, description and understanding of that place, their 'island', set within this theology of careful attention, is a meaningful, Christ-like work for anyone to undertake.

5.2.2.3 Reading the Book of Nature: Meaning

> *'There the angel of the Lord appeared to him in flames of fire from within a bush. Moses saw that though the bush was on fire it did not burn up. So Moses thought, "I will go over and see this strange sight—why the bush does not burn up."*
> *When the Lord saw that he had gone over to look, God called to him from within the bush, "Moses! Moses!"*
> *And Moses said, "Here I am."*
> (Exodus 3:2-4)

[492] *Catalyst West 2011: Eugene Peterson*, accessed 25 March 2022, https://vimeo.com/21067990.

From observing and listening to the Forest Church movement over the last few years, it is clear that meaning-making, using nature as conduit to that meaning, is an essential activity or posture that all groups lean upon. As Stanley describes it, this is the process through which we might receive 'messages' from God:

> In the context of reading the second book of God, Meaning is about discerning God's messages in and through nature and asking what the creation reveals about its creator… Communication happens in two ways, it is initiated by us or by God. When we initiate the search for Meaning we can either use something from nature to illustrate an idea we are already exploring…or we can choose to the Meaning of something from nature from a position of neutral enquiry…When God initiates the communication, or sends us a message through nature, we need to be listening in the first place.[493]

Whilst there is quite a lot here that needs further examination, it is not surprising that people want to find meaning in nature, because, as anthropologist Clifford Geertz reflects, we are 'meaning-seeking animals' who need to use symbols as, 'strategies for encompassing situations'[494]. It is worth noting that Geertz places this assertion within a study of religious people and comes to a somewhat cynical conclusion:

> The view of man as a symbolizing, conceptualizing, meaning-seeking animal…opens up a whole new approach not only to the analysis of religion as such, but to the understanding of the relations between religion and values. The drive to make sense out of experience, to give it form and order, is evidently as real and as pressing as the more familiar biological needs. And, this being so, it seems unnecessary to continue to interpret symbolic activities - religion, art, ideology - as nothing but thinly disguised expressions of something other than what they seem to be: attempts to provide orientation for an organism that cannot live in a world it is unable to understand.[495]

[493] Stanley, *Forest Church*, 41–42.
[494] Clifford Geertz, 'Ethos, World-View, and the Analysis of Sacred Symbols', *The Antioch Review* 74, no. 3 (2016): 622–37, https://doi.org/10.7723/antiochreview.74.3.0622.
[495] Geertz.

As a Christian practice, and as Stanley is right to highlight, the meaning-making process of any external stimuli, be it nature or the liturgy of a church service, is mitigated by the belief that God, through the Spirit, is wanting to commune with people. As an anthropologist Geertz is not alone in struggling to insert this phenomenology into his understanding of religious experience, but he is correct in saying that the meaning that is extrapolated reveals much about our 'religion and values'. What Stanley describes as 'being open to the idea that God might speak to us'[496], is farcical to anyone who doesn't believe in God, but for those of us who do, it is the very least we believe about him and is essential Christian practice in the form of both prayer, discernment and personal relationship. To desire God-given meaning from the world around us is only to reveal that our religion and our values coalesce around this fundamental act of faith.

Before moving on to examine how there might be a deeper, more Christocentric understanding of 'reading' meaning into or from nature, there is the possibility of an erroneous, sub-Christian approach to nature that needs addressing.

In his work, 'From Nature to Creation'[497], professor of theology at Duke University, Norman Wirzba, gives us an extremely helpful, contemporary theological response that speaks directly to the activities of groups like Forest Church. This work provides many supportive suggestions but here coins the phrase 'green idolatry', as a cautionary and critical position that is evidenced in some of the responses from within Forest Church. What Wirzba is essentially arguing against is the commodification of the natural world, providing an anthropocentric

[496] Stanley, *Forest Church*, 42.
[497] Norman Wirzba, *From Nature to Creation: A Christian Vision for Understanding and Loving Our World*, The Church and Postmodern Culture (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2015).

approach that places the eliciting stimuli of nature as object for self-gratification. He refers to our detachment from nature as leading to a 'diseased imagination'[498] but warns that simply turning towards the beautiful aesthetic of nature as some sort of cure for this malaise to be the incorrect Christian viewpoint. His critique points to both idolatrous behaviour and an unsustainable approach that causes a benignity of viewpoint towards the natural world where it is less than beautiful in our limited imaginations.

> It is tempting to think that genuine desire or affection is realized when we become worshipers of nature. But this is not so. To make the trek to beautiful vistas (often at considerable expense) runs the risk of a "green idolatry" in which mountains or lakes or species are commodified to fulfil an aesthetic desire. Too often the nature we seek in a "wilderness experience" is made to fulfil expectations about beauty. That places are beautiful is not the problem. But when we desire our relationship to nature to be mediated by the expectation that only places deemed pretty or spectacular are worthy of our attention, then we do witness an idolatry that condemns much of the world to neglect or even disparagement. What we often fail to realize is that our worship of nature's beauty, especially our designations of certain kinds of landscapes or creatures as beautiful, is also fundamentally a reduction of the world to expectations that we bring to it. In this reduction great stretches are abandoned by us as unworthy and thus unlovable.[499]

This green idolatry, Wirzba argues, is not that the desire towards nature to be salvific is misplaced, but that the 'desire has become degraded by being self-directed'[500]. Wirzba also gives us a Christian distinction in cautioning this way and it's one that sits incongruously against what many of the new nature writers focus upon. Authors like Richard Louv, presenting the problem of 'nature deficit disorder', illuminates the problem well but can appear to present nature as the cure in a way that is commodification, as though nature exists solely for humanity's benefit. This form of idolatry, where nature is object, echoes Martin

[498] Wirzba, 58.
[499] Wirzba, 58.
[500] Wirzba, 56.

Buber's aphorism of the 'I-It'[501] approach when applied to the natural world, where one utilises nature as experience and commodifies it to serve one's own purposes and pleasures. This is as opposed to the 'I-Thou' stance that most befits the Christian understanding of nature as God's creation, acknowledging the sustaining presence of God within it and enabling the possibility of encounter with the divine. Hearing from some of the attenders of Forest Church, they spoke of finding feelings like peace and joy in looking at nature, but it is less clear whether this was an experience of aesthetic pleasure or an encounter with God, and whether anyone leading the group might be able to postulate the difference?

As Wirzba illuminates, this green idolatry also challenges groups like Forest Church and their tendency to focus on the more aesthetically obvious natural phenomena. Wirzba argues that this form of hierarchical taxonomy, where gathering around a magnificent oak tree, or observing a particularly rare piece of flora or fauna, is more meaningful and profound than the looking at the weeds in a window box or listening to the cawing of a magpie outside the office window, and is unfaithful to God's view of such things. This more generous and non-anthropocentric view of nature is emboldened by the words of Jesus, 'Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground outside your Father's care.' (Matthew 19:19 NIV). This approach was so profoundly expressed in the Forest Church groups that I observed that met within more urban or suburban settings as exemplified by the Norfolk Wild Church run by Charlie Houlder-Moat. Charlie has a passionate connection with where her group meets, a wild park called Loch Neaton. Whilst the name might conjure up some wild or desolate images, in reality it's a patch of land by a large pond, behind a leisure

[501] Martin Buber, *I and Thou* (Martino Publishing, 2010).

centre, next to some astro-turf sports pitches. It would have been very easy to have found somewhere further outside of the town to meet, it's in the middle of the Norfolk countryside just a few miles from the vast and impressive Thetford Forest. But Charlie has rooted her practice on this aesthetically indifferent corner of her community with great purpose. With the noise of cars and the cries of hockey players filling the air, she leads her community into a growing sense of ownership and earths the prayers and other practices she leads deep into the unimpressive soil of her people's everyday locality. As another Forest Church leader, Rachel Summers put it, "I get very excited about people finding that nature connection in amongst the city, and I really like the fact that actually everywhere has these green spaces, everywhere has a patch of waste ground or weeds growing along the sides of the road on the way back from Sainsbury's".

In terms of finding meaning within nature, Wirzba's caution against green idolatry is essential for groups like Forest Church. In quoting Stanley earlier, he describes one way of reading nature as, 'to use nature to illustrate an idea we are already exploring' and then goes on to say 'like Jesus did when referring to wildflowers in Luke 12'[502]. In phrasing it this way, he appears to make an assumption that Jesus already had 'an idea' that he wanted to share with the crowd and the wildflowers are merely the prop to illustrate his point. This approach seems to violate both the objectification of nature and the self-directed green idolatry that Wirzba cautions against. What the text says is, 'Consider how the wildflowers grow' (Luke 12:27 NIV). The emphasis on both verbs here changes the focus completely and offers a heuristic method to his hearers. Firstly, Jesus tells them to 'consider', inviting the hearer into their own

[502] Stanley, *Forest Church*, 42.

meaning-making possibility, not insisting that 'this is what wildflowers tell us' but an invitation into participative heuristic consideration. To consider is more than to look at, reminding us of the 'careful, patient attention' of nature that McFague demands. Secondly, Jesus doesn't just ask for consideration of the beauty of the flower, he directs attention to how they grow. In doing this, Jesus directs the gaze not upon the outward or obvious but upon the vivification of the object, to its life-force and reminds us of the *vivificantem* himself, the Holy Spirit who animates and gives life to each and every flower. Jesus also seems to be asking for the impossible; how can one see a flower growing? There is either the need to watch it for a very considerable amount of time, or that you keep coming back to that particular plant, noticing the changes each time. Either way, this speaks of slowness and familiarity in a very deep sense. And, in what might be seen as an incidental point but one that is essential for the purposes of this work, it is not possible to consider the growth of wildflowers if they have been plucked from the ground. The ecological issues here are both micro, in that any Forest Church activity should do as little harm to its surroundings as possible, but also on the macro level, we have witnessed an ecocide that has seen the devastation of wildflowers in the UK, declining by 97% since the 1930s[503]. Will future generations be able to consider the wildflowers at all, or will they have to look at photographs? What might Forest Church do to enhance and bless the places where their groups gather?

This encouragement of Christ to 'consider how the wildflowers grow' gives us some helpful precedents to use as positive hermeneutical principles in the reading of nature. For nature connection activities to be done in Christian ways the gaze upon nature should always be

[503] 'Devastation of Meadows Endangers Flower Favourites Like Wild Strawberry, Ragged Robin and Harebell', Plantlife, accessed 1 April 2022, https://www.plantlife.org.uk/uk/about-us/news/devastation-of-meadows-endangers-flower-favourites-like-wild-strawberry-ragged-robin-and-harebell.

done through loving eyes. This enables a self-giving not self-gratifying position and acknowledges that meaning from nature is vivified by the animating work of the Spirit, that is the Spirit at work in the phenomena we are observing but also the Spirit that is present in us, interpreting and giving wisdom about that phenomenon. Wirzba calls this kind of approach towards the natural world an 'iconic modality'[504]. This stance is the antithesis of green idolatry where nature as idol 'functions as a mirror reflecting the scope of the viewers aim'[505], where all that can be seen is what the viewer desires it to be. In speaking of nature as icon, Wirzba refers to the Eastern traditions, who have never stopped using iconography, to illustrate the profound thought that icons act as windows, 'where others are not reduced to the scope of utilitarian and instrumental aims'[506]. When nature is viewed not as an idol to understand but as an iconic window, 'we are presented with a depth and transcendence that overwhelms us and calls into question the expectations through which we approached it in the first place'[507]. This is poetically captured by the novelist Iris Murdoch:

> I am looking out of my window in an anxious and resentful state of mind…Then suddenly I observe a kestrel. In a moment everything is altered. There is nothing but kestrel. And when I return to thinking of the other matter it seems less important.[508]

Jesus' encouragement towards slow and deep engagement with not just nature in general but with a singular particularity, is something again that I believe Forest Church is doing but could do more of. In attending the Forest Church gathering in the woods just to the north of my city, in our second time of meeting we found what we called our 'chapel', some fallen tree trunks that so happened to create a kind of boat-shaped enclosure that was ideal to gather within. When I first went there, the intention was to find other spots to meet in each time we

[504] Wirzba, *From Nature to Creation*, 62.
[505] Wirzba, 68.
[506] Wirzba, 70.
[507] Wirzba, 71.
[508] Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, Routledge Classics (London: Routledge, 2006), 84.

met, but it was agreed to go back there next time, and as the creatures of habit that we are, we met there for the next two years. This little 'chapel' is still there, I see it when I walk my dog, but it has changed very much over the years. The once newly fallen trees have gradually rotted down and are now much more owned by the ground underneath them than when they soared above it. I see them gradually being reclaimed by the earth from which they first emerged and are made of, and in doing so I can see that they are adding energy and nutrients, encouraging and enabling new life even long after their own demise. There is much meaning for me in this place, but I suspect that none of that exists for the joggers and mountain bikers who also use these woods, whose speed is not befitting the process of attention. It was in the slow, patient attention, attending Forest Church month after month, that unearthed this connection to the place and allowed meaning to mean something more than it had first appeared. This continual coming back to a place is a model that should be encouraged by Forest Church, the ability to encourage a healthy, counterculture that goes against the flow of newness in favour of known-ness.

As a final Christological framework and as a further aid to a hermeneutic of the natural world, I want to return to Sallie McFague and briefly summarise a helpful taxonomy that she proposes. Before describing this taxonomy, it is important to understand the theological context that McFague situates it within, in what she calls the 'Christian liberation paradigm'[509] that is based on 'the tradition's incarnationalism: on the Word made flesh, on God as embodied'[510]. This theological positioning is set against that of evangelical Christianity that she says, 'focuses on human and especially individual redemption' and against creation

[509] McFague, *Super, Natural Christians*, 14.
[510] McFague, 14.

spirituality 'which focuses on nature's wellbeing'[511]. In doing this she calls out what so many in Forest Church feel about both their, very often, evangelical backgrounds (that can be singularly obsessed with 'getting people saved') and also their concerns to avoid syncretising with those creation-spiritual types who are wanting to steer the movement away from its Christian roots. She offers a different and overlapping path in suggesting that 'Christian liberation reflection extended to the natural world sees human and natural salvation as inextricably linked'. With this background, drawing on liberation theologies as her inspiration, she makes some profound far-reaching claims and welds together the soteriology of human and non-human alike:

> A Christian nature spirituality then is not Christian praxis *for* nature apart from or opposed to the well-being of the human oppressed. It is not a nature religion, a nature mysticism or a nature ethic. It extends the paradigm of the destabilising radical love we see in Jesus' parables, healing stories and eating practises *to* nature. This kind of radical love for the vulnerable and oppressed is countercultural; it is at sharp odds with the religion of Economism; it places the Christian in a prophetic and uncomfortable position vis-a-vis culture; it is a *distinctive* voice in the global ecological conversation.[512]

It is on this foundation that McFague builds a framework that suggests Jesus' ministry towards nature can be seen in three ways, 'a *deconstructive* phase in the parables, a *reconstructive* phase in the healing stories and a *prospective* phase in Jesus' eating practices.'[513]

In the first 'deconstructive' phase she argues that just as Jesus used parables to overturn hierarchies of 'rich/poor, righteous/unrighteous, powerful/weak', so the destabilizing power of these parables can be extended to overturn the hegemony of human beings over the

[511] McFague, 14.
[512] McFague, 14–15.
[513] McFague, 14.

natural world. She suggests that this should lead to, 'the acknowledgment that nature is not just an object, not just useful to us, but is valued and loved in itself, for itself by God in Christ'[514]. In an earlier passage she crystalises this in saying 'it means applying the "liberation of the oppressed" to nature…it is recognition of and response to the fact that in our time the natural world is vulnerable, needy, sick, and deteriorating…and the gospel of destabilizing, inclusive love must be extended to nature and not stop at our own species.'[515] In the second 'reconstructive' phase, there is the encouragement to seek healing as seen in Jesus' healing acts, 'which underscore that salvation means the health of our bodies, that the deterioration and dysfunction of the ecosystems of our earth are an affront to God, who desires the well-being of not just humans but of all creation'[516]. And in the third phase, McFague turns to Jesus' eating practices, saying 'He ate with sinners, tax collectors and prostitutes the outcasts of society. His eating practices highlights solidarity with the oppressed…and focus on justice at the level of basic needs: all bodies need to be fed.'[517] These eating practices are also a 'foretaste of the eschatological banquet when all creation will be satisfied and made whole'. In this Christ-centred approach there is something wonderfully appealing for those who might have struggled to bring together the personal, intrinsic desire to engage with nature-connection whilst still holding on to an ecclesiological imperative to work for justice and equality. McFague paints a subversive role for the Church to endorse, and this prophetic, active ministry seems perfectly suited to so many of the people who I have met through researching Forest Church. It enables the search for meaning from within nature to go much

[514] McFague, 15.
[515] McFague, 12.
[516] McFague, 15.
[517] McFague, 15.

deeper than a self-serving afternoon activity, towards a self-giving, interrelational approach that seeks the flourishing of human and non-human creation.

6: Conclusion

What I have sought to do within this thesis is to examine and describe the contemporary, cultural move towards (re)seeing nature connection as a medium of salvific ubiquity for a humanity that has lost its everyday correlation with the natural world. I then moved on to construct and consider a case study of the Forest Church movement as the prime example of how Christians have organised together to offer a Christianised version of this cultural moment. Finally, I have analysed the observations of this case study, and begun to offer some theological reflection and suggestions as a critical response to the practices of Forest Church and groups like them.

In conclusion, reflecting upon both the cultural moment and the Church's current practices, I would like to offer some more constructive and hopeful encouragement to the Church and its practices.

Firstly, I want to affirm that the Church should unquestionably be doing things within this cultural space. Not all cultural proclivities should have or need to have, a Christian version but in this instance, I would argue that the Church is perfectly placed to offer interaction. If the argument is that these nature-connecting activities are saving people, enriching their well-being and creating spiritual connection, then the soteriological obligations of the Church should demand it to join in. One of the earliest proclamations of the Christian faith was that in Christ, 'all things on heaven and earth were created… all things have been created through him and for him' (Colossians 1:16 NRSV), this permission-giving theological statement alone should compel the Church into being more present amongst Christ's creation. This presence should undoubtedly be manifested in seeing Christians be better stewards of Creation, but

here I want to encourage the Church to also consider how it can better accompany people in their hands-on connection and reverence of it. These two things, as Sally McFague so helpfully contests, are not two options for the church but a correlated, two-sides-of-coin, process that when done well, switches the human gaze from seeing the natural world through 'arrogant eyes' to 'loving eyes', and in doing so, creates the possibility of saving a realm that is saving us.

Secondly, I want to return to address some of the prejudices that I brought into this research and were, in part, confirmed by it. From my observations, Forest Church, as an exemplar of this kind of Christian, nature-connecting practice, may well be maturing as a movement, but it has in its roots, a critical attitude towards the Church and its normal worship practices and has therefore deliberately distanced itself from the 'mainstream' activities of the wider body. Concurrently, it hasn't in any succinct and convincing way, documented or communicated the theological normalcy of its practices. This has manifested itself in both a sense of mistrust from the leaders of established churches, fearing that the practices of Forest Church are sub-Christian or Pagan, and those who participate in these practices are left unsure where the theological legitimacy of attending these activities sits within their own Christian faith. In essence, the lack of a cohesive and confident theological framework and the use of language that can be employed to explain and legitimise the work that flows out of this means that groups like Forest Church will continue to be niche, anomalous gatherings. This, however, does not need to be the case. Whilst this is certainly a different way of doing church gatherings, with a peculiar set of language and epistemological approaches, the support of scripture and older church traditions offer the Forest Church project a clear route into theologically faithful, Christian practice.

I want to suggest that a return to the two taxonomies that have been discovered within the study of the literature on the subject, might be a helpful way to organise a response here. Firstly, through the four major themes of the New Nature Writing movement; seeing nature as epistemic, topophilic, participative and salvific whilst also encompassing the three ways that Bruce Stanley suggests as 'ways in'[518] to read nature; study, awe and meaning.

Before offering some ways that the Church might embody these themes through its nature-connecting activities, I want to posit what I believe to be an important note of caution. I want to couch the language of what the Church should be doing by firstly emphasising the motivation of the activity to be through the practice of accompaniment. As much as I would like to see more work done by the Church in helping people to connect with nature, I hope that it would learn lessons from previous attempts to replicate and engage with cultural moments. The approach here needs to show the humility to learn from what is already good and happening in the world. There are so many encouraging, organised activities happening, where the Spirit of God is already at work. What is not needed here is an appropriation and Churchification of these practices, what is needed is a way to join in with what is happening that both honours what is efficacious and brings more revelation and understanding to what is already taking place. The biblical image that might be helpful here, is one of Jacob sleeping outside, with his head on a rock and after dreaming, he awakes and sees the place he is in through transformed eyes, '"Surely the Lord is in this place, and I did not know it…How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of

[518] Stanley, *Forest Church*, 35.

heaven." (Genesis 28:17 RSV). The task of the Church is therefore to find ways to show that God is in the places that people are already in, and I suggest that the language of it being a companion in this process is a helpful image to employ.

6.1 The Church as Epistemic Companion

One of the key activities and aims of groups like Forest Church is to approach nature as being somehow knowledge-giving. The theological concept of panentheism is reaching for language that speaks of the Spirit of God being present and knowable within the natural world. To introduce people to nature is to introduce them to God, and equally to enable the reciprocity of God to be seen, heard or felt by the one who approaches. And it's this knowing and being known-ness that should lie at the heart of any Christian approach to nature-connection. It is here where the Church should also consider the disciple-making remit of its work; where so much emphasis has been placed on knowing the scriptures, should it not also include a more equal encouragement towards the knowing of God's 'second book'[519]?

This connects with Forest Church's desire to educate people about the natural world, positioning the task of equipping people with the ability to name different species as more than just a frivolous activity but an elemental return to God's creation invitation to name and know his Creation. Naming is a vital step in the knowing of something, it creates a relationship and the possibility of connection and intimacy. Thomas Berry elucidates this point well in saying, 'We need to move: from a spirituality of alienation from the natural world to a

[519] Stanley, 25.

spirituality of intimacy with the natural world from a spirituality of the divine as revealed in words to a spirituality of the divine as revealed in the visible world about us...'[520].

In practice, this means groups like Forest Church should ensure that leaders are encouraged to practice what Stanley calls the 'study' of nature when groups meet. Whether through their own prior knowledge or the provision of equipment, be it field guides or technology like the many phone-based apps that assist in the naming of species. This is not a call for dry, classroom pedagogy though, whether for adults or children, this should be a playful and interactive practice, with no need to bring in experts (whilst also not discouraging that) but a co-creation of understanding and investigation.

6.2 The Church as Topophilic Companion

The natural progression of the epistemic approach to knowing about nature in general, is to commit to knowing about it in its locality and to know of it in specificity. This kind of topophilic study requires an intentional and slow approach, coming back time and again to the same place and situates Forest Church as an ideal companion to do this. All the groups I engaged with gathered together each time, in the same place. This is no small thing. As MacFague says so well, 'It is hard to care for the earth if one has never cared for a piece of it. The particular is the basis for the universal.'[521] One of the most affecting things about visiting Forest Churches was their passion for the place in which met, inevitably meaning a desire to see it cared for and nourished.

[520] Berry, *The Sacred Universe*, 133.
[521] McFague, *Super, Natural Christians*, 155.

Whilst it is hard to ever imagine a return of the parson-naturalist as a funded clerical role within the Church, it is a provocative challenge to the vocation of all church leaders. In terms of mission, much has been written about the necessity for church leaders to understand the local cultural landscape and to use that knowledge to mould the shape of the mission of the Church. I haven't yet heard of any training though, that encourages and equips church leaders to know the natural landscape of their parishes and communities. It might be less obvious in some parishes than in others, but every church will serve a locality that has some sort of outdoor space that could, with the right accompaniment, become more intimately known if part of the church's mission was to regularly gather within it. This simple task, of focusing on the particular has the potential to see both greater care for that place, to be part of its flourishing, but also introduce people to the more universal, through asking what sustains and vivifies it. This sacralising process of transforming the seemingly profane, to a generation who have become alienated from it, elevates the meeting place into holy ground and opens salvific possibilities for those who are present.

6.3 The Church as Participative Companion

'For many people God is not encountered in church buildings, nor in musical setting sung by a robed choir, or even in a carefully planned liturgy…However, walk with them into a beautiful landscape and they speak of encountering God in the wonder of the scenery.'[522] As a senior church leader, Bishop Graham Usher is encouraging a radical movement in making this observation and suggestion. As has been previously stated, the rationale and theology of

[522] Usher, *Places of Enchantment*, 6.

knowing why this approach should not be seen as radical but as entirely orthodox, is important but, even as the church is working this out, it should be encouraged into the action of 'walking' with people into the natural world. Even as much as I have cautioned groups like Forest Church to be more theologically literate with their work, I would not for a moment discourage them from getting on and doing what they are doing. The important action of the Church must be to get out of its four walls and be alongside people who are 'encountering God' in the outdoors. In its simplest form, this accompanying practice should be seeking to elicit awe in people. You cannot make that happen for people, but by curating heuristic activities that allow people to see how marvellous the natural world is, in vast and majestic sea and sky and landscape, or in the small minutiae of the interdependent world of a window box, a fertile place of awe-filled encounter becomes possible.

Whilst, therefore, this can be seen as a simple practice, there is a counterpoint here. Through observing Forest Church gatherings, it became apparent that there were times when there was a lack of creativity in what was being offered. This was especially true when there weren't any children present. Having children as part of the gathering forced the leaders into more hands-on and interactive activity, which brought playfulness and comradery to the event. When there was only provision for adults, there was an overreliance on more circumspect and individualised suggestions, with the ubiquitous, 'go off on your own for some time and see what you learn about God' being the go-to activity. This may be novel and even profound for some, but it cannot sustain a long-term, regular approach. How can church activity outdoors harness the playfulness that fires imagination and also connects people with one another as well as the natural world, whilst at the same time allowing for the deep numinosity that silence and contemplation of nature can bring? This is not easy, but I would suggest

greater connectivity of leaders of groups like Forest Church, where ideas can be shared and good practices can be discussed, would be a good starting point. In this sense, there is a pragmatic problem to overcome and one that is common to all new movements. When thinking of Forest Church in particular, I would contend that the people who started the movement, with pioneering and frustrated energy, need to now be generous in giving it away rather than in trying to hold it to its original vision. It has already evolved beyond that, and to still just have a Facebook group as the only, online co-ordinated networking platform, with no training or resources offered, cannot sustain the movement.

6.4 The Church as Salvific Companion

When Christians speak of salvation, they invariably mean the salvation of humankind and where the soteriological benefit happens only after death. One of the profound and destabilising effects of the claims of nature-connecting activity, is the sober reminder to the Church that salvation should also be grounded in both the here-and-now, as expressed by Christ in his offer of 'life in all its fullness' (John 10:10 NIV), and as St Paul tells the church in Rome, a more expansive view of salvation where, 'creation itself will be set free' (Romans 8:21 RSV).

In my interactions with Forest Church, there was never a hint of proselytising people. One of the great attractions of it for many, is that people come and they go, they are not being asked to join an organisation or to sign up to a creedal belief system. The leaders of these groups do however desire the wellbeing of people, with that as a foundational, motivation in all they do. I believe that this is therefore form of evangelism, where good news is properly

understood to be more ‘saving people from their sins’. I hope to have shown that culturally and through these Christian activities, people are consistently expressing, without necessarily knowing why, that they feel like more alive human beings. And from speaking with attenders of Forest Church, it was clear that they see connection with nature being beneficial in tangible ways, ways that do not experience within church services. Whilst some will still want to see more foregrounding of calls to repentance and the like, I would want to encourage groups like Forest Church to continue to practice their work as a meaningful enough act of salvation as life-in-all-its-fullness, and to resist the temptation to do much more than that. If they can at least have the ability to act as faithful guides, introducing people to where and how the Spirit might be present in the setting that they are in, the task is then to allow the wildness and unpredictability of the Spirit to do as the Spirit wants. If we can learn anything from the natural world, it is surely that it tends to be at its most content and beautiful, when it is left alone to flourish in ways that it was created to.

I want to leave the last words, to the man I quoted right at the very beginning of this thesis. John Muir was a prophet in every sense of the word, a religious firebrand who rejected and was rejected from, the faith that so enlivened his early life. He was a prophet because so much of his writings, that seemed to be a rant against the Church can now be seen, in my opinion at least, as the clarion call of a clear-thinking man, inspired by the Spirit. Muir saw, with devastating clarity, just what the coming century was going to bring by way of harm to nature, and the concurrent alienation of humanity from it. He saw the malaise that organised religion, along with other market forces, was complicit in bringing about. On a more personal level, in an era where Church attendance was a social demand, his journal shows a man who moved into the mountains to get away from the church, and in doing so, he found God. One

of the most common quotes from Muir, although impossible to find its specific source is, ‘I would rather be in the mountains thinking of God than in church thinking of the mountains’. The sentiment is certainly congruent with Muir’s writings, whether he wrote it or not.

In summary, I hope that the Church of the future is as naturally at home in the mountains, or the woods, or an allotment, as it is within its building, confidently curating spaces where people can think of, and know, God.

Appendix 1: Interview Questions for Forest Church Leaders

Durham University

OUTLINE FOR INTERVIEW WITH FOREST CHURCH LEADERS

1. Can you please tell me about your faith background. Do you attend church now and if so what kind of church and what involvement do you have there?

2. Please tell me how and why you got involved with Forest Church.

3. What do you see as the significant differences between Forest Church and traditional church?

4. Can you summarise your Forest Church for me, when and where does it meet and what kinds of activities do you do?

5. What is your sense of the type of people who attend your Forest Church and why do you think they come along? Is attendance regular or quite erratic?

6. What do you see as the primary purpose of your Forest Church and how do you assess whether or not it is reaching those purposes?

7. Do you have any sense of where your Forest Church is going in terms of direction and do you imagine that it will meet for many years or is this just an activity for a season?

8. Do you see yourself as 'pastoring' the people who come to Forest Church or is it merely an event that people attend?

9. Have you had any reaction from other churches towards what you are trying to do?

10. Where do you see the future of the wider movement heading and what do you ultimately hope it might achieve?

11. Anything else that you would like to tell me?

Appendix 2: Questionnaire for Forest Church Attenders

FACULTY OF THEOLOGY AND RELIGION

Research Questionnaire for Forest Church Attenders

This questionnaire will be used to help me collate some research into organised nature connection activities, why they have become so popular and how Forest Church is responding to this. You don't have to answer any or all the questions, just the ones that you are happy to. These will remain anonymous and after I have put all the data together, these forms will be destroyed.

Thank you so much for agreeing to help me, it's very much appreciated!

1. What is your gender? Male Female Rather not say
2. What is your age? 18-35 36-50 51-65 Over 65 Rather not say
3. What is your religion?
4. How many of these gatherings have you attended before?
5. Do you go to 'normal church' as well as Forest Church, and if so, what kind of church is it and how regularly do you attend?
6. If you answered 'Yes' to the above question, what are the main differences for you in what you experience between attending your church and Forest Church?
7. Why did you start coming to Forest Church?
8. What have you found to be the most helpful things about attending Forest Church?
9. Can you describe a particular moment within a Forest Church gathering, that had spiritual impact upon you?
10. Please add anything else that you would like to say.

Appendix 3: New Nature Writing - Book Sales

Data provided by Nielsen BookScan

Volume	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
T8.1 Natural History: General	218,721	105,477	100,188	266,807	192,475	470,839	415,529	283,644	281,085	291,537	463,188	243,332	250,158	206,243	224,582	294,851	361,668	431,957	397,364	340,920	165,167
T8.3 Natural History: Plants	74,023	107,761	96,713	118,357	115,971	145,710	140,842	150,820	157,856	151,134	143,267	116,536	113,720	107,552	129,982	166,540	151,633	161,660	181,420	125,652	83,889
T8.2 Natural History: Animal & Wildlife	260,398	368,095	352,426	352,084	440,229	378,291	344,567	388,042	575,284	559,261	523,569	427,669	410,841	522,838	652,181	593,995	893,429	795,155	812,979	581,308	376,641
T8.8 Environment & Ecology: General Interest	76,452	54,992	30,231	26,448	44,482	120,178	134,667	117,053	139,726	112,996	78,177	52,010	49,983	62,096	93,783	68,045	63,353	95,585	559,646	198,359	79,793
Aug 27, 2021									1											10:25:38 am	

Appendix 4 – Attending Forest Church: Two Vignettes

Robinswood Forest Church

It's a dreary Saturday in September as I pull up in the car park of Robinswood Hill Country Park, a few miles to the south of Gloucester. For the first time that day, the rain briefly stops and from the car park we're afforded a view right across the city of Gloucester, where the eye is drawn to the cathedral that dominates the city skyline.

Gradually a rag tag group of individuals gather around a children's playground and greet one another. I count 17 of us in total, with 5 children. One of the first things I notice is that everyone is dressed well for the weather, these are not people unused to being outdoors. It's also obvious that everyone knows everyone else, with the children leading the way by immediately chasing around, playing tag with one another and sliding down a wet and dirty slide. Rev Cate Williams, the co-leader of Robinswood Forest Church, brings us to order and

lays out the plan for our time, giving everyone an A4 print out with prayers and readings[523]. Today, she explains, we are celebrating Mabon, which is 'what pagans and Celts called the Autumn equinox'. It's a word I'd never heard before but like many other Forest Churches, Cate centres many of her gatherings around key markers of seasons and other significant moments that are found within the Pagan festival calendar. She says that we're going to walk together and spend some time in an area called the old orchard. She encourages us to consider the turning of the seasons as we walk; the move towards the darker half of the year, with colder weather and shorter days ahead. She encourages us to think about what we might be leaving behind, as we see all around us the dying of the summer life within the trees and plants around us. After Cate reads a brief prayer, we begin the walk. I fall in to step with a woman who has attended several of these gatherings, she says she enjoys it but the main reason for coming along, whatever the weather, is because her 12 year old son who wouldn't miss it. She points out her boy to me, who isn't on the path we're on but is with the other kids exploring a more interesting route in the tree line above us. She tells me about his ADHD diagnosis and the struggles that she has had in bringing him up, 'his energy and messiness is exhausting, he's always on the go and never settles for any length of time'. She tells me that she is no longer able to attend her church because her son couldn't sit still for the time expected and the children's work in the church couldn't deal with his behaviour. "It's not a replacement for my church but coming to Forest Church means that I get a bit of headspace, and he is very happy to buzz around and do his own thing in the woods". We don't get round to talking about the thoughts that Cate encouraged us to, and it doesn't sound like many others around us are either but that doesn't seem to matter too much, the air is filled with

[523] See appendix 1: Robinswood Forest Church: Running Order

the sound of the groups chatter, occasional laughter and the dripping from the trees as they shed the earlier rain.

After a little while we reach the old orchard and Cate calls us all together. She then asks us to pause and think about the questions she asked at the beginning. After a brief pause, she reminds us that this is also a time of great abundance, as the natural world offers fruit and other food that animals will store up to see them through the tough season ahead. We're encouraged to go off and see what abundance we can find. After 10 minutes or so we all return with hands full of berries and seeds and nuts and acorns, as well as the wind-fallen apples that are all around our feet. It's a well made point and Cate grounds this by reading from Matthew 6 and reminding us of Jesus promise to provide for us just like he does the birds of the air and the flowers of the field. We then read a lovely piece of prose that Cate calls 'a statement of hope' (I've since searched for this and can only presume that Cate wrote this herself). We each take a turn in reading a line and whilst we've lost the children to muckier adventures, the adults read and slowly reflect on the words. There isn't any sense of transcendency at any point of the day, everyone is either chatting or keeping an eye out for their children, it's far from being a breathless rush but there is perhaps a sense of going through the motions. No comment is made by anyone about what we've just done, and apart from a bit of silence and a few nodding heads to the words that Cate says, it's hard to know what anyone is thinking and whether this is an act of worship or just some nice thoughts that we're sharing outdoors. Cate has put together some profound words and images for us but nobody seems to be very focussed on what is being asked. I feel for her here, I know at personal experience how disappointing it is when planned worship activities don't entice the awe-filled engagement I'd imagined when I was putting the act together. This doesn't

however take away from the positive experience of ambling through woodlands with a lovely group of people. If the liturgy doesn't quite hit the mark, Cate somehow curates a feeling of a very safe, inclusive space and whilst I'm clearly not one of the locals, I feel a sense of amiable peace amongst these strangers.

As we head back further into the woods, I talk to a younger guy, in his late 30's at a guess, who tells me that he's a social worker in his day job and his partner helps to lead and organise the Forest Church gathering. He talks about the stress of his day job as well as his slow drift away from church and a general deconstruction of his childhood faith. He said he didn't always connect with the spiritual content of this group, but he always felt better for coming and 'nature is always the place that does it for me still'.

We find a spot that the group regularly finishes up in and the children run off, again, to continue with the building of dens that have been emerging over the months of them going there. Sadly, I need to leave at this point, which is made harder by the fact that Cate somehow produces some homemade scones along with some autumnal blackberries and clotted cream but I have to get back to Brighton. People give a warm goodbye and I head back to the confines of a car and long, various motorways returning me home.

The time spent at Robinswood was good and nourishing, even if it didn't elicit any deep awe or meaningful reflections on nature or God, I wasn't in any way disappointed. Cate had done such careful preparations for the day, as someone who has to do this sort of curating craft regularly, I was impressed by the creativity and commitment of this very gifted leader, but I was struck by the irony that nature took something of a back seat role in the proceedings. The environment wasn't the driving force for this Forest Church gathering, but it somehow

gave itself to the creation of an open and gentle atmosphere in which this disparate group of people found common ground, and that divine connection with others felt enough of a reason to have been there at all.

Norfolk Wild Church

Any image that I had of Loch Neaton, the home venue of Norfolk Wild Church, being in a wild and remote spot, akin to some Scottish shortbread tin scene of stags and heather, were soon dispelled as I was instructed to 'park in the leisure centre car park, we meet just behind the astro turf'. And so it is, tucked behind a very busy sports and social club at the heart of the market town of Watton, I find Charlie Houlder-Moat and her electric blue camper van, next to which is a flag with the words, 'Wild Church'. The flag is literally being held at its base, under the front wheel of the van, because it is very, very windy and the wind is icy cold. "If we'd have been meeting in the woods I would have had to call the session off for health and safety reasons", says Charlie and she's not joking. I'm the first to arrive and it's just myself, Charlie and her wife Ally for a few moments, which gives me a chance to ask them about Wild Church. Charlie is a Licenced Lay Minister in the Church of England and works within the 'Mission Enablers' team of the Diocese of Norwich.[524] The group has been meeting for 'about seven months' and the numbers gathering have varied but Charlie says that a core group are beginning to emerge who always attend and 'will call me to let me know if they can't make it, which is really nice'. As she tells me this, on cue, a family of three, led by an enthusiastic young boy of around 8, come wandering over from the direction of the car park. There are three

[524] This team exists to 'work alongside those actively engaged in parish ministry to facilitate local mission' with an emphasis to support 'innovation based on good practice but which is relevant to the local neighbourhood, not simply replicating or imposing ideas from elsewhere.' Taken from: 'Mission Enablers', *Diocese of Norwich* (blog), accessed 15 February 2022, https://www.dioceseofnorwich.org/churches/mission-enablers/.

generations in this little group with dad and grandma accompanying the boy. As others start to join us, Charlie explains that today's theme is around birds, as we're meeting just after the RSPB's Great Garden Birdwatch, an initiative to get people counting the variety and numbers of birds that they see in their gardens, in one day. Whilst we wait for any latecomers, the first activity gets underway as we're tasked with making bird-feeders out of old plastic bottles. I join in and chat to the others around me, but I feel slightly the odd-one-out, I'm clearly not a local and that point, every other adult apart from me, has a child with them. When it's clear that we're going to run out of bottles, I hand mine to one of the children and whilst my instinct is to help them with the tricky cutting of the bottle, I'm aware that the grandparent they've come with is more appropriately placed to do that. Charlie is in her element here, she's a local in every sense, growing up in Watton and seeming to know not just the people attending but also everyone else who walks past as well. She is wonderfully warm and welcoming, asking people about how they're doing and clearly keen to make sure that everyone is seen and interacted with. Seeing myself and another couple of adults who've arrived during the craft activity, Charlie encourages us to go and follow a bird trail that's been set up around the edges of the 'loch' (I later find out that it was the remnants of a pit that was dug out to create a railway embankment, and the men who did the work were a crew of Scottish labourers. This was later filled in with water to create a swimming lake, named 'loch' in honour of the men who created it). Dotted around on trees and benches are small, laminated cut-outs of birds. These have a simple fact about the bird but also have a child-friendly question to consider, like 'I wonder if you can see God's heart in this place?' (in a tenuous connection to Swans necks making a heart shape when their beaks touch). It begins to rain as I try to follow the trial and that along with the icy wind makes me give up any pretence that this is going to be the contemplative activity that I'm sure it's meant to be, so I head back to the group. As the

children and their adults finish off the bird-feeders, we regather in the small space of shelter behind Charlie's van, and she introduces the group to a visiting speaker who runs a local charity that's trying to save songbirds. Again, this is aimed at the children present and she holds up some pictures of the most common garden birds and shows us a Blue Tit's nest, telling us some ways that we might help birds to nest in our gardens. Some people start to drift off at this point and Charlie grabs the opportunity to finish things up by handing out some chocolate nest cakes and reads us a prayer from the book 'Outdoor Church' by Sally Welch. It's well-intentioned but the kids aren't paying attention and the temperature seems to have dropped even further, it's not easy to hear the words and even harder to concentrate with the wind whipping around our heads.

As I get back to the relative warmth of my car and begin the journey home, I try to reflect on the last hour and a half. Firstly, on a personal level, I feel a disappointment that there was nothing for me or people like me, more like joining in a kid's club or Sunday School activity than the reflective space in nature that I'd hoped to find. But as I thought about what I'd just witnessed I felt my posture change as I considered the task that Charlie was trying to undertake. She is clearly an enthusiastic and brilliant leader, she exuded pastoral warmth and great creativity in all that she did, and as I tried to observe this session through her eyes, the issues that I felt were weaknesses, on reflection, were actually great strengths within that particular setting. This hyper-local activity, always happening on a seemingly uninspiring patch of grass next to the astro turf pitches, was never going to connect with me, because it wasn't intended for me. Charlie knows her community, maybe as well as any church leader I've ever met, she is rooted into that area, she lives and breathes and celebrates and mourns alongside these people she is seeking to minister to. She is best placed, in that place, to

instinctively know where to pitch the content of her activities, this gathering may have been drastically changed by the weather, but this isn't an event for her, it is a process, it is church. She will be back there next month and maybe then, the wind will lessen and conversation and connection come more easily, and even if it isn't, the ones who can make it will enjoy their time and the ones who can't make it, will let Charlie know. Through her dedication, kindness and commitment to this locality the, at first glance, uninspiring space, is transformed into the ideal, sacred place, holy ground for her to do this activity; it's known, it's accessible and it's now owned with great affection by the community who meet there. This Forest Church wasn't for me, and I hope and pray it continues that way.

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