

Picnics, processions and praise

Jan Godfrey supplies a host of ideas to choose from for exploring the big outdoors with your church.

Planning

Hopefully in the summer months, there will be opportunities to hold church-based activities outside to include all ages and visitors – a mixture of fellowship and outreach. Many churches hold outdoor services, but there is a lot more you can do. The weather being fickle, do plan for indoor alternatives, but with the emphasis still on the outdoor world as a background for worship and celebration.

Make the most of all ages sharing the joy and wonder of God's creation in parks or gardens, commons or coast, farms or fields.

Questions

Whatever you do, these are things to consider together.

- How can we discover God at work outside?
- How can we celebrate God's provision?
- What can we experience of God with our senses?
- Are there ways that we can enjoy being with God that are special to being outside?
- How can we best encourage all-age fellowship outdoors?
- How can we best use our surroundings – town, suburbs or countryside?
- What would be an appropriate theme? Rainbows are used here as one example but what about: the senses, thanksgiving, creation, exploration, discovery, God's world, and so on?

Use your senses

Have a walk together. Stop at intervals to be very still and smell, see, hear, and feel what is going on around you. Look for different colours, then see what's high (clouds, birds, buildings) and what's low down, and what you are standing on. Pray, or sing choruses or a hymn thanking God for your surroundings. Take home anything found or picked – as allowed – to make a display. Thank God for our senses.

A procession

Have a simple 'Jesus' walk round your local area, carrying banners. It could be a prayer walk, praying for different places as you go. If you have large numbers processing, it's worth telling the police what you are intending.

Banners

For simple but effective banners, use large pieces of card with dowel rod taped to each side for strength. Put 'Jesus' in large decorated letters. Add the name of your church, and maybe some symbols, like a cross, dove or fish.

Streamers

Cut packs of crêpe across the width in strips. Tape the ends of different coloured strips together to make streamers to wave.

Shakers

Tape two paper cups together, rim to rim, with dried peas or rice inside. Decorate, and add small streamers at each end.

Balloons

Have a bunch of helium balloons ready to launch at the end of your

walk. Attach to each a small label saying, 'God loves you' or something similar. Sing a hymn as the balloons go, or say a prayer beforehand.

Being dramatic

If you have the resources, why not organise a pageant as outreach to visitors or fringe church members? Maybe it could be a short history of your church or of local Christianity. It would need organising well in advance.

Or use a simple humorous sketch in the context of an outdoor service. (There's one for puppets on page 2.)

A picnic

Bring and share picnic or barbecue food. Encourage people to mingle, by asking them to change places for different parts of the meal. Then have games, worship songs and prayers. You might want to include the story on page 2.

Games

1 Making groups

Animal crackers

Give everyone a piece of paper picturing an animal. All make appropriate noises until they have found everyone in their group.

Colours

Alternatively, issue everyone with counters or lengths of wool of colours of the rainbow. Find everyone of the same colour. Tie wool together to make a circle.

2 Treasure hunt

Have a list of items to find in a defined area. Groups of players hunt, leaving the items untouched but writing down their location.

For the examples below, use the real thing, toys, pictures or models. Peter's net, Caesar's coin, Adam's apple, Eve's snake, Goliath's head, Balaam's ass, Ruth's ring, Paul's letter, Job's comforter (a dummy), Jacob's ladder, Mary's baby, Martha's saucepan, Aaron's rod, Noah's ark.

Should you need a tie-break, see who knows most about the characters involved!

3 Quiz

Hold an all-age quiz with work-sheets to find out facts about the surroundings of your church building.

Outdoor songs

Think of a world without any flowers (JP)

For the beauty of the earth (JP)

All things bright and beautiful (JP, MP)

By blue Galilee (JP)

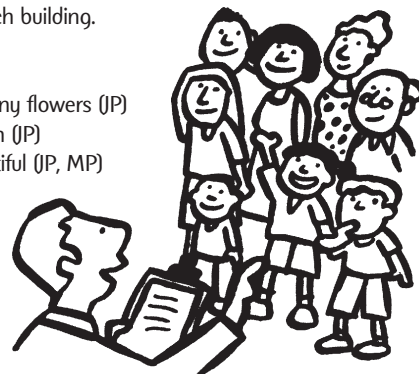
Colours of day (JP)

Oh Lord my God (JP, MP)

Yes, God is good (JP, MP)

Jesus is Lord (JP, MP, SF)

My God is so big (JP)



Prayer

- Pray – in a circle, holding hands, or holding symbols of the theme, like different coloured ribbons for rainbows.
- Living water – write prayers on paper boats, sail on stream or pond.
- Use Psalm 8 as a basis for prayer, or the version for little ones below.

For

For all your gifts we praise you, Lord,
for sun and sky and sea;
for clouds and rain and rushing wind,
for every flower and tree.

For dragonflies and butterflies,
for animals and birds;
for gardens, parks and city streets,
for waterfalls and woods.

For farms and fields of wheat and corn,
for golden harvest crops;
for frost and ice and desert sand,
for snowy mountain tops.

For stars that twinkle in the night,
for fishes in the deep;
for rivers, streams and rainbows,
for hills and valleys steep.

Forever great, forever true,
forever Heaven's king;
forever I will sing your praise,
for making EVERYTHING!

© Jan Godfrey 2002



Extra ideas

- Bark rubbing to explore textures.
- Bubble blowing to see rainbow colours.
- Kite flying to remind of God's power.
- Response – ask everyone to write a poem or prayer or draw a picture.
- God clothes the flowers – press wild flowers and grasses.
- Sing a new song – fit new words to a known tune.
- Play team games, or rounders, football or cricket.
- Three-in-one. Challenge people to find and take home a cloverleaf to remember Father, Son and Holy Spirit.
- Display interesting items found, like feathers, stones, flowers and so on. Invite anyone who wants to talk about their item if it reminds them of God in a special way.
- Snap! Don't forget a group photograph.

Books

This Amazing World by Lois Rock, Lion Publishing, 2002, ISBN 0754946674.

Poems and Prayers for a Better World (ed) Su Box & Felicity Henderson, Lion Publishing, 2001, ISBN 0754938868.

What a Wonderful World, Pat Alexander, Lion Publishing, 2002, ISBN 0754938310.



Story

The picnic that nearly wasn't

St Noah's church was all ready for a picnic in the town park. Narinder and Philippe and little Maria were all looking forward to playing games and having a picnic together as they were the best of friends.

The weather forecast had been for a very hot day, and it certainly felt warm and sticky. Just as they reached the park gates, they heard a rumble of thunder.

Then, before there was time to even think about playing games or eating lunch, a very large black cloud swam into the sky from nowhere, and heavy rain POURED down.

'Oh ...' shrieked everyone, and ran back to St Noah's church hall as fast as they could. The picnic was spoiled – and it hadn't even begun.

Narinder and Philippe and little Maria felt very disappointed.

'It's not fair,' grumbled Narinder.

'God should have made it fine for us,' said little Maria.

'Stupid weather,' said Philippe. 'It's all spoiled.'

'Spoiled? Of course it won't be spoiled,' said the Vicar, Fred Jolly, with a beaming smile. 'We'll have an indoor picnic instead. Turn on the sun!'

He turned all the lights on with a flourish, and somehow everyone squeezed into the bright and cheerful church hall out of the pouring rain. Rugs and chairs and flowers appeared from various rooms and cupboards, music started playing and some of the grownups organised games. Everyone began to make new friends at the 'outside-in' picnic. Then it was lunchtime. Fred Jolly said grace and everyone shared their sandwiches and crisps and biscuits and fruit. Someone went to fetch ice-cream, and there were hot and cold drinks. There was more than enough food for everyone.

After lunch there were songs and hymns to sing, and an unexpected film to watch. The film was all about birds and flowers and God's wonderful world.

'This is a super picnic,' said Narinder and Philippe, and even little Maria nodded, just keeping awake, with her thumb in her mouth.

After the film was over, everyone made a big circle and held hands and said thank you to God for a happy day together.

And when the doors of the church hall were opened to put out the leftover crumbs for the birds and to let everyone go home – there was a beautiful rainbow! The rain soon stopped and a watery sun shone over St Noah's church hall.

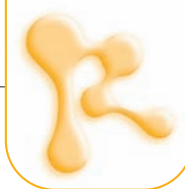
'The weather doesn't seem to matter now,' said Narinder.

'It's been a good picnic,' said Philippe.

Little Maria said nothing at all. She lay curled up on a rug that had been a pretend patch of grass, fast asleep.

© Jan Godfrey 2002





The fruit-gum tree

A play written for puppets – though suitable for people – set in a garden, and appropriate for outside. Use it to explore themes of creation, disobedience, or temptation.

Cast and props

- Narrator.
- 6 animal puppets.
- Snake (made of card)
- The scene is a garden ready for a party/picnic/barbecue with a few flowers, and a cut-out tree with a large quantity of painted and/or fruit sweets attached, and one large red sweet sticky-tacked in the centre. It should look particularly enticing, maybe in red fluorescent card and glitter. It has a notice attached saying, 'DO NOT TOUCH'.
- Tubes of sweets to share at the end.

(Party music plays, then fades.)

Narrator: This is a garden, a long ago anywhere garden. It might be a garden near you. Let's call it the Garden of ... *(add a local name.)* There's going to be a summer garden party here today and everyone's very excited. There'll be music and dancing, and games to play. There'll be good things to eat and drink, and everyone will enjoy being with their friends. The sun is shining so it should be a perfect, happy time. *(Snake shows itself.)* But if you see this creature around, just BOO him away will you? *(Practise.)*

(The animals enter together talking excitedly.)

- A1 Oo, here we are.
 A2 It's a lovely garden.
 A3 It's beautiful.
 A4 It's brilliant.
 A5 It's perfect.
 A6 It's going to be a wonderful party.
 ALL We're looking forward to it, it's really exciting!
(Snake appears briefly – audience hiss.)
 A1 Whoever was that?
 A2 Never mind. They've gone. *(They look round the garden eventually focusing on the tree.)*
 A3 Look at the flowers.
 A4 And the tree – it's a fruit-gum tree!
 A5 It's full of fruity sweets!
 A6 Oooh, they look tempting.
 ALL Look at the red one, it's almost as big as an apple.
 A1 But it says, 'DO NOT TOUCH'.
 A2 Why?
 A3 I don't know ... but we could eat the other sweets.
 A4 But the red one looks especially good...
(Snake appears briefly.)
 A5 It would taste nice...
 A6 We could share it...
 A1 Perhaps we'd better not touch...
 A2 Perhaps we shouldn't... it's disobedient...
 A3 But nobody's looking...
(Snake appears, watches, vanishes.)
 A4 It would be good for us...
 ALL It would give us energy, make us clever and wise, help us win at games...

- A5 Yes, and there are lots of other sweets for everyone else...
 A6 It would be an awful waste to leave it there...
 ALL And it can't do any harm, it's only a sweet! Yes, Yes, Yes!
(Others and snake jostle A6 who reaches the red sweet from the tree and takes a bite. The animals immediately start quarrelling over it.)
 ALL It's mine! I thought of it! I took it! Give it to me! Go away!
(And so on.)
 Snake Ha, ha, ha, ha... *(Sinister laugh.)*
 ALL A bit for me! I want some! *(Start rubbing their tummies and groaning.)*
 A1 Ohh, yugggh! It tastes horrid! *(Throws the sweet down.)*
 A2 It's old! It's past its sell-by date!
 A3 It's sour!
 A4 It's stale!
 A5 It's nasty inside!
 ALL YUK!!!! We feel ill! We feel ill! Oh...
 A6 *(to others)* It's bad! It's disgusting! Why did you make me take it?
 ALL *(speaking at once)* We didn't! It was you! No it was you! No, not me, you! Now we can't go to the party, we're too ill... oh... oh!
 A6 Well don't blame me, it wasn't MY fault, you all wanted the sweet, it's all YOUR fault.
(Jostle and knock the tree/flowers/grass, making a general mess.)
 ALL Everything's spoiled ... and the garden's all horrid now, we've trampled on it and made a mess of it...
(They leave the garden. The snake appears, laughs, then vanishes.)
(Song, verse 1 only, all congregation join in.)

Narrator: So the animals missed the party and were very unhappy. They had to go to different hospitals a long way away and didn't see each other again. Instead they sent nasty get-ill cards to each other and went on blaming each other forever. The garden was spoiled for everybody else who came to the party because they trampled all over it when they were disobedient trying to reach the red fruity sweet. If the animals had chosen to say 'No, No, No!' instead of 'Yes, Yes, Yes!' things might have been very different. But they would have needed God's help to do that. Let's see how it might have been...
(Animals reappear together, with snake. They look thoughtfully at snake then rush at him.)

ALL Go away! NO! NO! NO! God is bigger than you - God's the GREATEST!
(Narrator invites the children to help stamp on the cardboard snake until it is completely squashed.)

(Sing the song together, starting with the second verse, then the whole song. The animals can do appropriate actions. Share sweets with the congregation, explaining that red ones may be eaten!)

Song

Don't blame me *(Tune, 'Three blind mice')*

Don't blame me, don't blame me, it's such a lovely tree, with goodies all for free; it's full of fruit so juicy and sweet, rosy and ripe and a special treat, all I want is a bite to eat, so don't blame me!	Don't tempt me, don't tempt me, I shan't touch the tree, however good to see; so go away and stay away, and don't come back another day, we know that God is good - HOORAY! so don't tempt me!
--	---

© Jan Godfrey 2002