



CASE STUDY

MUDDY CHURCH

ANVIL: Journal of Theology and Mission
VOL 35, ISSUE 1

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Leonard Sweet and Frank Viola give us the image of God “playing in the dirt, making mud pies”,¹ the Creator’s hands shaping and forming the greatest cathedral that could be imagined – stones building mountainsides, windows through the canopy of leaves, echoes and whispers as nature moved, galloped, slithered and grew.

The creation narrative in Genesis offers us an insight into the fullness of creation but the whole of the Bible continues with God on and in the earth. We can connect to the wilderness even if we have never been to a desert, we can see the starlit sky as we read Abraham’s promise (Gen. 15:4), we understand the peace of the still waters and know our need for them in the valley (Ps. 23). But it is not only the Old Testament; Jesus used mustard seeds, fish, spitting in the mud and drawing in the dirt, and we comprehend the enormity of Paul’s calling through the shipwrecks (Acts 27). These constant connectors to creation are not only because of locations but because, going back to the Genesis narrative, we came from the earth, created, breathed into and will return to it. The reminder that we come from the dust is not to make us feel like dirt but a reflection of how wonderful and complex we are and that within us is the immensity we find in nature’s glory.

Hectic lifestyles threaten our connection to creation; adults unable to explore outdoors fail to offer the outdoor opportunity of time and space to children. Research by Unilever found a third of children spend less than 30 minutes outside each day;² this is in comparison with the United Nations guidelines, which state that prisoners require at least one hour of suitable exercise in the open air daily.³ We are removing opportunities from this generation of the rights we give to prisoners. The son of a friend was a good student, well behaved and with no problems in the classroom, but his walk home was manic – jumping, shouting, running, screaming. It was as though he had spent all day conforming and being good and needed this space to be his real self – like releasing the fizz from a drinks bottle! He isn’t the only one; outdoor activity is linked to improved mental health, healthy living and learning ability, and for many children it allows them

a release from the pressures of environments where they feel the need to conform.

A side effect of schools adopting healthy lifestyle agendas has been the increased opportunities for outdoor play, activity and learning that offers space, air and exploration. Pupils and teachers reported outdoor learning as leaving them happier and healthier – 72 per cent of teachers identified it having a positive impact on their job satisfaction.⁴ This is not just limited to school learning, though; David Hay and Rebecca Nye talk about spiritual development as becoming “more deeply aware both of ourselves and of our intimate relationship with everything that is not ourselves”,⁵ which includes the earth, the world and other people. Formation of our faith is strengthened by people, but also the earth and the world – which often isn’t recognised in formal church settings as something we can all offer.

Outside space looks different to each of us – buildings, bricks, stone, trees, windows, daylight or night, it isn’t particularly about what the outside looks like but the opportunity to connect with it. Moving into a small town in Nottinghamshire, there seemed to me little of value – fast food, charity shops and empty buildings filled the centre. Around the edges soulless new-build estates were developing that have no parks, shops or centres but are built close to major road routes – encouraging commuting, not community. Believing in Asset-Based Community Development,⁶ where opportunities and strengths are looked for within an area, we realised there was a treasure, our own Eden.

At the edge of town was an area known as “the quarries”, where generations of children have played among the woodland. Over recent years the natural habitat with streams and lakes has been developed into a small nature reserve with a visitor centre and a café. It was a popular place for dog walkers and people seeking nature away from the somewhat depressing town centre and estates. This was where Muddy Church began – as a place that offered access to God’s creation, where people of any faith or none could gather together: all ages, wheelchairs, pushchairs, sticks, legs – two and four.

The name “Muddy Church” offered a sense of formal and informal together, expressing openness and belonging. It was important to address that using the name “church” wasn’t just notional, but we were considering this being a place where relationships with God, one another and

¹ Leonard Sweet and Frank Viola, *Jesus: A Theography* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2012), 41.

² Edelman, *Dirt is Good – Free the Kids* (2016), quoted in <https://www.campaignlive.co.uk/article/prisoners-spend-time-outside-todays-children-claims-persil-campaign/1388344>. See also <https://www.edelman.co.uk/work/dirt-is-good/> (accessed 16 May 2018).

³ See <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/treatmentofprisoners.aspx> (accessed 18 January 2019).

⁴ Natural Connection Development Project, 2016. “Outdoor Learning Project – Press Release”, available at <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/englands-largest-outdoor-learning-project-reveals-children-more-motivated-to-learn-when-outside> (accessed 5 October 2018).

⁵ David Hay with Rebecca Nye, *The Spirit of the Child*, revised ed. (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2006), 21.

⁶ See <https://www.scdc.org.uk/what/assets-scotland> for an explanation of this approach (accessed 17 January 2019).

the world were formed. The idea was of a church that was open and equal – children could lead, no separate teaching times, accessible routes, free activities, talk or be silent, questions with no one suggesting they were the only person with the right answer. For some the lack of structure takes getting used to; when someone suggested we gather together to start, that I should pray and then lead the way, I pointed to the children already on the pathway running ahead and picking up flowers.

Muddy encapsulates the idea this is messy – we meet no matter what the weather; there is no sanitising that we cannot possibly get wet or dirty, as these things sometimes remind us we are alive: the cold wind that chills our cheeks, or being reminded by a child of the pure joy of jumping in a muddy puddle. This is a place of informal adventuring, which may take you off the pathway in search of a stick or spying a bird but focuses on the element of being with. Equally, in the wondering together it can get muddy – different opinions are free to be shared, heard and mused over as we walk and share.

Muddy Church does not come with a programme or guidebook but is a place in which each church is encouraged to look to their community and to find spaces and opportunities outside of a building for people to connect. Around the country there are various expressions with other names, such as Mossy Church and Forest Church, that have found their expression. Some are more formal with liturgy, some take place in adopted orchards, others in the church garden. Our Muddy Church conveniently ends in a space to feast at the little community café where we can support local business and warm up with a coffee and cake. One church met and made bread on sticks and toasted marshmallows in a fire, another had an apple festival and another utilised the smallholding of a member of their congregation, which included feeding sheep and llamas. The way Eugene H. Peterson expressed John 1:14 as the Word moving “into the neighbourhood”⁷ resonates with the values of Muddy Church: incarnational dwelling in the midst of our family, friends and neighbours in ways that connect with our community.

Diana Davis and Autumn Wall pointed out that when thinking of mission we see the importance of relationship, and that the only thing “not good” in creation was “for man to be alone” (Gen. 2:18).⁸ Zechariah shares an image of the elderly sitting, “cane in hand”, where the “streets will be filled with boys and girls playing there” (Zech. 8:4–5). Muddy Church offers generational engagement – the joy of the enthusiastic four-year-old chatting away to the 80-year-old grandfather, who points out the apples growing on the tree; together they wander and talk, explore and enjoy. The Muddy Church “congregation” is from a variety of different backgrounds – single parents, grieving families, lonely third agers, home schoolers, eco-warriors and mums with a giant pack of wipes and antibacterial gel. The opportunity to walk beside and share, to offer a God who accompanies us and walks with us in the garden, brings a freedom that has not been restricted by walls or what people will think.

I turned from talking to a friend to see the pink rain suit of my two-year-old following the older children up an almost sheer mudbank. The children found roots to help pull them up to a point where they could slide down the steep mud slope to the bottom; some struggled, shouted, others giggled. Images of my little one’s pigtailed rolling through that mud, smashing into stones and colliding with trees flashed before me, then I saw her face – unafraid and accomplished. Delight filled her little frame that she was here, and in that she was learning risk and resilience – because life has challenges, joys and sorrows and here she saw people to follow to achieve for herself, to try, to struggle and to succeed. Muddy Church is about people discovering through that connection with one another something about themselves and of God, to come into a space in creation where they can journey with others in a place that all feel accepted and equal and leave transformed. C. S. Lewis said, “we need to be reminded more than instructed,”⁹ and Muddy Church offers time and space to remember again our place in the world, the joy of adventure and the delight in journeying – even through the mud.

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⁷ Eugene H. Peterson, *The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2002).

⁸ Diana Davis and Autumn Wall, *Across the Street and Around the World* (Birmingham, Alabama: New Hope Publishers, 2016).

⁹ C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (London: HarperCollins Publishers, 2001), 82.