

Worship in the Shelter of Creation

Creating an Outdoor Sacred Space for Liturgies, Prayer, and Contemplation



A resource from
The Bishop's Committee on Creation Care

Why Outdoor Sacred Space?

As the weather improves and we begin to emerge from restrictions on gathering imposed by the pandemic, we have an opportunity to consider the creation of outdoor sacred spaces where small, physically distanced groups can gather for liturgies and individuals can find solace in a prayerful, contemplative, natural environment.

This document is offered as a guide to finding the appropriate location on your church property or in a backyard for outdoor worship. It also contains suggestions for ways to enhance the selected area to best serve in its capacity as an outdoor sacred space. In this way we not only learn about who God is from creation, we also join with all of creation in praising God.



Choosing the Space

1. Avoid distractions

Is there a natural space that is away from parking, the street, and other visual or audible distractions? A quieter spot will be more accessible for those who are hearing impaired.

2. Consider the terrain

Level grass or natural paving stones underfoot facilitate accessibility.

3. Create a sense of shelter

Natural features like trees, shrubs, hedges, or even rock formations, a building wall, or wooden fences can help create a sense of enclosure to distinguish the space from its surroundings.

4. Create a threshold

Is there a way to create an approach or path from the church or home to a virtual “threshold” that will demarcate the selected sacred outdoor space from its broader surroundings?

5. Consider the view

Is there a clear and expansive view to the sky or some nearby or distant natural feature that is worth considering?

6. Discern where the shade will be

Does the location offer some shade during certain times of the day or is it in full sun? The sacred outdoor space's relationship to the sun during the day may have an effect on the time at which you gather to celebrate.

Setting up the Space

Once you have a location, the following will help you decide how to shape your space.

How will you center the space?

1. Where do you want the focus of your liturgy to be? Will attention be directed to one end of the space or towards the middle?
2. What form of seating arrangement will best facilitate community worship and/or individual prayer? Consider non-traditional seating arrangements, such as circular, which would lead to a more intimate and central focus for the liturgy. Or consider antiphonal style (facing one another on opposite sides), which would lead to the creation of a sacred axis that embraces the liturgical centers of altar and pulpit. Both arrangements allow us to be intimately present to each other and highlight the community of faith gathered around the eucharistic table or central focal point as a primary symbol of Christ's presence.



Photo by Michael Visser

Include the elements of creation

1. A water feature like a small fountain with running water, a pond, or even a vessel containing water reminds us of our baptismal covenant, acknowledges the purifying power of water as a primary symbol of new life in Christ, and allows us to reflect upon Christ as “living water”.
2. Stones or rocks placed intentionally as a focal point with fire and water or alone also remind us of the role that rocks play as witness to God's redemption throughout history.
3. A candle in a jar, hurricane lamp, fire-pit, or other safely managed flame reminds us of God's presence both in the fire in the wilderness and also in the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost.

Having some of these items present means that you will be surrounded with creation's elemental gifts to us: earth, fire, water, and air.

Engage your Senses

Remember that like the worship space within the church building, this outdoor sacred space provides a place to orient, ground, and center ourselves so we can be fully present to liturgies, prayer, and contemplation. Hopefully, the songs of birds, the fragrance of blossoms or foliage, gentle breezes and other ways of engaging all of our senses to highlight our experience of the natural world will be present while you are in the created sacred space.



Photo by Michael Visser

While not all the suggestions we have given may be appropriate for your space, keeping them in mind may help to identify, define, and enhance an appropriate location. Above all, let your heart and your faith lead the search, being attentive to what all of your senses are experiencing as you explore. Every church property or backyard will be different, and some may not provide a suitable outdoor space for larger gatherings to worship but may provide a quiet corner for personal prayer and/or contemplation.

For additional assistance and or answers to your questions, please contact the Bishop's Committee on Creation Care:

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