

Outdoor Church: Different Trees, Different Gifts

This session is best suited to early autumn, before all the leaves fall off the trees but when some seeds are about (conkers, sycamores, etc). The aim of the session is to learn more about the trees in your area, and link that with the metaphor of the "body of Christ", with all parts playing a role.

You will need:

- Tree Identification Chart (Appendix A) – print out enough copies for groups to share
- Some bags to collect leaves and seeds in
- (optional – journals and pencils)

1. Welcome Prayer / Worship

2. **Ask the group:** how many different types of tree do you think there are in this park? Do you know the names of any of them? Which is the biggest tree?

3. **Activity:** In small groups with adults in each, go and find as many of the trees on the sheet as you can. Collect leaves and any seeds (conkers, beech nuts, sycamore helicopters) in a bag. Gather back here in 10 minutes.

4. Comparing notes on trees

Optional – journals: Stick leaves into your journal and if you like, draw the seeds next to leaves.

Discuss: Which tree do you like best? Which was the biggest? Which tree had you never heard of or seen before?

Show / give out the Tree identification sheet (Appendix A, below) Hold up leaves/seeds – which tree this is from?

At this point, you could share a few fantastic facts about the trees in your park, or turn that into a quiz (which tree is thought to be over x00 years old / grows to xxx metres high, has the shallowest roots, etc?)

5. Which is the best tree? Diversity and sharing our gifts.

Ask: if there was only going to be one tree in the park, which one would you choose? Why?

What about the parts of the tree (roots, branches, trunk, leaves, nuts) which are most important? Could the tree manage without some of them? What would happen if you got rid of some parts?

(Optional: Read / dramatize the story below “Little Bird”... This reminds me of a story I heard from a little bird...*Read story.* This story was inspired by a passage in the Bible...)

Let’s get symbolic for a moment, and imagine that the church is a tree – and the people who belong to church are different parts of the tree. Some are the branches, others the bark, some the roots, others the leaves, some make up the trunk, others are the nuts/seeds...in other words, We all have different roles to play.

This reminds us of some passages in the Bible that uses the symbol of a body to represent the church.

Romans 12: 4-8 (NLT): “Just as our bodies have many parts and each part has a special function, so it is with Christ’s body. We are many parts of one body, and we all belong to each other. In his grace, God has given us different gifts for doing certain things well. So if God has given you the ability to prophesy, speak out with as much faith as God has given you. If your gift is serving others, serve them well. If you are a teacher, teach well. ⁸ If your gift is to encourage others, be encouraging. If it is giving, give generously. If God has given you leadership ability, take the responsibility seriously. And if you have a gift for showing kindness to others, do it gladly.

1 Corinthians 12: 4-6 (CEV): “There are different kinds of spiritual gifts, but they all come from the same Spirit. There are different ways to serve the same Lord, and we can each do different things. Yet the same God works in all of us and helps us in everything we do.”

Explain: The Bible talks about people having “gifts” – not a gift like a present that you keep for yourself, but something you are good at and that comes naturally, that you can use to bless other people. These can be quite practical skills like making things or organising people or speaking in front of people, or it might be more supernatural things like healing the sick or speaking in a heavenly language.

6. Reflect together

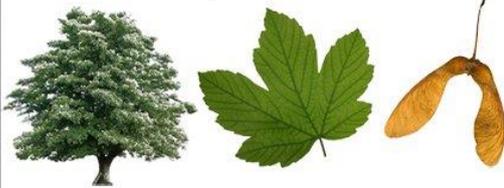
In small groups (ideally 3s) Share what gifts or passions God has given to you. Does the tree image or Bible verses stir anything? If you like, draw an image of a tree and label yourself as part of it, with your own gifts and roles.

Pray you would be able to use that to bless other people, in your family/church/workplace/school etc. **Pray** God would stretch you to operate fully in your giftings and help you to work together with the rest of the “tree”. **Praise** God for the variety of trees around us and the great diversity in the world, reflected in his church.

British Trees

SYCAMORE TREE

Acer pseudoplatanus



OAK TREE

Quercus



HORSE CHESTNUT TREE

Aesculus Hippocastanum



SWEET CHESTNUT TREE

Castanea Sativa



WALNUT TREE

Juglans Regia



SILVER BIRCH TREE

Betula Pendula



WYCH ELM TREE

Ulmus Glabra



HORNBEAM TREE

Carpinus betulus L.



BEECH TREE

Fagus Sylvatica



ASH TREE

Fraxinus Excelsior



Appendix B: Story – “Little Bird”

It was a cool autumn morning and sparrow was flying over the park. She was whistling a merry tune when the song was drowned out by a loud noise below. “I wonder what is going on?” As she flew lower, she could hear loud voices coming from the woods.

[indignant voice] “My nuts are definitely more popular with the squirrels! They got 5 stars in the Winter Dining Guide!”

[Arrogant sounding] “Your nuts may be Sweeter, but my acorns are the daily bread for birds AND furry creatures! Anyway, my leaves are the icon of the National Trust, so I must be the most important tree. Just saying!”

Oh, thought sparrow. The trees are discussing who is most important again. This happens every year! The oak and beech swayed their branches as they argued. Hawthorn bristled her spikes and joined the fray.

[sound bright and breezy] “My berries are the best looking, you must admit. And even if the ground freezes over, the birds can easily get my juicy little treats. I think the whole forest should just be made up of hawthorn trees!”

Sycamore let out a big groan. He was always a bit down on himself.

[sound like Eyore] “You’re ALL better than me. I’d give anything to have seeds that are round or shiny or nutty or juicy. My seeds are just thin and flat like paper! I wish I made seeds that fell to the ground with a big THUMP, instead of wafting around in the wind.”

Sparrow gently landed on Sycamore’s top branch and grabbed the chance to interrupt.

“Trees trees trees. You’re looking at this from the wrong point of view. Wouldn’t it be boring if the forest was only made of one type of tree? Not only boring, but bad for us animals! You give us all something different...shelter, food, super food, sticks and leaves for nests...And what about the people? They LOVE climbing your branches, collecting your conkers and pretending sycamore seeds are tiny helicopters.”

“Do you?” asked Sycamore *[say to the children]* “Really, do you like playing games with my seeds?”

But just as the trees seemed to be listening to some sense, another argument broke out. This time, the Horse Chestnut shouting at itself!

“We just don’t want to go. Why do we have to go? Every autumn, we change colour – yes, that’s lovely – but then we have to drop onto the floor. We’re fed up!”

[arrogant and posh sounding] **The trunk huffed.** “You silly little leaves. You’re always complaining. I honestly think we’d be better off without you. I’M the biggest bit of this tree, nice and tall and strong. Why don’t you just fall off and not bother coming back next time!”

The leaves rustled with indignation, but before they could reply a rumbling noise came from below.

“Trunky! Not so proud, my boy. We hold you in place, don’t you forget. You wouldn’t be so tall without **us roots!** Now, while we’re on the topic, please could we have a little peek...above ground? Just a little teeny weeny look?”

A big creaking sound followed as the roots tried to lift themselves up.

“Woah woah woah, stop!” **shouted the branches.** “No, no, no, stay where you are! The whole tree will topple over if you move! We’ll, err, we’ll drop some seeds down soon to keep you company down there.

And you, lovely leaves. Do we need to remind you that if you DON’T fall off, when those wild wintry winds blow, a gust will catch you leaves like washing on a line and our whole tree might be knocked over!”

“Also”, **squeaked the bark,** “We need you to fall off so we can save some energy over the winter. And talking of energy, Mr Trunk, don’t forget the leaves catch all the sunlight to feed our tree! We’d die without them!”

“Exactly” – the sparrow joined in again. “A tree needs every part of it to work. Every bit is different, but really important. You should stop trying to be something you’re not, and do your own job really well, without lording it over the others. Remember – you all need each other.”

The trees swayed as if to nod in agreement and the rustling leaves sounded like they were making a song. Sparrow nabbed a few red berries before flying off – her work was done.

This was a session from Park Church Luton (www.parkchurchluton.com)

See also www.engageworship.org for creative ideas for all-age worship.