

AN INTRODUCTION TO MESSY CHURCH

Where did it all start?

At St Wilfrid's, Cowplain - a medium-sized suburban Anglican church near Portsmouth, under the leadership of Paul and Lucy Moore. They had a sense that there were local people - particularly parents - who were positively disposed towards their church and the idea of church more generally, but didn't or didn't want to come along on a Sunday. They first ran Messy Church in 2004.

What does 'Messy Church' look like?

Eventually, the Moores distilled a pattern: monthly sessions, on a weeknight just after the end of school, lasting for two hours. The two hours would consist of a short period of welcome; an hour to enjoy a variety of different creative activities related to a Bible story or theme; a short (perhaps 20 minutes) 'celebration' on the same story or theme, designed to be maximally interactive and usually involving singing, demonstrations, drama and discussion; and a sit-down shared meal - usually a warm home-cooked-style supper and small pudding.

Five underlying values

Being all-age; being Christ-centred; creativity; hospitality; celebration

A lot of the creativity and hospitality is related to *reimagining church* for the contemporary context: what is essential about church, and what can be creatively reconsidered and reimagined, for the sake of those who otherwise find church unfamiliar, alienating or unwelcoming.

Addressing some misconceptions

Messy Church is NOT just for kids (or, perhaps, it *shouldn't be* just for kids, even if it often ends up being primarily oriented to them!) The vision could not be clearer: Messy Church is all about being all-age, and intergenerational. All of the activities should ultimately have all ages in mind, recognising that every age can learn from every other, and that people can learn and be disciplined very meaningfully through activities other than sermons and adults' Bible-studies. The Messy Church team realise this is a challenge: but they think it's a challenge worth pursuing!

Messy Church IS CHURCH and not just an outreach activity. Again, the reality might be more complex, but the vision is that Messy Churches will be churches in their own right, and will be treated at the very least as congregations of equal importance and theological validity as any that meet on a Sunday.

What about the impact?

The latest figures are from around 2012. At the time, some 4,000 Messy Churches had opened (and only 7 had closed!) and had some 360,000 people attached to them (most were in the UK: some were elsewhere in Europe, with some further afield in the USA/Canada and Australia/New Zealand). Of that 360,000, maybe 38% represent *genuine outreach* beyond existing churchgoers.

What about other ways of measuring impact? Evidence suggests Messy Churches are making disciples (even if that process is very varied, and often very slow); it's also challenging the wider church, without breaking away from it.

*If you want to learn more about Messy Church, the best places to start are with the website (<https://www.messychurch.org.uk/>) or with one of their two more introductory books: *Messy Church: Fresh Ideas for Building a Christ-Centred Community* (Lucy Moore, BRF: 2011); and *Starting Your Messy Church: A Beginners' Guide for Churches* (Lucy Moore and Jane Leadbetter: 2012). If you do want to contact me about my research, then the easiest way is to email jennifer.dziegiel@durham.ac.uk*

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STRENGTHS	WEAKNESSES
<p style="text-align: center;">It's working</p> <p>We mustn't exaggerate or get over-excited, but it does seem that however you measure success, Messy Church is working and growing at least modestly, and probably effectively.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">It's gently prophetic</p> <p>Messy Church is designed to pose a challenge to some church habits, traditions and practices where these aren't working at their most effective, or need to be reconsidered. But it doesn't do this by breaking away from the church, but by offering a different perspective from within. It's a new part of the 'mixed-economy' of church, but it is content to be one part among many.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">It's adaptable</p> <p>The Messy Church books and website consistently point out that while there are good reasons for the structures suggested, Messy Church is ultimately about adapting to local needs, and providing a church that's accessible and convenient to those who otherwise wouldn't attend. It can also be adapted to different churches, incorporating distinctive traditions and practices in imaginative ways.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">It's mission-led</p> <p>Messy Church has mission - in all its dimensions and complexity - right at its heart. It's a matter of finding things that work without sacrificing distinctive Christian identity or theological depth.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">It's well-resourced</p> <p>Messy Church and BRF have a wide range of literature, suggestions, case-studies, periodicals, networks, groups and events, all designed to support Messy Churches. No Messy Church would ever be encouraged to try and go-it-alone. The books are eminently accessible without sacrificing theological and practical depth.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">It's resource- and effort- intensive</p> <p>The Messy Church leaders don't beat around the bush on this front - pulling Messy Church together, even once a month, requires time, money, effort, people, resources and energy. Churches often find these are in short supply as it is, and finding extra reserves to add another congregation, and to serve and resource it as well as possible, poses real difficulties.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Theory vs practice</p> <p>Even if you agree that Messy Church is great in theory (and by no means everyone does!) then there is nevertheless an (important) argument to be had about whether or not it's as great in practice. Already there's evidence of variation in practice, beyond a warranted degree of contextually-appropriate adaptation: in particular, Messy Church is often run as an outreach activity, rather than 'as church'; and often it is aimed very squarely at children.</p> <p>This links with the fact that it's hard-work and resource-intensive: if energy and provisions aren't to be found, can Messy Church live up to its vision?</p> <p style="text-align: center;">The long term?</p> <p>Does Messy Church work in the long-term? The authors are clear that it's not about creating a feeder for Sunday services. But what happens when disciples are made, and they need more depth than a two-hour all-age session once a month can provide? The authors acknowledge that, while ideas and suggestions are out there, they haven't worked out the long-term implications of Messy Church yet - and the burden may fall to individual churches to work it out through trial-and-error.</p>