



# Being a church for people of all ages

## The messy model



### Lucy Moore

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I'm the wrong person to ask to write an article about Messy Church. I'm far too excited about the unexpected ways God's working through it. So unless I'm very careful, my writing soon turns into the equivalent of Psalm 150 and becomes a rather wearing series of non-stop, 'Praise him on the exclamation mark!' utterances. It's hard to be sober and reasoned, when every day your inbox has evidence of another tiny step or mighty leap made by an individual, family, church or denomination towards Christ. We know what a brilliant job our network of leaders and volunteers does to keep Messy Church growing and going from strength to strength in all the corners of the world. So a big 'thank you' from all of us at Sherwood Anglican. This warmth, support and solidarity around the world is the most vivid experience of global cross-denominational partnership in the gospel and expression of Christianity as a worldwide faith that I've encountered so far. And who could fail to chortle with glee at the reply last week to an email asking how the first ever Messy Church on Mauritius went:

'We had an amazing time! What struck me to the core was the commitment and enthusiasm of the team, their faith in Jesus and what he can do through Messy Church. God's presence was so evident. We realised that the battle wasn't going to be that easy to reach the families we so desperately wanted to reach. But at the same time when I looked out at the beautiful faces that God sent I knew he was doing something in me, he was breaking every expectation I had and reaffirming that his hands were going to

build Messy Church not ours. We are all feeling exhausted but so humbled to serve such an awesome God. He has begun a work in each of us through Messy Church and we are so excited to see where he will take us. I have a feeling we have no idea! How exciting.'

So what is it that makes this a model of church that so many churches of all traditions and denominations, in rural and urban settings, in multicultural communities or more monochrome ones, are finding helpful in their mission to families and others who have never set foot across the threshold of a church? How is it connecting with families?

### A church for all ages

Perhaps the unique selling point of Messy Church is not its predilection for sequins or its handiness with a power drill, but its wholehearted commitment to being a church for people of all ages. Not children, with adults along as babysitters, but for all ages to enjoy together. 'Not church for children, but church for ... church,' as the Archbishop of Canterbury recently described it. You may argue that this is not unique: churches have been doing family services or all-age worship for years. But have they? Really? Have they taken Jesus' words seriously and put a child in the midst as a model of discipleship to adults? Or have they expected children to 'behave' in a service and community designed around the wants of adults? I have found that there are remarkably few examples of regular church worship which actively

encourage all the age groups to stay together, learn together, worship together, serve, weep, laugh and love together: in other words, to be transformed and grow as disciples together.

The yearning for something like Messy Church began from the growing conviction that my colleague Martyn Payne and I had, more than 12 years ago, that if we are serious about the spiritual nurture of children, we need to provide a worshipping community where they stay together with people of all ages and learn with them on all sorts of levels: formally, 'apprentice-style' and socially, just as a family instils its values into its members simply by behaving in a certain way together. The Sticky Faith research from the Fuller Institute in the USA; the *We are Family* report from the Methodist Church in the UK, and even more recently the Church of England report *Rooted in the Church* indicate that a faith that lasts into adult life is best built on a foundation of a community of all ages together. One of the core values of Messy Church is that of being 'all age'. Nobody claims it's easy to do. We accept it's costly financially and in terms of time, energy and imagination. But when we throw in our meagre loaves and fishes, God rewards us with a generosity beyond anything we'd hoped for, as our eyes are opened to new understanding about what discipleship means and how more effective learning can happen.

## Hospitality

Another selling point of Messy Church, though hardly a unique one, is another of its core values: that of hospitality. Through Messy Church, churches have rediscovered the value of sitting down around tables as a community and simply eating together. The meal is the main (but by no means the only) expression of hospitality, echoing in some small way God's overflowing provision, and Christ and his Church's joyful acceptance of every person into the family as equals. In some ways it is a foreshadowing of the banquet in the Kingdom – and all through jacket potatoes and baked beans. A meal symbolises welcome, acceptance and equality, not spoken overtly in words, but communicated at a deeply significant level: God loves and values you this much. His Church loves and values you this much. You matter. The youngest child and the oldest great-grandparent can understand this difficult gospel truth simply through the Messy mealtime.

## Creativity

Churches also connect with the child within each person, whatever their age, through the core Messy value of creativity. I've just skyped a group of Messy Church leaders in Melbourne West, Australia, where one Baptist minister described how encouraging it is for him as a minister to rediscover how important creativity is. Another leader spoke of the joy of being able to play. (As

they were, for inexplicable reasons, all wearing fake koala ears, they were obviously practising what they preached.) The hour of structured yet free activities that makes up a large part of Messy Church gives everyone a chance to explore the Bible in ways that suit their own learning style and spiritual stage or preference. The creative Spirit

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of God who turned nothing into something at the start of creation, whose power brought Jesus from death to life, and who continues to transform thoughts, attitudes, hearts, actions and lives, appears not just in guitar-led worship songs or cathedral anthems, but through the astonishing things that human beings are inspired to create from toilet rolls and cereal boxes.

God is also audible through the questions and conversations for which those activities make space. The real skill of a Messy Church team member is not how adept they may be with a glue gun but how attuned they are to notice and celebrate the question or comment that shows God with his sleeves rolled up, changing someone's life. One of my own team members emailed after a Messy Church session on 'Salt and Light'. Her activity was to play Kim's Game with different items to do with light:

'The grandfather in the group was racing along remembering more items than anyone else in his family, and more quickly than anyone else who came to the table had done. I complimented the man on his amazing memory. He then told me that although he could remember everything on the table, at that moment, he could remember nothing of important events in his past. He could not remember having got married. Apparently, the man had contracted meningitis, without the medical profession realising what he had. The grandfather had been very seriously ill, and had gone through a very difficult time not knowing who close people around him were, and what was happening. The whole family are obviously very close, and have come through this huge event in their lives together. When I asked the question on the card of how each member of the family would describe themselves, the man looked at his wife and said, "My wife is the light of my life." And then the wife looked at her grandson and said, "And when he was born, I said that he is my sunshine" ... One young woman, who was quite quiet said she saw herself as theatre spotlights. And a seven-year-

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*Sticky Faith*, <http://fulleryouthinstitute.org/stickyfaith>

*We are Family*, [www.cgmcontheweb.com/?page\\_id=543](http://www.cgmcontheweb.com/?page_id=543)

*Rooted in the Church*, [www.churchofengland.org/media/3775547/rooted-in-the-church-summary-report-nov-2016.pdf](http://www.churchofengland.org/media/3775547/rooted-in-the-church-summary-report-nov-2016.pdf)

old didn't decide on any particular kind of light, but her eyes lit up and she beamed when she heard all the different sorts of lights she could be.'

How would these conversations and insights happen in 'normal' church? What an amazing leap of understanding at a gut level for the people of different ages involved in this activity, not least the leader herself, who was led to reflect theologically on her own prosopagnosia through it. Creativity, especially within a loving Christian community

## Messy Churches around the world are faithfully being the family of God

of all ages, brings a freedom to learn gospel truths at a very profound level of our being, often surrounded by friendship, wonder, awe, colour, the stuff of the earth and a bubbling up of joyful laughter.

### Celebration

Joy is echoed in a fourth Messy value – 'celebration'. If we are serious about the spiritual nurture of people of all ages, including children, we have to get serious about joy. Often churches confuse joy with triviality and superficial entertainment or fun and assume that spiritual maturity equals introversion, solemnity, quietness, stillness and restraint. All these things can be good: self-control is a fruit of the Spirit after all. But maybe some cultures like that of the UK have lost their God-given sense of joy, that wholeness and well-being that springs up from the Spirit deep in our very being and often expresses itself as a bubble of laughter or sudden spontaneous snort of delight. How often do we snort in worship?

Children are great at leading the way and showing adults what it means to be wholeheartedly joyful. Joy might come from the satisfaction of achievement, like the shy pleasure on the faces as adults and children completed simple scraperboard patterns to explore the theme of dark and light. It might be triggered by wonder at the natural world, like the astonished glee of seeing a science activity produce a particular chemical reaction. Joy might also come from a moment of shared human contact, like the baby who opens his arms to you and comes to you for a cuddle. A gospel of celebration of who God is, what he's done for us, of our identity as his people, of the cosmic significance of our own lives in the light of his love for us; a gospel of marking or celebrating the things that matter in our lives and in our world, both the joyful events and the tragic ones, as our God is a God who cares about everything we're going through: this is a gospel worth sharing with the families around us. This is the attractive

gospel which broken people in a broken world are welcoming with open arms.

### Christ-centred

The fifth and final core value of Messy Church is the one from which all the others spring but is so obvious that it was the last one to be included when we were working them out: the value of being Christ-centred. A Messy Church exists to help families and others encounter Christ and move closer to him. At the heart of a Messy Church is Jesus' love for children and other people on the edges of society, the people whose lives are perhaps a bit of a mess, whose relationships are dodgy to say the least, who have been damaged by the world around them, who have a journey to make and a longing for something more, either for themselves or for their children.

All these categories of people include families who are coming through the doors for the first time and team members who have been following Christ for decades: even the holiest, saintliest church-going Christian is, compared with the holiness of God, in a mess. We are a messy people with messy lives, and the joy of Messy Church is the invitation to everyone to come as we are to Jesus and join him in his saving work for the world, sorting out our messes in the process. This gospel of unconditional love and for life in all its fullness and for God's Kingdom to come on earth as in heaven is a gospel for young and old alike. Jesus offers a loving acceptance of each person just as they are. He offers healing for the past, a purpose for the present and a hope for the future. He offers freedom and boundaries. He offers all we need to become the people we are meant to be. Giving people space to explore God's word in a variety of imaginative ways, alone, in small groups and as a gathered community, to celebrate him and encounter him in worship, to give to and receive from his people and to be encouraged to take his light out into the community, the home, the workplace: this is church at its messy best.

### A growing church

Just as a healthy family patiently grows its members in love over a lifetime of giving and receiving, so Messy Churches around the world are faithfully being the family of God for those whom God is calling to himself. Just as a family shapes its members at their deepest level, so are Messy Churches gently moulding people into Kingdom shapes. Just as much of what matters most in a family is rarely articulated in words, so the non-verbal messages in Messy Church underpin the conversations and experiences that draw people closer to Christ. With over 3,500 registered Messy Churches across 30 countries and new registrations coming in at a rate of two a day, few can doubt God is doing something beautiful in our time.

Am I allowed an exclamation mark now?!