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*Ideas for discipling a Christ-centred community*



**Messy**  
**CHURCH**  
**2**

**Lucy Moore**

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# Introduction

It's rather fun to be writing this second *Messy Church* book. When I wrote the first one, Messy Church was something very small and precious, personal and precarious, and we had no idea what would happen. But what an exciting journey it's been over the last few years: meeting many of you through *Barnabas* training days, at Messy Fiesta events, and online via email and [www.messychurch.org.uk](http://www.messychurch.org.uk). With this book I feel as if I'm writing to a group of friends. And right at the outset I want to say a huge 'thank you' to you all for your generosity, warmth, willingness to share and graciousness in bearing with us the many times we go wrong or set off down a wrong track. I'm quite sure we'll be making mistakes all the time we're running Messy Churches, and it's kind of you to stick with us as we work out together how best to build this project up and help more and more people to enjoy loving Jesus together.

Throughout the book, I've tried to avoid using the word 'family' because of the misconceptions that the word can sometimes evoke. Too often, it can be understood exclusively as the nuclear unit of mum, dad and children, even if we all know that family can mean all sorts of combinations of people who depend on each other—grandparents and grandchildren, single-parent families, carers and children to mention only a few. But at the same time, one of the strengths and glories of the Messy Church identity is that it is a church for the whole family, household or whatever you want to call it, rather than being a place that encourages individualism, separatism and homogeneity. It is a place where all ages are valued and where everyone gains from being in contact with people of other ages. In this book, I've replaced 'family' with 'people', although the word doesn't have quite the same significance. So please read every mention of 'people' as a weighted term that understands 'family' in its broadest and best sense.

First of all (and just in case your copy of *Messy Church* was whisked away by keen crafty people before you had time to read it), let's recap on the Messy Church model outlined in the first book. Messy Church in its original form is a Fresh Expression of church that began in an Anglican church in Portsmouth as a way of being church for people who don't do traditional church, for whatever reason. It is church for all ages: adults are welcome with a child in tow, or vice versa. It meets after school once a month on a Thursday and goes as follows:

3.30–4.00	arrivals, drinks, board games, chat
4.00–5.00	crafts
5.00–5.15	celebration in church
5.15–5.45	hot meal

Since Messy Church began in 2004, the *Fresh Expressions* DVD and the previous book have meant that lots of churches have picked up on the idea and been able to adapt it for their own situation, both in the UK and overseas (at the time of writing, Canada, New Zealand and Australia), which we still find ridiculously exciting.

Of course, where it's been springing up in other parishes and different contexts, it happens on different days of the week and sometimes with different names. In Christchurch, New Zealand, they call it Families@4, for example. And from Gisburn, the Reverend Eric Kyte wrote, 'One lesson they learnt thanks to my father-in-law was to change the title. He saw "Messy Church 4–6pm" and said, "Church? Two hours? I can't think you'll get many takers!' He was right: we changed the name to Whatever Club, while still being upfront about what it was, and, lo and behold, a good crowd turned out!'

## WHY A SECOND BOOK?

So what's the purpose of a second book? Partly to provide another set of themed sessions (you've probably read that part of the book first!) to save planning groups time and to make the best use of existing ideas. Many thanks to the creative imagination of our planning team for the ideas here. But the purpose of this book is mostly to encourage us all to be dissatisfied and to want more for the adults and children we're working with. It's fantastic that your Messy Church is welcoming people who wouldn't otherwise light up the doors of a church, and you are doing a great job of affirming their identity as loved children of God, of creatively exploring God's word together, of helping them feel comfortable with putting worship into words and of deepening fellowship by eating together. Good! Brilliant! In fact—essential! But as we all go on with Messy Church, it becomes increasingly clear that we need to carry on gently opening up appropriate ways for people to go further and deeper with God. In other words, how can we help them grow as disciples?

To do this, we need to look to the wisdom and resources of the Church through history but we also need to look imaginatively at the particular context we are in today and to have the vision and courage to develop new forms of discipleship that are suited to the context of the people who come to Messy Church. So in this book, we'll be looking at the 'what next?' question, starting the debate on what might be appropriate forms of discipleship for adults and children to walk in together, and how we might enable them to do so through the relationships and structures that we've built up in Messy Church.

The growth of Messy Churches means that there's a corresponding need to meet and share ideas with other leaders and helpers so that we can continue to let the concept grow and develop. One way we've done this through *Barnabas* is by setting up [www.messychurch.org.uk](http://www.messychurch.org.uk), which is a sharing place for crafts, recipes, ideas and problems. Another way is by holding Messy Fiestas across the country. These are days of sharing, learning from each other and celebrating all that God is doing. And, of course, there's this, the second book, which ponders

on the question ‘What next?’ It’s a very exciting time to be in the Church, with the Spirit of God blasting fresh air in from all directions, and things are changing even as I write this introduction, never mind by the time the book’s in your hands.

## SO... WHAT NEXT?

One of the things we’re all learning in Fresh Expressions is the need to go one step at a time. God’s kingdom wasn’t built in a day and if you don’t build on a solid foundation the whole thing—even with the best intentions in the world—will wobble, waste time and money and be generally dispiriting. So when you are starting out with Messy Church, it’s absolutely right to begin by throwing everything you have into making the once-a-month meeting time the most engaging it can be, without worrying about ‘What next?’ Three times so far on our own ‘messy’ journey, God has spoken to me (twice through other people and once through Psalm 23 at a friend’s induction service, of all places) to say, basically, ‘Don’t *worry*. Just keep on doing what you’re doing. You’re doing a great job.’ And I believe now that those words are for all of us. You’ll know when it’s time to develop things further.

The Fresh Expressions team has described a typical process that many new churches find they are replicating. You can see it in brighter colours on the Fresh Expressions website. It goes like this. When people are searching for a way to start reaching out to those in a particular context, the pattern is often:

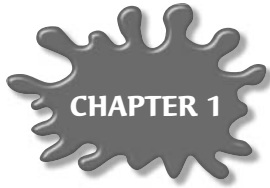
Listening and following God’s call → loving service →  
forming community → disciple-making → evolving worship

All this is surrounded by prayer and support, and ‘connection’ underpins the whole process.

I would suggest that people who are setting up Messy Churches and running them as described in the first book are doing a grand job in the first three stages: Listening and following God's call – loving service – forming community. You are doing fantastic outreach and it is a crucial first step in itself: we need to build up trust and relationships before we can go further. But some way down the line, do we stay content with the once-a-month contact? What we want to do, when the time is right and God is prodding, is to provide the opportunity for people to go deeper with God and to show them that there is a path of discipleship within or beyond Messy Church that they may want to explore with us.

Things move very slowly for us, as those of you who read the blog on the Messy Church website will know. I blame it on our lack of a paid administrator or family worker, but I suspect, in the dark reaches of the night, that it is my lack of organization. It might also be that we are a little bit like the goose at the front of the migrating V, or the person picking their way through the swamp to show the others a path: perhaps all pioneers feel the same way. It might take lots of wrong turns to arrive at what looks, in hindsight, like the obvious way forward. We're also operating in real life, not some idealized ecclesiastical dream world, and have to fit Messy Church in with being the taxi service for teenagers, holding down jobs and tending to senior members of the family—as, indeed, I'm sure you do too. All very Paul the tentmaker-esque.

But the long and the short of it is, we haven't got a 'Eureka! Sorted!' solution to the question of discipleship that we've tried and tested. As I write, we are setting out on a tentative foray into discipleship, but it could go pear-shaped. We do spend a lot of time reflecting on the opportunities and bounce the reflections off wise people. And it's these reflections that we want to share now, in the hope that, as you go forward with your Messy Churches, you'll be encouraged to go deeper in discipleship and to share your different ideas with everyone else.



# Messy discipleship: possible ways forward

What I'd like to do is suggest a possible framework for the way forward. I'm not going to recommend a 'one size fits all' solution to encouraging discipleship, because we all need to get excited about what is right for our own situation. (While I'm delighted that so many churches have found the Messy Church model useful, I am a little disappointed not to hear of any nascent gardening/sports/chocolate churches, which would mean that people had really personalized and localized the concept. However, not only is there plenty of evidence that people are adapting the Messy Church model to suit their own situations, but other Fresh Expressions of church are popping up all over, which is a cause of much rejoicing.

So I will suggest big-picture ideas to think about in your planning teams, keeping the very specific Messy Church situation firmly in mind, and I hope that between us, with the networks of Messy Fiestas, the website and local friendships between Messy Churches, we will come up with many imaginative and creative ways of helping to transform people's lives over the coming years. I hope as well, perhaps arrogantly, that as our church in England—Methodist, URC, Anglican and other denominations—explores how to be church for our changing culture, looking back to valuable traditions and forward to making a church for very different societies, our joint discoveries through Messy Church might perhaps help other churches work out how best to help adults and children to walk with Jesus together in the future.

## THE BIG PICTURE

Let's take a look at the big picture of what we're doing long-term in Messy Church. For example:

- ❖ What are we aiming for?
- ❖ How will we recognize 'success' when it happens?
- ❖ How might we go about making disciples?
- ❖ What about the team itself?

### What are we aiming for?

As we look across the babbling hubbub of colour and action in our Messy Church, do we ever think about what we would like to be seeing in five years' time? Are we dreaming dreams? Do we dream of adults and children plodding in through the doors and through the 'messy' process like sardines in a canning factory? Is that as good as it gets? Oh dear! Have we become fishers of people for our own dastardly sardines-on-toast purposes? (Or to make our church look good/be seen to care for those on the fringe/increase numbers and so on?) I don't think so.

Wouldn't we love instead to see families—adults and children, and individuals—changed, transformed and healed, with doors opened to them that they'd never imagined? Life in all its fullness, as bright as the rainbow of paints in a paintbox, in front of them, and a vivid and articulated friendship with Jesus shining out of them. People who have gained the confidence to take hold of the paintbrush and make a mark. People who are like playdough in the skilled sculptor's hands and recognize his gentle creativity everywhere they go. People with a sense of contentedness and satisfaction from being fed on food that lasts, and yet who are hungry for more. People who want other people to taste and see and make and stick and praise and live because it's so good. People who are in it for the long haul, even when the going gets tough. People with a growing and active compassion for others in

playgrounds, workplaces, homes and nations who don't yet have that sense of safety, belonging and purpose. People whose love bubbles out of a Messy Church and into the rest of their lives. People who can change the world.

### **Reflect on your Messy Church**

Imagine Jesus walking in among the people there. What parts of Messy Church would make him laugh? Who would he spend most time with? Who would he reach out to heal? Who would he confront? How would different people react to him?

### **How will we recognize 'success' when it happens?**

Alarm bells clang at the word 'success' in this context. It feels so Pharisaic and seems just on the brink of the numbers game that we so often play in churches: 'It's big so it must be good! ... Numbers are low: it's obviously not working.' Many Messy Churches have huge numbers of people through the doors from the word go. Indeed, in Morden, the first session they ran brought in 120 people and the 'full up' sign had to go outside! (I wouldn't have liked to be on the cooks' team that day.) But it's very dangerous to claim that this is a mark of success in itself. Having all those people is a great opportunity, certainly, and a successful first step, but the way God's kingdom measures success is more about maturity than numbers. And we are in this for the long haul, not for a short sharp shock, so success is better seen as making the most of each step of the journey, rather than ever feeling that we have arrived.

Maturity, then, not numbers, is an aim in the long term. A shorthand definition of maturity within Christianity might be that the more mature you are, the more you love. But that would be too easy to trot out tritely and sentimentally. Here's what George Lings writes

about maturity of whole churches in an essay on ‘Fresh Expressions growing to maturity’:

*Being church seems to be the result of what happens when people encounter Jesus in such a way that it transforms them to become more like him and so also transforms their relationships with one another. In one sense maturity is the process of growing up into Christ, becoming in practice what by change of status we already are. It is a long, undulating process with spiritual, moral and social dimensions. Maturity is connected to integrity and authenticity, for mature behaviour and reactions have a health, balance and cohesion that are attractive. It is also linked to awareness of self-identity and self-knowledge. So churches that demonstrate maturity will also have a good idea of what church is, what it is for and what it is like when healthy.*

We do want our Messy Churches to mature and to develop in every dimension, in the way also described in the same essay:

- ❖ A dimension called UP: seeking God, to become more like him in his holiness.
- ❖ A dimension called IN: growing a community that reflects the diverse oneness of the Trinity.
- ❖ A dimension called OUT: that embodies the apostolic community living out being sent.
- ❖ A dimension called OF: knowing each expression belongs as part of the catholic wider whole.<sup>1</sup>

For this to be real from the grass roots up, we want the people who belong to Messy Church to become individually mature. Here’s George Lings again: ‘Following Christ is the walk, growing like Christ is the aim.’<sup>2</sup>

For our very varied congregations, some of the following way markers might be useful guides as we try to spot people walking forward in their discipleship. These are not rules or regulations, just the sort of things that might indicate God’s working—like leaf buds on a tree in springtime.

### **How are people reacting to Jesus?**

Are people changing in the way they react when you talk about Jesus? Are they starting to talk about him themselves? Are you seeing a difference in the way people engage with worship/story/prayer during the whole Messy Church session? Can you sense a deeper engagement, a curiosity, a looking forward to this aspect of what you do? For example, are people offering to lead part of the event or offering to be more deeply involved? Are people enthused to puzzle over the Bible and question it? Has anyone shown an interest in studying the Bible?

### **How are people reacting to other people?**

Are you seeing a deepening concern for and understanding of what it means to be a neighbour; a growing concern for local issues and global ones? Are there times when you've spotted peacemakers at work? Is there a growing respect for other people, a concern for personal relationships, friendships, family relationships; a willingness to build up, not break down? Is there an increased understanding of and trust in God's healing power?

### **How are people changing in their creativity?**

Do you sense more willingness to 'have a go' at the different creative activities you have on offer? Is there more readiness to risk or to play?

### **How are people changing in their attitude to the created world?**

Are they seeing more of its beauty? Are they more concerned for its well-being? Do they relate what they believe to the way they live their life on a fragile planet?

### **Reflect on your Messy Church**

What examples of any of the above have you spotted? Talk as a team. Write them down before you forget. If they're not confidential, do send them to the website community to encourage others ([www.messychurch.org.uk](http://www.messychurch.org.uk)).

## **How might we go about making disciples?**

For his dissertation *Making Disciples in Fresh Expressions*, Andrew Roberts listened to twelve leaders of different sorts of Fresh Expressions to find out what they do to make disciples in their different settings. He found that leaders believe their congregations need three main things to become disciples or to walk further on their discipleship journey. These three things need to be culturally relevant to help form mature whole-life disciples. They are:

- ❖ A sacramental environment
- ❖ Supportive relationships
- ❖ Intentional learning

In other words, we need to provide a safe, holy space where God is both there and 'other', present and transcendent; a community where people build each other up; and a way of learning together about things of faith.

The examples he uses are from churches that don't specialize in making an effort to include all ages, but the principles are equally fine ones to work from for Messy Church. We just need to think about how they work in an all-age way. All three elements are potentially part of Messy Church to some extent, and it's good to reinforce the usefulness of what we're doing when we meet together.

For example, we provide a safe space, where there is encouragement

to take risks and be creative, where we can worship in different ways and meet God in other people, in his word and in his gracious provision of food. (We will look at the importance of food at greater length later on, and think about the whole question of sacraments.) We provide the opportunity for supportive, all-age, cross-generational relationships to flourish, encouraging older people to enjoy being with and learning from younger ones, and vice versa. We base our programmes on Bible stories and approach them with an attitude of learning in different ways, suitable for the culture we're dealing with.

It's a good start. However, we all know that there is always room for improvement, and we come up against the fact that we only meet once a month, so what can be done to encourage discipleship in the other 30 or so days of the month?

### **Reflect on your Messy Church**

Who are disciples among the people who come to Messy Church? How do you know? Who's still sitting in the waiting room, train-spotting? Who hasn't even noticed there's a journey to go on?

## **What next?**

So we have the start of something whole-life, which does a crucial and valuable job but doesn't yet go the whole way. We have set ourselves limits by holding Messy Church just once a month—and this is very deliberate! It's good to know your limits, and our team can only just cope with one a month; we couldn't offer Messy Church every week. A vicar from another church was talking recently about her congregation's plans to start up a Messy Church. She said, 'But our parents work, it would have to be at a weekend, and have we got enough leaders to run it every Sunday afternoon?' I said, 'Um, it would only be once a month, though, wouldn't it?' and suddenly the

thing became doable for them. However, what about the rest of the month? How are we helping our Messy Church people to feel they belong to a church family in those days? How are we encouraging them to walk the discipleship walk when they're not actually at Messy Church?

### Notes

- 1 George Lings, 'Fresh Expressions growing to maturity', in Steven Croft (ed.), *The Future of the Parish System: Shaping the Church of England in the 21st Century* (Church House Publishing, 2006), p. 138.
- 2 George Lings, 'Unravelling the DNA of church: How can we know that what is emerging is "church"?' in *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church*, Vol. 6, No.1, March 2006.