



DISCIPLESHIP DEFINITIONS

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On one level, most of us instinctively sense what discipleship is about. The Gospel accounts of Jesus' teaching and his relationship with his disciples suggest Christian discipleship is something about life commitment¹ and how we live, not only how much we know. We are also helped that the word 'disciple' is a familiar word used in many secular walks of life to describe someone who is following or learning from a teacher, leader or philosopher. Yet, as one begins to look for the most appropriate way to measure discipleship, it becomes apparent that there is considerable variety of opinion when attempting to settle on a precise definition.

If some have observed that discipleship has been an under-emphasised dynamic in church life in recent years², it is now rapidly gaining momentum as a priority in measuring effectiveness in ministry and mission. The growing repertoire of books, models, church reports and online material brings a welcome challenging of assumptions and rich exploration between theory and practice. However, the variety of ways discipleship is understood by modern writers and theologians across denominations and church traditions means that engaging in research is an extremely complex task.

The task in stage 1 of this project was to map out as many contours of the discussions around discipleship definitions as possible, exploring the interpretations and models already in the public domain with a view to settling on a definition moving forward in the research. Our initial investigations pointed to several important dynamics to hold in tension.

HEAD KNOWLEDGE ----- HEART RESPONSE

The Engels scale is well-known as a classic measuring tool for individual spiritual growth. It is a helpful starting point although some say its simple, linear measurements are inadequate to chart the reality of life which is infinitely more meandering. Coming from an education standpoint, it is often critiqued for its assumption that discipleship is first and foremost something about acquiring knowledge. Some authors caution against an understanding of discipleship that is mere head-knowledge. Ellen Charry, a Jewish convert to the Presbyterian church in the U.S., wrote that the learning aspect of discipleship should not be detached from the transformation component. She maintained that it should be impossible to separate truth and goodness. If a supposed truth did not lead to virtue in those who held it, the way it was communicated was faulty, or it may not be true in the first place.³

Alison Morgan's 2015 book *Following Jesus: The Plural of Disciple is Church* argued that head and heart were intrinsically linked. She developed course materials to help churches go beyond the common default of studying Scripture in groups to resources focusing primarily on nurturing character. Similarly, Stephen Cherry's *Barefoot Disciple* (Archbishop Rowan's recommended

¹ Jesus calling the disciples: Matthew 16 vv. 24-25, Luke 14 vv. 25-27.

² Archbishops' Council, *Developing Discipleship* (GS 1977, 2015).

³ In *By the Renewing of your Minds* (Oxford University Press, USA, 1999), Charry expressed her deep conviction that 'God is not just good to us but for us' p. 238. Charry invented a word 'aretegenic' - from the Greek words for 'virtue' and 'to beget' - to describe being conducive to virtue.

Lenten devotional in 2011) emphasised that head knowledge was linked to heart response by way of humility. Cherry argued that there was no ‘*humility-free form of Christian discipleship*’ as exemplified by Jesus in Philippians chapter 2.⁴ The use of the word ‘barefoot’ referred to the practice of taking one’s shoes off to approach a holy site.⁵

Tim Keller, founder of the Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York, published *The Call to Discipleship*, a very short article introducing his understanding of Christian discipleship. Based on Luke chapter 9, Keller wrote that ‘*being a disciple of Jesus Christ means setting a new priority, finding a new identity and living a new mercy*’.⁶ Keller suggested an order in which these three ‘play out’: living out new radical mercy brings you into finding a new identity, which brings you into setting a new priority and therefore peace. Keller believed that the sign of true, growing, gospel disciples was their gentleness.

In 2013, George Lings acted as editor of the *Messy Church Theology* book, which brought together the reflections of a number of authors in various contexts observing the Messy Church phenomenon. One author, theologian John Drane, also connected head and heart imagery by posing the question: should discipleship always rest in the realm of the cerebral? Drane commented that, like Engels, Fowler’s stages of faith are a useful framework to chart faith development but concluded that the framework produces more questions than answers because of its emphasis on cognitive development and linear mapping. Drane wrote, ‘*discipleship is messy because life is messy*’⁷ and argued for more of a multi-dimensional framework to recognise discipleship in more holistic ways.⁸

This connected with Bob Jackson’s comment in another chapter of the same book that, in hindsight, the Sunday school movement proved less effective than hoped because it mistakenly assumed discipleship was about children acquiring knowledge. Methodologies such as Godly Play asserted that ministry among children was more effective when understood as helping a child learn the art of spiritual reflection; discipleship was not about filling their heads with facts about the Christian faith but helping them engage with key stories on a personal and emotional level.⁹

INNER TRANSFORMATION ----- OUTER TRANSFORMATION

From a research perspective, it is not difficult to see why head knowledge might have been emphasised over heart response in historical attempts to measure discipleship. It is easier to map people’s knowledge of the Christian faith or the beliefs they hold rather than measuring the extent to which individuals exhibit qualities such as goodness, gentleness or humility. What outward signs might or should be evident as an outworking of individual transformation through the process of discipleship?

In 2016, Simon Foster from the Saltley Trust produced *What Helps Disciples Grow?*, a report on research conducted across churches of various denominations and traditions in the West Midlands.

⁴ Cherry, *Barefoot Disciple* (Continuum, 2010), p. 6.

⁵ Although how one might best measure humility is an interesting question.

⁶ Keller, <http://gcdiscipleship.com/2012/05/09/the-call-to-discipleship/>, accessed on 22 November, 2018.

⁷ Drane in Lings (ed.), *Messy Church Theology* (BRF, 2013), p. 111.

⁸ Drane in Lings (ed.), *Messy Church Theology* (BRF, 2013), p. 121.

⁹ Berryman, *The Complete Guide to Godly Play: Volume 1* (Morehouse Education, 2002), p. 19.

The report interpreted the word disciple to mean being a follower, not just a learner, and went on to define the term disciple to ‘*indicate anyone who learns as they practice their faith, and whose practice is affected by their learning*’.¹⁰

Discipleship involving ‘following’ that might be discernible in outward transformation came up elsewhere. In the aforementioned *Barefoot Disciple*, Cherry advocated the adoption of ‘apprentice’ as a helpful synonym for disciple.¹¹ As an apprentice, discipleship means spending time with the master, in his workshop and on the road, although Cherry concluded that ‘*following is not so much about trotting along some distance behind Jesus as about emulating his way of travelling*’.¹²

Mike Breen also wrote about discipleship as apprenticeship.¹³ His book *Building a Discipling Culture* drew on his transatlantic experiences of leading Three-Dimensional Ministries (3DM) and The Order of Mission, having previously been rector of St Thomas Crookes in Sheffield. Breen recognised that effective learning occurs in a variety of contexts beyond a classroom environment. Inspired by apprenticeship models and immersive environments, Breen recommended ‘huddles’ (same gender groups of 12 members) as an effective vehicle for delivering discipleship which he described as offering a continual process of invitation and challenge to become more like Jesus.

Rowan Williams, in his 2016 book *Being Disciples*, defined discipleship as ‘*staying with and following Jesus*’. This involves being aware and attentive to what God is doing, by listening and looking with expectancy and choosing the company Jesus keeps.¹⁴ Williams’ anthology of talks examined various aspects of a life characterised by pursuing Jesus. Chapter 3 deals with the capacity to forgive and receive forgiveness and chapter 4 reflects on the idea that while holiness does mean being separate from the world, it also means being a person who is fully alive, bringing joy to others. Similarly, US pastor Jonathan Dodson, pastor of Austin City Life church in Texas, argued for outward transformation in his book *Gospel Centred Discipleship*; a ‘*disciple of Jesus is a person who so looks at Jesus that they actually begin to reflect his beauty in everyday life*’.¹⁵

In 2016, Methodist minister and member of the Fresh Expression team, Andrew Roberts identified his aims of discipleship as kingdom transformation (the transformation of the world) and transformed character (personal transformation). In *Holy Habits*, Roberts argued that these were together characterised and nurtured by ten holy habits in everyday life; biblical teaching, fellowship, breaking bread, prayer, giving, service, eating together, gladness and generosity, worship and making more disciples.¹⁶

In *Disciples & Citizens* Graham Cray explored the dynamic of service within discipleship. Drawing on Jesus’ ministry to the poor, sick and marginalised and exploring the example of St Paul and the church in Corinth, Cray argued that discipleship involves individuals taking more of an active role in public life. He described this engagement as addressing issues of social justice, recognising the importance of forgiveness and reconciliation and challenging sin, corruption and hypocrisy in public life.¹⁷ Hopkins in *Messy Church Theology*¹⁸ and Ireland and Booker in *Making New Disciples*

¹⁰ Foster, <http://www.saltleytrust.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/delightful-downloads/2016/04/What-Helps-Disciples-Grow.pdf>, accessed on 22 February, 2017.

¹¹ Cherry, *Barefoot Disciple* (Continuum, 2010), pp. 12-14.

¹² Cherry, *Barefoot Disciple* (Continuum, 2010), p. 10.

¹³ Breen, *Building a Discipling Culture* (3DM, 2014).

¹⁴ Williams, *Being Disciples* (SPCK, 2016), p. 15.

¹⁵ Dodson, *Gospel Centred Discipleship* (Crossway, 2012), p. 56.

¹⁶ Roberts, *Holy Habits* (Malcolm Down, 2016), pp. 93-112.

¹⁷ Cray, *Disciples & Citizens*, (IVP, 2007), pp. 188-189.

¹⁸ Hopkins in Lings (ed.), *Messy Church Theology* (BRF, 2013), p. 238.

echoed these sentiments in their advocacy of social action projects such as fundraising or supporting food banks as one indicator of individuals' engagement on a discipleship journey.¹⁹

David Watson in 1978 emphasised that discipleship must be radical *'or nothing at all... With this in mind, it is the greatest mistake to water down the cost of Christian discipleship or to present the church as a club where the degree of commitment depends entirely on personal choice or convenience.'*²⁰ Written in the context of evangelical and charismatic renewal in the Church of England, Watson raised the discipleship 'benchmark' for the average church-going Christian. He wrote as if participation in church, conversion to Christ and being filled with the Holy Spirit are not enough in themselves. Real discipleship is something more; in *Discipleship*²¹ he wrote: *'the vast majority of western Christians are church-members, pew-fillers, hymn-singers, sermon-tasters, Bible-readers, even born-again-believers or spirit-filled-charismatics but not true disciples of Jesus. If we were willing to learn the meaning of real discipleship ... the resultant impact on society would be staggering.'*

OWNED INDIVIDUALLY ----- OWNED IN RELATIONSHIP

The much-used headings of 'believing', 'belonging' and 'behaving' in church sermons to explore the dynamics of discipleship also surfaced in the literature. Sometimes 'blessing' was added too. The 'belonging' element widened discipleship definitions further in the importance placed on relationships with one another in following Jesus. For example, Breen's 'huddle' model requires small accountability groups of honesty and confidentiality where members can learn from one another in living out the Christian life. The expectation of, and openness to, challenge from other people in the group is the key.

The Saltley Trust's research identified only one pathway out of four as something done individually; the other three: group activity, public engagement and church worship all contained a communal dynamic. Dodson also wrote about the relational as well as the rational and missional: *'a disciple of Jesus then, is someone who learns the gospel [rational], relates in the gospel [relational] and communicates the gospel [missional]'*.²² Watson's vision of a radical counter-cultural discipleship in *I Believe in the Church* centred on some individual aspects but emphasised the call to a deep love for other Christians as the living out of discipleship. This was echoed by Moore in his unpacking of the way St John's Gospel expresses discipleship as love in action.²³

German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, writing in the late 1930s in an unsettled Germany prior to the outbreak of World War II, drew upon Jesus' Sermon on the Mount in his reflections and included his now well-known rejection of cheap grace and the call to a Christian 'to come and die'.²⁴ In *Life Together*, Bonhoeffer wrote in detail about how Christians should live with one another in intentional community. Individual meditation, prayer, intercession and solitude is to be balanced by shared times of worship, prayer, Bible study and sacraments. Believers are encouraged to help one another to pursue meekness, patience, listening, helpfulness and bear one

¹⁹ Ireland and Booker, *Making New Disciples* (SPCK, 2015), p. 127.

²⁰ Watson, *I Believe in the Church* (Hodder & Stoughton, 1978), pp. 59-60.

²¹ Watson, *Discipleship* (Hodder & Stoughton, 1981).

²² Dodson, *Gospel Centered Discipleship* (Crossway, 2012), pp. 37-38.

²³ Moore, *Making Disciples in Messy Church* (BRF, 2013), pp. 64-66.

²⁴ Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (SCM Press, 2015) new edition.

another's burdens and difficult aspects of character. Central to Bonhoeffer's exploration of discipleship was the notion that all members are indispensable links in a chain.²⁵

One might be tempted to place less significance on such an understanding of discipleship developed in the context of intentional community; sodality is not the normal mode of church for most Christians²⁶, let alone new believers. And yet, the contemporary resurgence of interest in monasticism suggests discipleship in the context of intentional community still resonates with different traditions and denominations, witnessed by the presence of groups such as the Community of St Anselm and post-denominational groups like the Iona Community and Northumbria Community.

Morgan's book title alone, *Following Jesus: The plural of discipleship is Church*, communicates her central tenet of understanding discipleship as something done with others rather than an individual pursuit. The book draws on examples from her experiences and observations of churches in Africa as well as her work with ReSource in the UK. Like other authors, Morgan identifies discipleship as something akin to apprenticeship but emphasises the importance of community in discipleship.²⁷ She argues that the language of 'disciples' is missing in the letters of the apostles because, although the concept of individual discipleship was evident, the emphasis had, by then, shifted to how followers were to reshape their lives as groups or communities.

Judy Paulsen, a professor at Wycliffe College in Toronto, engaged in a small-scale research project in 2012 in which she examined the impact of discipleship at a Canadian Messy Church. Paulsen used several measures of discipleship under the headings of changes in 'behaviour', 'belonging' and 'believing' to examine changes in Messy Church attenders.²⁸ Ireland and Booker, in *Making New Disciples*, also emphasise relationships in the context of discussing childhood faith and discipleship. A relational dynamic is inevitable; unlike the individual internal engagement possible by 'pew-sitting' adults, discipleship has to be more interactive for children to participate in similar processes.

American pastor Bill Hull summarises five key aspects of what a disciple should be in *The Complete Book of Discipleship* and notes that three of the five most commonly adopted by Christians are the least challenging because they can be done by a person on their own and therefore do not always lead to change.²⁹

FORMAL LEARNING ----- INFORMAL LEARNING

In his experience, the remaining two aspects - submitting to a teacher and taking the initiative to disciple others - are crucial because of the *relational* element involved. Working with others is considerably more demanding but absolutely vital for individual character transformation and to be effective in reaching others; it is a '*hideous trait within the body of Christ*' that Christians can avoid either of these relational aspects of discipleship and still be considered mature leaders.

²⁵ Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (SCM Press, 2005), p. 72.

²⁶ Winter, <http://frontiermissionfellowship.org/uploads/documents/two-structures.pdf>, accessed on 3 July, 2017.

²⁷ Morgan, *Following Jesus: The Plural of Disciple is Church*, (ReSource, 2015), pp. 44-52.

²⁸ Paulsen in Lings (ed.), *Messy Church Theology* (BRF, 2013), p. 82.

²⁹ Hull, *The Complete Book of Discipleship* (NavPress, 2006), pp. 68-69. These three less challenging aspects were: 1) studying the Bible, 2) becoming acquainted with Jesus' way of ministry, and 3) learning to imitate his life and character.

Discussions around individual versus relational dynamics also connected with debate in the literature about the most helpful learning environments or teaching methods for discipleship. If a disciple is helpfully understood as something akin to an apprentice, this is suggestive of active or practical learning in emulating Jesus' 'way of travelling', such as Breen's immersive environment rather than a classroom approach.³⁰

In a similar way to Ireland and Booker, Drane, in his chapter in *Messy Church Theology*, raises the issue of learning styles as something much wider than age and stage of life. Personality types, the spiritual practises of different Christian traditions and, to some degree, gender studies all suggest spiritual growth is far more than 'an exclusively cognitive affair' for many adults as well as for children. Drane argues that the interactive and playful moments in Jesus' ministry are important to note as essential elements of discipleship.³¹

Bob Hopkins' chapter in *Messy Church Theology* continues with this question of whether discipleship can only occur in the context of formal learning. Hopkins notes the wider church's tendency to equate discipleship with communicating information and the sermon as the church's chief vehicle for delivering this. As well formal and non-formal ways of learning, Hopkins draws attention to the extent to which effective learning also occurs through socialisation (through observation, not instruction).³² These comments are echoed in Ireland and Booker's discussion on the value of exploration and non-directive learning in *Making New Disciples*.

Drawing on the example of Jesus, Hopkins comments on the different learning experience of the crowds, the 12 and the 72 in the Gospels as they observed and lived Jesus' values as well as listened to his teaching. Unlike formal learning which builds from one level of knowledge to the next in any given subject area, non-formal learning is practical, much like apprenticeship. Both approaches are intentional, unlike socialisation which happens naturally and spontaneously in the social context of relationships. Hopkins sums up the consequences of each approach as 'formal learning brings understanding, socialisation forms values and non-formal [learning] brings skills.'³³

Berryman takes this a step further in his warning that when there is a mismatch between verbal and non-verbal communication, great harm can be done in an environment where a child is exploring faith and spirituality. When children sense a disconnect between what they are taught and what they *actually* experience, they conclude it is somehow their fault and/or they find the mismatch too painful and they withdraw from the process.³⁴ Something of this can occur for adults too.

KEY MOMENTS OF DECISION ----- LIFELONG JOURNEY

³⁰ Breen, *Building a Discipling Culture* (3DM, 2014), p. 10.

³¹ Drane in Lings (ed.), *Messy Church Theology* (BRF, 2013), p. 124.

³² Hopkins in Lings (ed.), *Messy Church Theology* (BRF, 2013), p. 234. The 'formal, non-formal and socialisation' framework originally came from Ted Ward, Professor of Education at Michigan State University.

³³ Hopkins in Lings (ed.), *Messy Church Theology* (BRF, 2013), p. 231.

³⁴ Berryman, *The Complete Guide to Godly Play: Volume 1* (Morehouse Education, 2002), p. 136.

The multiple references in the literature to the more helpful and appropriate definition of discipleship as ‘apprentice’ leads into one last set of dynamics to hold in tension. Engaging in the process of discipleship takes time. It is a lifelong journey.

Drane argues in *Messy Church Theology* that discipleship is more than just becoming a quiet and passive Christian (i.e. just attending services, giving to the church, trying to be nice to each other). Rather, discipleship is about following God in all the blessings and struggles of daily life, just as Jesus walked alongside two disciples on the Emmaus road.³⁵

That sense of discipleship as a lifelong journey also connected with writers who emphasise the need for leaders and volunteers running the Messy Church to see themselves on a discipleship journey also.³⁶ If leaders aren’t prepared to continue learning about their faith in between church gatherings, why should they expect attenders to? As Zahniser wrote: ‘No believer can ever stop growing; and none of us has “arrived”’.³⁷

Yet alongside the notion that discipleship is an ongoing, never-ending process, the literature occasionally refers to the need to publicly mark important points along the way. Hopkins points out subtle distinctions between attenders, participants, contributors and members, helpfully querying whether just because someone is ‘in the room’, they have automatically embarked on a journey of learning, even within a socialisation approach.³⁸ Some degree of ownership must take place on an individual level as well as a corporate level.

Furthermore, there is a need to intentionally create opportunities for individuals to make decisions, to consciously engage in and have ownership of this process. For example, in *Faith Generation*, Nick Shepherd argues that teenagers need to be given a chance to respond to invitations to follow Jesus; they need safe and supportive environments where tough questions can be debated, but also specific opportunities to make ‘choice’ decisions about faith within these groups.³⁹

Further considerations for defining discipleship in Messy Church

As already explored, the literature produced by the Bible Reading Fellowship had itself begun to explore how discipleship should be defined within the context of Messy Church. In the introduction to *Messy Church 2*, Lucy Moore outlines discipleship as an intention of Messy Church; if a Messy Church is to be seen as a church congregation in its own right, then a responsibility for discipleship is inevitable. At the same time, Moore recognises the need to handle the discipleship contextually, expecting leaders to develop their own approaches as appropriate in their local situations. This and subsequent BRF literature outlines several further dynamics particular to the Messy Church phenomenon that need due consideration in settling on discipleship definitions and models.

NON-CHURCHED BACKGROUNDS ----- CHURCHED BACKGROUNDS

³⁵ Drane in Lings (ed.), *Messy Church Theology* (BRF, 2013), pp. 111-126.

³⁶ Hamley in Paul (ed.), *Being Messy, Being Church* (BRF, 2017), pp. 37-49.

³⁷ Zahniser, *Symbol and Ceremony* (MARC, 1997), p. 19.

³⁸ Hopkins in Lings (ed.), *Messy Church Theology* (BRF, 2013), p. 234.

³⁹ Shepherd, *Faith Generation* (SPCK, 2016), pp. 56-78.

In the Church of England, *Mission-shaped Church* argued that fresh expressions of Church were needed in mission to people who find church ‘peripheral, obscure, confusing or irrelevant’.⁴⁰ A cross-cultural process was required to connect with people who might be described as non-churched because of little or no prior church-going experience and thus their unfamiliarity with the culture of church. Along the lines of a homogeneous unit principle approach, the report recommended making it as easy or convenient as possible for such people to begin to encounter Christians and church.⁴¹

The Day of Small Things research reported Messy Churches as the fresh expressions of Church type with the highest proportion of attenders with non-churched backgrounds. The literature noted this initial effectiveness masked a deeper discipleship challenge. In *Messy Church Theology*, Paul Moore argues that, with a greater number of attenders from non-churched backgrounds, walking with people on a discipleship journey will take longer.⁴² Zahniser echoes this thought in noting that disciplers often do not know what to do with believers completely new to the faith, and converts from different cultural backgrounds rarely know what they are getting into, so need lots of help.⁴³

From a cultural perspective, the literature did not yield much to suggest how discipleship might be explored with those who had not grown up around individual practices such as quiet times and tithing and therefore would consider them unfamiliar concepts. A common approach adopted in church life of laying on a discipleship course was not an obvious solution either. By 2016, *The Day of Small Things* research reported only 19.4% of the Messy Churches surveyed had tried or were trying discipleship courses.⁴⁴ Anecdotally, interviewers noted a common scenario of a discipleship course being arranged but little or no take-up from attenders. Ireland and Booker in *Making New Disciples* named problems of childcare as one practical limitation to an Alpha course being the obvious solution.⁴⁵

The ability of Messy Churches to attract families from de-churched and non-churched backgrounds to a fun, family-friendly gathering also means attenders may be at very different starting points. Are there stages or steps of engagement prior to discipleship appropriate for ‘not-yet Christians’, or even people who have yet to realise this form of church is not just a children’s craft club? Laurence Singlehurst’s *Sowing, Reaping, Keeping* in 1995 proposed that relatively large numbers might be involved in the early stages of a mission-initiative, but that these are ‘seed-sowing’ stages with discipleship occurring at a late stage with fewer people.⁴⁶ Ireland and Booker in *Making New Disciples* likened Messy Church to ‘removing stones from stony ground’, with the suggestion that it is largely working with individuals at a preparatory or very early stage of discipleship or evangelism.⁴⁷

Where evangelism ends and discipleship begins is not clear in the literature. David Watson in *I Believe in Evangelism* argues that discipleship is the over-arching term for all stages of engagement; evangelism is what we should call discipleship with non-Christians.⁴⁸ In *Gospel Centred Discipleship*, Jonathan Dodson wrote that discipleship should not be separated from evangelism; sharing the gospel is something to be done with both non-Christians and existing Christians - making and maturing.⁴⁹ Yet, Ken Morgan, a church planting coach in Australia, outlines

⁴⁰ Archbishops’ Council, *Mission-shaped Church* report (GS 1523, 2004).

⁴¹ McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth* (Eerdmans, 1970).

⁴² Moore in Lings (ed.), *Messy Church Theology* (BRF, 2013), p. 247.

⁴³ Zahniser, *Symbol and Ceremony* (MARC, 1997), pp. 17-19.

⁴⁴ *The Day of Small Things* report (Church Army, 2016), p. 113. Based on the Messy Churches in 21 dioceses that met the fresh expressions of Church criteria.

⁴⁵ Ireland and Booker, *Making New Disciples* (SPCK, 2015), p. 126.

⁴⁶ Singlehurst, *Sowing, Reaping, Keeping* (Crossway, 1995).

⁴⁷ Ireland and Booker, *Making New Disciples* (SPCK, 2015), p. 129.

⁴⁸ Watson, *I Believe in Evangelism* (Hodder & Stoughton, 1976).

⁴⁹ Dodson, *Gospel Centred Discipleship* (Crossway, 2012), p. 28.

four initial stages in his mission strategy; his book *Pathways* identifies ‘Potential Contact’, ‘In Touch’, ‘Belonging’ and ‘Embracing the Gospel’ as four initial stages before the fifth stage of ‘Following Jesus’. (There are seven stages in total.)⁵⁰

For all its noted limitations, the ‘negative’ steps on the Engel scale are a helpful reminder that this part of an individual’s faith journey is just as complex as the ‘positive’ steps. In *Making Disciples in Messy Church*, Paul Moore considers an adaptation of the Engel scale called The Grey Matrix, incorporating extra dimensions of ‘open’, ‘closed’ and ‘Holy Spirit in their lives’ as a more holistic way of marking the ‘before’ and ‘early’ stages of faith development.⁵¹ Moore feels that this way of tracking an individual’s emotional warmth or willingness to participate in Messy Church, as well as stages of belief, is helpful. This connects with Paulsen’s research of discipleship in a Canadian Messy Church that noted very little change in the beliefs of the parent attenders, but reported progress when questions of behaving and belonging were asked.⁵²



In 2016, Mandy Aspland completed a doctoral dissertation on discipleship within Messy Church. From survey work conducted among 203 adults from 41 Messy Churches, she explored an unexpected trend for helpers and attenders to score a Myers-Briggs personality type SJ combination. This ‘Sensing/Judging’ indicates a tendency for order and duty, suggesting the routine and well-structured aspects of Messy Church are a draw for leaders and attenders.⁵³ Perhaps Messy Church isn’t as messy as the name suggests?

In addition, Aspland concludes that Messy Church leaders tend to think practically rather than theologically. Generally-speaking, they are more likely to make things happen on a practical ‘here and now’ basis rather than strategise long-term. Moore, in *Making Disciples in Messy Church*, stresses the need for a practical approach and considers the Catholic catechesis as a useful way forward for the practical alongside the intellectual.⁵⁴

In 2015, the Archbishops’ Council presented General Synod with a paper, *Developing Discipleship*, as one of a few ways to encourage increasingly intentional conversations about discipleship more widely within the Church of England,⁵⁵ acknowledging the lack of emphasis on discipleship in recent years, especially among the laity. A paper by Jeremy Worthen also contributed to the debate; his *Towards a Contemporary Theology of Discipleship* explores the relationship between discipleship and ministry, and identifies relevant liturgical sources and ecumenical statements that can assist.⁵⁶ While these and other papers are enormously helpful at the level of national decision-making, it is hard to tell if these reports are likely to be accessible or comprehensible to Anglican Messy Church lay leaders at grass roots level.

⁵⁰ Morgan, *Pathways* (Kenneth Morgan, 2017).

⁵¹ Moore, *Making Disciples in Messy Church* (BRF, 2013), p. 25.

⁵² Paulsen in Lings (ed.), *Messy Church Theology* (BRF, 2013), p. 82.

⁵³ Aspland, ‘Unless you become like a child: Psychological type and Christian becoming at Messy Church’ (PhD with The University of Leeds, York St John University, Faculty of Education and Theology, April 2016), p. 205.

⁵⁴ Moore, *Making Disciples in Messy Church* (BRF, 2013).

⁵⁵ Archbishops’ Council, *Developing Discipleship* (GS 1977, 2015).

⁵⁶ Worthen, <https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2018-01/The%20Roots%20of%20Renewal%20and%20Reform.pdf>, accessed 4 December, 2018.

MONTHLY PATTERNS ----- WEEKLY PATTERNS

The Day of Small Things reported 28% of fresh expressions of Church leaders as being spare-time, inferring many leaders balance ministry responsibilities with home, family, work and existing church commitments. 36% of Messy Church leaders were noted as being spare-time and 87% of Messy Churches met monthly.⁵⁷ The Messy Church literature suggests that the monthly pattern of gatherings is not only an outworking of a value of celebration (that would make less sense if a Messy Church met more frequently), but also sheer pragmatism that Messy Churches cannot be resourced in weekly patterns long-term by spare-time leaders. Furthermore, Ireland and Booker notice how stretched leaders are in maintaining monthly patterns, let alone anything more.⁵⁸

Bob Jackson and Bob Hopkins in their respective chapters in *Messy Church Theology* explore the potential for what discipleship opportunities might happen *between* monthly Messy Church gatherings. However, BRF were already keenly aware of wanting to try a variety of discipleship approaches that didn't exhaust leaders. In 2017, they began piloting various discipleship approaches that would be manageable for busy leaders; a small proportion of the approaches invited attenders to experiment with meeting between monthly gatherings such as intergenerational small groups, days out or social action projects.

Another subgroup of approaches focused on enriching the monthly gathering itself. Ideas included introducing Holy Communion or mentoring younger leaders. A clip of Messy Church in a 2005 Fresh Expressions DVD discussed the limitations of ten minutes of worship once a month to take people on their discipleship. However, Moore in *Making Disciples in Messy Church*, drew on Lings' thinking around the Seven Sacred Spaces of monasticism and explored what this might mean for Messy Church.⁵⁹ Why do we assume that sacred moments only occur in the space of 'chapel' and its function of worship? Why not also in the variety of other spaces within Messy Church, e.g. refectory (serving and eating together), cloister (the unexpected one-to-one conversations) or chapter (planning meetings)?

Faith at home, an idea for discipleship found in a number of places in the literature, was another idea to pilot. David Voas' findings in Strand 3 of the Church Growth Research reported that many committed Christian parents do not feel equipped to share faith at home with their children. Moore discusses possible reasons for why parents find themselves de-skilled and suggests Messy Church can help parents take small steps in praying, discussing issues and reading the Bible with their children at home. However, he warns that this is a far wider problem than Messy Churches alone and one not quickly remedied.⁶⁰

ALL AGE DISCIPLESHIP

PEER GROUP DISCIPLESHIP

⁵⁷ *The Day of Small Things*, (Church Army, 2016), pp. 104 and 228.

⁵⁸ Ireland and Booker, *Making New Disciples* (SPCK, 2015), p. 127.

⁵⁹ Moore, *Making Disciples in Messy Church* (BRF, 2013), pp. 84-85.

⁶⁰ Moore, *Making Disciples in Messy Church* (BRF, 2013), p. 112.

If there is limited literature exploring what discipleship looks like with attenders encountering church or the Christian faith for the first time, there is even less on the issue of all-age discipleship or intergeneration discipleship approaches. As a named value of Messy Church, BRF leaders were hesitant to suggest separate discipleship groups were the inevitable way forward. Moore explores the child as a true model of discipleship, with more of a natural capacity for eagerness, curiosity and humility. The holding together of the youngest and oldest learning together, from each another, is a value at the heart of Messy Church practice.

Berryman outlines a Theology of Childhood in the first volume of *The Complete Guide to Godly Play* series and delves into the ethic of blessing and non-verbal communication that Jesus' interaction with children seemed to highlight; he suggests the innate gifts that children and childhood bring also have potential to enrich adults - for so much of a person's spiritual life is experienced non-verbally. Godly Play offers a contemporary version of the ancient spiritual practice of lectio divina, for children (and adults) to meditate artistically and kinaesthetically on Scripture to internalise it.⁶¹

In 2015, various creative resources were published as part of *Explore Together* (a model of intergeneration engagement with a Bible study from Scripture Union⁶²) and some Messy Churches leaders appeared to be using them. Subsequently, further resources for evangelism and faith enquiry materials appeared using more visual stimulus and interaction; while these were not marketed as intergenerational tools, creating resources with a more non-book culture approach allowed for greater engagement across a wide range of age and stages of life.

Yet, as Ireland and Booker comment, beyond an introductory stage, how do you handle deeper adult discipleship needs that are inappropriate to share with a wider group of mixed age and gender? How are these to be handled sensitively?⁶³

How these definitional understandings of discipleship shaped the research

In many ways, this literature review work generated more questions than answers regarding discipleship definitions. However, taking each of the dynamics in turn, we felt reasonably comfortable progressing our research with a definition encompassing elements of both head knowledge and heart response as key components; in the context of Messy Church, head knowledge came with an age appropriate and newcomer appropriate caveat, acknowledging that even a small amount of knowledge acquired regarding the Bible and church life is a significant step forward for those new to the faith. Likewise, we felt the inward and outward transformation spectrum are crucial dynamics to hold together, acknowledging the almost impossible challenges in measuring inner transformation in all its complexity and subjectivity.

For the individual-owned and relationally-owned dynamics, we felt it was important to hold both within our definition. At some level, or at some stage, individual ownership is important. While the literature does not always agree *when* the process of discipleship begins, we were keen to focus our definition on something more than attendance; merely being 'in the room' at Messy Church could reflect a number of realities that might be in danger of overclaiming a discipleship process. For example, attenders may be practising Muslims, Hindus or Sikhs enjoying the community element. Or someone may have been simply 'dragged along' by friends or family and wishing they were anywhere else. Thus, some indication of willingness to engage on a personal level, however small, with the faith element seems important.

⁶¹ Berryman, *The Complete Guide to Godly Play: Volume 1* (Morehouse Education, 2002), p. 19.

⁶² Scripture Union, <http://www.exploretogether.org>, accessed on 4 December, 2018.

⁶³ Ireland and Booker, *Making New Disciples* (SPCK, 2015), p. 129.

However, the all-age value of Messy Church with its child/adult interaction means understanding discipleship purely, or primarily, as an individualistic journey is incomplete. The higher proportion of non-churched attenders who tend to be unfamiliar with individual traditional discipleship practices such as daily devotions, financial giving, etc, seem an unrealistic starting point. This connects with the parts of the literature that argue that Messy Church is stronger in non-formal and socialisation approaches to learning. *The Day of Small Things* reported 33% of Messy Churches surveyed identified attenders of theirs helping as part of the team, seeing this as discipleship development. Thus, the community dynamic or discipleship being owned in relationship seemed a crucial element to include in the definition.

Overall, the most compelling aspects of the varying definitions were, from a researcher's perspective, the most difficult to measure. For example, how does one measure dynamics such as personal transformation, the quality of relationships or the depth of community? As the 2013 Strand 3b report of the Church Growth Research Project claimed, it is hard to measure discipleship in terms of spiritual growth quantitatively, as many aspects are a value judgement.⁶⁴ And as the infamous quote reminds us: *'Not everything that can be counted counts. Not everything that counts can be counted.'*⁶⁵

Generating an appropriate model or framework seemed to be less possible as a starting point in the research and more an outworking or outcome of the overall research process. We also kept in mind such a definition would be applied to children, adults, attenders and leaders. Therefore, we deliberately kept an open, flexible and broad definition going into survey work and focus group research.

Our provisional definition of discipleship was:

Growing as followers of Jesus, evidenced in any or all dimensions of:

- *Deepening relationships - with fellow Messy Church attenders, Messy Church team or with church*
- *Active enquiry/interest about the Christian life or story*
- *Signs of personal transformation*

What data could be gathered in this research that would help develop this provisional definition further?

- 1) The existing Messy Church literature and anecdotal evidence point to difficulties in Messy Church leaders and volunteers taking initiative to develop effective discipleship processes. As well as wanting to know what they had tried, we wanted to ask leaders about some of the hurdles in their contexts. Did the leaders identify the same challenges as discussed in the literature? E.g. Was it the limitations of a monthly pattern of gathering? Was it the challenge of intergenerational discipleship? Or something else?
- 2) Acknowledging the variety of discipleship definitions, models and measures in the literature, we wanted to ask leaders to indicate which *they* felt are the most appropriate ways to measure discipleship in their contexts. Did they put more emphasis on changes in relationship, personality or practices? Did they use traditional measures such as financial giving or partaking

⁶⁴ Church Growth Research Project: *An Analysis of fresh expressions of Church* Report (Church Army, 2013), Section 2.5.

⁶⁵ This quote is usually attributed to Einstein but in reality, the link to Einstein is somewhat tenuous.

in Holy Communion, or perhaps less quantifiable measures? Did particular aspects of our tentative definition stand out as more important? Or were there other dynamics that we had overlooked altogether?

- 3) Noting the higher proportion of attenders from a non-churched background and the practical or pragmatic trend among Messy Church leaders, we saw the opportunity to gather data in this research that might tell us how discipleship is understood and communicated by leaders among Messy Church attenders. To what extent is discipleship unhelpfully loaded with baffling churchy language? What vocabulary do they use to explore discipleship in a way that is accessible to attenders?
- 4) As the research proposal outlined, to have some way of identifying discernible stages, however slight, in discipleship through qualitative group work would assist in identifying patterns or ways to understand the stages of making, keeping and deepening discipleship. 'To make' provisionally was understood as 'to begin', 'to keep' as 'to retain or to hold', and 'to deepen' as 'to grow, to intensify and to strengthen'. If discipleship is too complex and loaded a word, can it be broken down in helpful ways that demystify the process? Can leaders identify different stages of engagement in a discipleship process? Can attenders reflect on their own journey and see particular things occurring at these different stages?

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February 2019

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