

This report presents the strand of research that explored the questions, ‘What is the evidence around whether leavers grow out of Messy Church, and what happens to those who do stop going?’

Parts of our findings around this were drawn from leavers-related questions in the quantitative strand, and these are reported within the *Painting with Numbers* report. This document deals more specifically with the separate methodology and survey we used to contact ex-attenders themselves.

## Methodology and Sampling

Some questions regarding leavers were asked on the initial survey of Messy Church leaders, which provided a helpful perspective from the 174 leaders involved. However, this only tells us so much, and so to more fully answer some of the research questions within this strand, gathering data from leavers themselves would also be necessary.

In order to get in contact with leavers, it was necessary to ask the leaders initially surveyed if they would be willing to put our team in contact with people they know have attended and left their Messy Church that they are still in contact with. In the initial leaders’ survey, the question was asked of whether leaders knew of any leavers they were still in contact with who might be willing to answer some further questions with our team.

One drawback of this approach is the inherent sample bias. It is likely that those whom leaders are still in regular contact with, as well as being willing to discuss openly their experiences of Messy Church, will have generally more positive things to say than those uncontactable or unwilling to be surveyed about it. Therefore the resulting data may disproportionately reflect causes of leaving external to the Messy Churches themselves, with a potential range of attenders’ critical feedback left out.

This risk of overly-optimistic bias might seem to be upheld by responses given to the final question, which largely spoke of attending Messy Church as having had a positive (and often profoundly spiritual) impact on the leavers surveyed, as well as their children in many cases. However, for the sake of manageable research, this was the only plausible approach.

Interviews were conducted with twelve participants who had attended Messy Church regularly for at least six months before leaving. These interviews were semi-structured, using the survey instrument above. The interviews were mainly conducted by phone, with a minority of respondents completing it themselves on a survey document in their own time before emailing it to our team.

## Respondents’ Demographics and Motives for Attendance

In our sample of twelve leavers, ten were female and two male. All of them had attended the Messy Church for at least two years - seven for between two and five, and the remaining five for longer. Four were aged between 35-44, six between 45-54, and one each in the 55-64 and 65-74 brackets. Three of the respondents had three children, eight (and one grandparent) had two children (or grandchildren), with the final respondent having one child. All their children (or grandchildren) here were aged between 8 and 17 years.

Nine of the twelve respondents identified themselves as Christians. However, in the follow-up question to this, none of these nine said they had become a Christian at Messy Church - although

four of them indicated that Messy Church had helped them to rediscover a faith they had lost, certainly a snapshot of Messy Church's missional capacities and impacts, which is good news.

All twelve respondents first heard about Messy Church through channels in their local neighbourhoods: two by word of mouth, three through advertisements in a community centre, four saw it advertised at schools, and five through adverts at churches.

The question on what aspects of Messy Church appealed to them and their families elicited two distinct factors. Firstly, the motivational factors of (mostly parents) in starting to attend Messy Church: three cited each wanting to attend an event for the whole family and wanting to teach their children good values, while nine (75% of our sample - the same proportion who identified themselves as Christians) wanted an introduction to Christianity for their children. Secondly, the motivational aspects of (more from the children) what kept attenders coming back once having started attending: one cited enjoying the games, two mention that friends also attended, three each cited that the food and community feel was appealing, and eleven (92%) said they enjoyed the crafts.

### Reasons Given for Leaving Messy Church

A variety of responses were given to this crucial question, but interestingly no one distinct response was indicated by more than half of the respondents. This suggests, to some extent, perhaps unsurprisingly, that each individual has their own reasons for moving on, but a few trends do seem to emerge.

Broadly the responses given emerge from patterns in or of the attenders' lives, their children's ages, and where they feel they best fit in the wider Church economy. We grouped them into seven distinct categories of reasons given for deciding to leave:

- The children moved to secondary school
- The family moved to another Messy Church
- The children now attend a church youth group instead
- The respondent now attends another church community
- Messy Church no longer seemed age-appropriate for the respondent's children
- The respondent's family moved away from the area
- The meeting time became difficult

Because the question eliciting these reasons was an open-ended text-box, almost all of our respondents gave answers which fit into multiple coded categories (only one gave a reason fitting only one of our codes, while four straddled three, and the remaining seven straddled two). The table below summarises how the respondents' answers may be broken down across this range of categorised reasons.

Reasons given	Respondents												Total
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	
Children going to secondary school			✓	✓	✓		✓	✓			✓		6
Moved to another Messy Church	✓	✓				✓			✓	✓			5
Church youth group instead			✓	✓	✓						✓	✓	5
Another church community instead			✓	✓			✓				✓	✓	5
No longer seemed age-appropriate	✓	✓			✓	✓							4
Moved away from the area									✓				1
Meeting time became difficult										✓			1
<i>No. reasons given by respondent</i>	2	2	3	3	3	2	2	1	2	2	3	2	

A number of interesting trends are noticeable from this data. Of the four attenders who left because Messy Church no longer seemed age-appropriate for their children, three are now attending Messy Churches elsewhere; this suggests their perception of its all-age aptness for their family to be contained by particular local Messy Churches and not the ecclesial model in general. The single respondents for each of the bottom two coded categories also moved on to different Messy Churches, implying an encouraging degree of loyalty to the style of church perhaps counter-intuitive to presuppositions about its often-transient attenders.

Overall nine out of twelve (75%) of our respondents have continued attending a church community in some form after leaving the Messy Church they were surveyed about, with three no longer doing so. Seven (58%) stated that their children were still attending a church, while the children of four weren't, and the final respondent indicated that some, but not all, of their children were. Considering that as previously indicated this same proportion's motivations for attending Messy Church was to introduce their children to Christianity, it seems to have served its purpose well here as a stepping stone into other faith-based communities and activities.

However, it is worth reiterating here that our pool of respondents was highly biased by sampling method, and while the trends in this group are interesting, this degree of positivity and openness to being further involved with churches (Messy or otherwise) is unlikely to be representative of most average leavers.

### The Transition to Secondary School

75% of respondents indicated that either their children starting at secondary school (50% of responses) or Messy Church no longer seeming age-appropriate for their children (a third of responses) were factors in their leaving, although strangely, only one cited both of these reasons. Furthermore, in our initial leaders' survey, the children's moving from primary to secondary school was recognised as a key factor behind people leaving by 83% of respondents.

These may imply that this transitional period is a significant factor in families' patterns of church attendance - though as already noted above, for most respondents it was not the end of their (or their children's) attendance at church communities altogether. However, it may raise legitimate questions about the realised practicality of the vision of Messy Church as an all-age activity; the crafts, cited as the biggest draw by our respondents here, may not appeal to children who start becoming adolescents or youth. Even if crafts are effective in attracting families as young newcomers, there is a risk they may come to feel they have 'outgrown' it if there is not a balance between offering these activities and optional alternatives for older children, so they can remain engaged with Messy Church without feeling like they're at a level of maturity no longer appropriate for that community.

These are hard questions, and speaking into the conundrum of how to maintain inclusion as children get older is one which Messy Church leaders, local churches and the national team may need to continue wrestling with. That said, finding appealing solutions to this - things to offer older children - is an issue that many Messy Church leaders have given thought to, and our leaders' survey received a wide range of examples of things that had been tried (many of which had been discontinued). Of the 174 respondents, 48 (28%) had run a separate youth group in some form, 37 (21%) had encouraged older children to remain engaged with Messy Church as helpers, 13 (7.5%) ran a further group or activity, and only 3 (1.7%) each saw children generally stay on as they got older anyway or changed Messy Church to be youth-orientated. 22 (12.6%) claimed they had made no such provision, while for 5 (2.9%) such efforts were currently in the intentional stage only. While it is encouraging to have such a range of attempts to youth-proof Messy Church's all-age

character, many of these projects are implied to have been short-lived. Also, given the small non-representative sample of our leavers, assessing to what degree differing types of project here were successful and why is beyond the scope of this research.

### **Differing experiences by gender**

Nine of the twelve respondents indicated they noticed no difference (or a similar response) in terms of different experiences of girls and boys at Messy Church. It would appear broadly that the Messy Church format appeals to both boys and girls of primary school age (and younger).

However, the remaining responses suggested some differences in experience. One simply said, “the boys are a bit louder and the girls a bit shyer”, while another parent stated “my son enjoyed the more active games most while my daughter loves the craft”. The remaining respondent alludes to the issue in terms of leaving Messy Church: “...the girls tended to stick around for longer as they got older. The boys lost interest in the crafts a little bit.” This suggests that below a certain age gender is less of a salient factor, but it may become one as attending children approach the transitional periods discussed above. Some suggestions from leaders in focus groups corroborate this, and anecdotally some phone calls with Messy Church leaders during the initial survey raised the issue of providing a relevant experience for younger children as well as 10-year-olds, particularly boys.

The issue of differences in patterns between girls and boys remains an open question that may be valuable for further study, particularly in the context of our bias-labile sample.

### **Conclusion**

This report has outlined key insights on why people leave Messy Churches and what happens to them after doing so. It has also reflected on how while these may be somewhat encouraging findings and in line with our other strands of research, the nature of our sampling methods means the data we discuss here may not be broadly representative.

Our core finding from the leavers’ strand overall is that age, gender and attenders’ circumstances may all play unpredictable parts in people’s decisions to leave a Messy Church, and there is no sure-fire way of preventing this. However being intentional, inclusive, and anticipating the varying needs of adults and children attending a Messy Church, may help retain people and deepen engagement.

**Church Army’s Research Unit**  
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### **Contact Us**

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**Survey Instrument**

[Questions 6, 7, 8, 12, 13, 14 and 15 were presented as open text-boxes; the rest were as shown]

There are **no** right or wrong answers. Please tell us what is true to your story.

Your responses are confidential and will remain anonymous.

1. Please circle your gender: Female / Male
2. Please circle your age group: 11-15 / 16-17 / 18-24 / 25-34 / 35-44 / 45-54 / 55-64 / 65-74 / 75+
3. Which Messy Church did you attend?
4. For how long did you attend the Messy Church? (please circle)  
Less than 6 months / 6 months - 1 year / 1 - 2 years / 2 - 5 years / More than 5 years
5. How many children, and of what age and gender do you have? (leave blank if you have no children)  
Child 1: Boy / Girl    Age: .....    Child 2: Boy / Girl    Age: .....  
Child 3: Boy / Girl    Age: .....    Child 4: Boy / Girl    Age: .....
6. How did you first hear about Messy Church?
7. What aspects of Messy Church appealed to you and your family?
8. What were the key factors behind you stopping attending Messy Church?
9. Would you identify yourself as a Christian?                     Yes                     No                     I'm not sure  
 a. If yes to Q9, did you become a Christian at Messy Church?  
 Yes                     No                     Messy Church helped me rediscover a faith I had lost
10. Are you attending another church community?                     Yes  No
11. Are your children attending another church community?                     Yes  No  Some, but not all
12. If no to Q10, would you consider returning to a church community?
13. If your children have reached secondary school age, what effect did this have on their and your Messy Church attendance?
14. Did you notice any difference in experiences at Messy Church between girls and boys?
15. Do you have any other comments about your experience of attending Messy Church that you would like to share?