

# MESSY LIFESPAN ANALYSIS



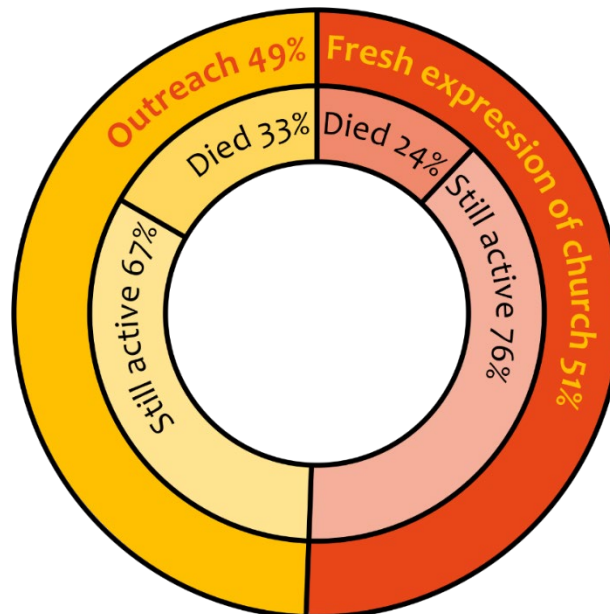
This report presents the key findings of the strand of the research that explored the question ‘What can we learn about the lifespan of Messy Churches?’ In answering this question, it draws together relevant material from the following sources:

- Statistical analysis of relevant sections of the main telephone survey
- Qualitative analysis of 11 follow-up telephone interviews with leaders of Messy Church that have died

## Statistical analysis

### What proportion of Messy Churches do not survive?

Of the 174 Messy Churches interviewed for the main survey, 49 (28%) had ‘died’. The remaining 125 (72%) remained alive.



	All MES	fxC MES	Outreach MES
Still active	72%	76%	67%
Died	28%	24%	33%

**Table 1: Proportion of Messy Churches that are still active**

**Figure 1: Proportion of Messy Churches that are still active, divided by fxC or outreach status.**

There is no significant difference in the proportion of Messy Churches still active that are fresh expressions of Church in comparison with those that are run on an outreach basis.<sup>1</sup>

In our sample, the median age of Messy Churches which had died was 36 months, while those that are still alive have a median age of 74 months. These are very significantly different.<sup>2</sup>

### What makes some Messy Churches vulnerable?

The various quantitative factors included in the survey for Messy Church leaders were investigated for association with whether or not the church was still active. In terms of background, none of

<sup>1</sup>  $p=0.27$ ,  $X^2=1.22$ , 1df.

<sup>2</sup>  $p=8.8 \times 10^{-13}$ ,  $W=5198$ .

the context, frequency, days or time of day factors significantly affected whether or not a Messy Church died. Venue was slightly significant; those in 'other' or 'church' venues failed more often than expected, while those in a 'mix' of venues succeeded more often than expected.<sup>3</sup>

In terms of leadership, the pay type (stipendiary, locally paid or voluntary), time given (full, part or spare time) and ecclesial status (ordained, licensed or lay-lay) of the main leader are not associated with whether or not a Messy Church dies. The gender of the leader appears to be almost significantly associated ( $p=0.049$ ), but this may be merely an artefact of testing so many possible factors.

Considering the attenders at Messy Churches and their church background, the median percentage of existing Christians is equal in Messy Churches that have died or that are still active.

When we consider the maturity of the Messy Church, those that have died are significantly less likely to use storytelling when engaging with Scripture, and significantly less likely to have had baptisms in Messy Church.<sup>4</sup> When the number of different sacraments are examined, Messy Churches that have died have engaged with significantly many fewer sacraments in comparison with those who are still alive.<sup>5</sup>

No other factors were significantly associated with the death of Messy Churches.

### What can be learned about Attendance Patterns?

Respondents to the main survey were asked about the patterns of attendance that they had noticed, in respect to growth patterns, and in general. The results are shown in Table 2 and Figures 2 and 3 below:

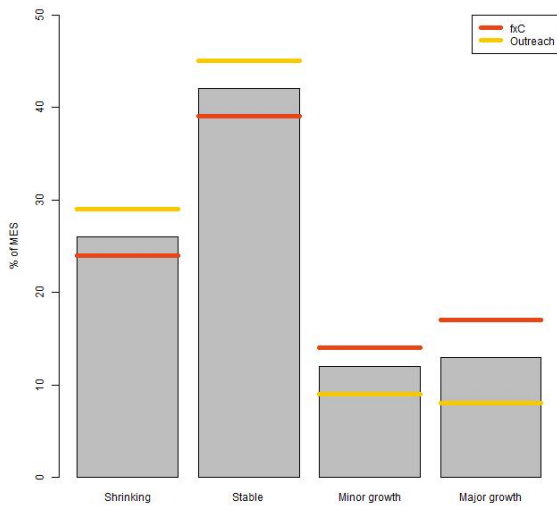
Patterns in attendance	Total	fxC	Outreach
Major growth	13%	17%	8%
Minor growth	12%	14%	9%
Stable	42%	39%	45%
Shrinking	26%	24%	29%
Core group of attenders	55%	61%	48%
Unpredictable	32%	33%	31%
Seasonal	26%	26%	26%
High turnover	20%	20%	20%
Sporadic	20%	18%	21%
Other	8%	9%	7%

**Table 2: Attendance patterns in Messy Church**

<sup>3</sup>  $\chi^2 = 12.02$ ,  $df = 5$ ,  $p=0.034$ .

<sup>4</sup> Storytelling:  $\chi^2 = 4.70$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p=0.030$ .; baptisms:  $\chi^2 = 5.07$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p=0.024$ .

<sup>5</sup>  $\chi^2 = 12.30$ ,  $df = 3$ ,  $p=0.0064$ .



The most popular choice was a ‘stable’ Messy Church (42%) then ‘shrinking’ (26%). Outreach Messy Churches chose these options slightly more often than fxC ones. 12% of churches saw minor growth, and 13% major growth. Here fxC churches were better represented. The difference between the values is not statistically significant.<sup>6</sup>

Figure 2: Growth patterns in Messy Church

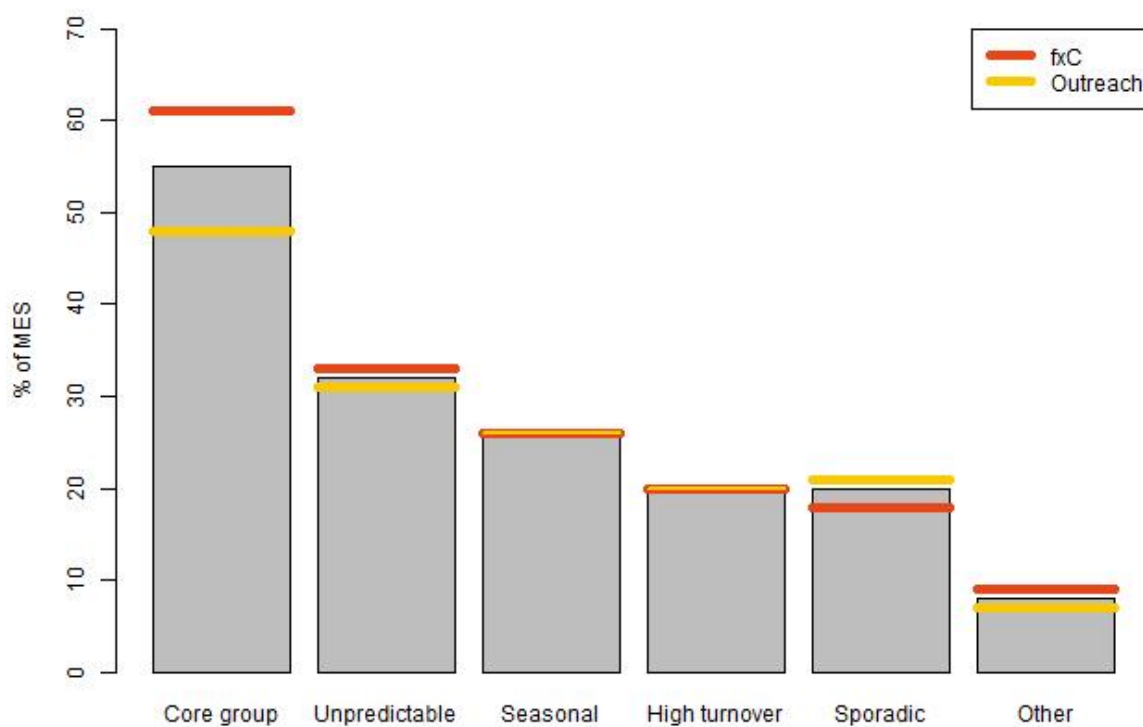


Figure 3: Attendance patterns in Messy Church

In general attendance, the most common pattern was that of a core group (55%), then an unpredictable pattern (32%). There is no significant difference between fxC and outreach Messy Churches in terms of these patterns of attendance.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup> p=0.41; Kolmogorov-Smirnov D=0.14

<sup>7</sup> X<sup>2</sup>=1.27, df=5, p=0.94.

### Is there any ideal size for a Messy Church?

74% of Messy Church leaders suggested there was an ideal size for their Messy Church. 26% did not.

- Of those that did, 5% were above the ideal size, 29% below and 40% were around it (there was no response from the remainder). Messy Churches that had died were significantly more likely to be below their ideal size.<sup>8</sup>
- Of those that did identify an ideal size, for 40% of cases it was for practical reasons, 5% spiritual and 28% for a combination of both (there was no response from the remainder).

## Qualitative Analysis

### Why Do Messy Churches Sometimes Die?

For the 49 Messy Churches that had died, we made a note of the end date and wrote down a brief headline of how and/or why the Messy Church ended. The different types of reason given are summarised in Table 3 below:

	Total	fxC	Outreach
Numbers dwindling	13	4	9
Not enough people on team	10	3	7
Leader(s) moved on	8	6	2
Priorities changed	6	2	4
Labour or resource intensive	5	2	3
Not effective	5	3	2
Competing events	4	2	2
New incumbent	4	2	2
Interregnum	3	3	0
No reason given	3	2	1
Dependent on school support	1	0	1
Not enough prayer	1	1	0
Sending church closed	1	0	1

Table 3: Reasons for death in Messy Churches

While ‘numbers dwindling’ was most often mentioned by outreach Messy Churches, the mostly common issue identified by fxC Messy Churches was ‘Leader(s) moving on’.

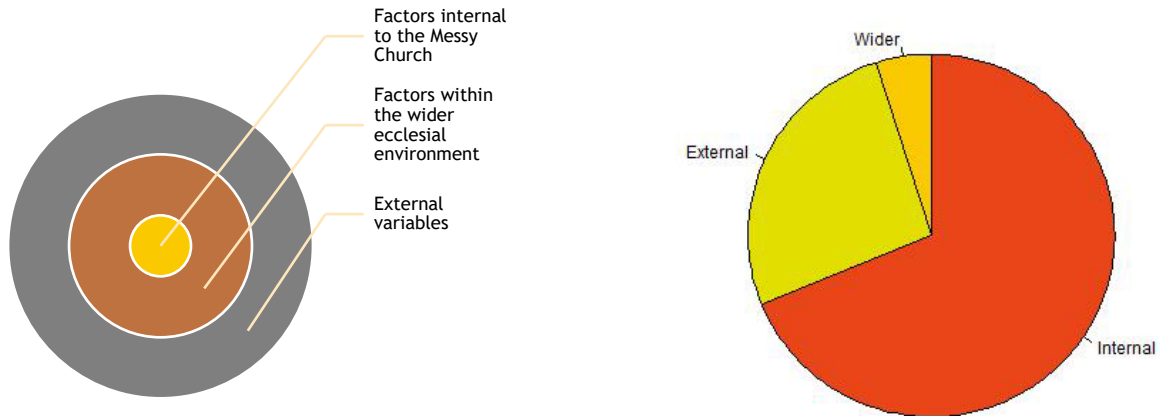
We also asked the leaders if they would be willing to take part in a follow-up interview to dig deeper into how and why Messy Churches come to an end and explore if there is ‘life after Messy Church’. 11 leaders agreed to participate. Of these, six were leaders of fxC Messy Churches that were no longer meeting. Five were leaders of outreach Messy Churches that had stopped.

Qualitative analysis of the data gathered suggests that the ‘presenting reason’ for the death of a Messy Church typically falls into one of the following categories<sup>9</sup>:

<sup>8</sup>  $\chi^2=7.81$ ,  $df=2$ ,  $p=0.020$ .

<sup>9</sup> This framework is adapted from that used in our 2016 report *Sustaining Young Churches*.

<https://churcharmy.org/fxcresearch>



### 1. Internal factors - reduced team, declining attendance

Most leaders cited several inter-related reasons for the end of their Messy Church, but it often involved at least one of the following:

#### a. Reduced team capacity

Linked to:

- 'Not enough people on team' (or existing team aging / becoming less able)
- 'Leader(s) moving on'
- Messy Church seen as being 'labour or resource intensive'

#### b. Declining attendance

Sometimes linked to:

- Attendees getting older and not being replaced
- Messy Church perceived as 'not effective'

Though some leaders only emphasised just one of these factors, several mentioned both. As one participant put it, their Messy Church stopped because it had become 'too labour intensive for reducing numbers'.

### 2. Factors within the wider ecclesial environment

Some leaders also told us about factors within their ecclesial environment that had made it harder to sustain their Messy Church. Illustrative comments include:

- The host / sending church's 'priorities changed'
- The host / sending church leaders 'never grasped the idea of having another church'

### 3. External variables

Others told us that the end of their Messy Church had been triggered by changes within their wider external environment, for example the abrupt closure of a local venue and valued partner.

#### 4. Deeper underlying reasons - failure to adapt?

Behind these 'presenting reasons', there lie deeper, underlying reasons. With only limited data to draw on, we can't probe too deeply into these. But, having reflected on the data, there appears to be a common theme, amongst Messy Churches that ended, of not sufficiently adapting or evolving. Key dimensions of this include:

- a. Losing momentum - not staying fresh

*'Looking back, [we] needed more inspiration and new ideas'*

- b. Not evolving / adapting in response to changing circumstances of volunteers

*'Volunteers became harder and harder to come by as different work and family commitments meant the team began to diminish'*

*'Initially we had lots of teenage helpers but they grew up and went to uni'*

- c. Not recruiting new people as members (inevitably) move on

*'Not enough families with younger kids coming through to "repopulate" attendance'*

*'Some very proactive mums (who had been key in gathering people at start) drifted away as their children got older'*

- d. Struggling to involve / disciple parents and whole families

*'Because it was well-resourced with able volunteers, parents absolved responsibility. Family discipleship was definitely the intention ... [but] this was not happening as hoped.'*

*'Struggled to develop as church rather than just as children's group'*

#### Can a Messy Church have a good ending?

For two of the eleven leaders interviewed, the life of their Messy Church was 'cut short' by unexpected external events that came as complete surprise.

However, most of the others said their Messy Church had come to a gradual, rather than sudden end, and that they had 'seen the end coming' for a while (typically as a response to declining numbers and difficulties recruiting leaders/helpers).

Whether or not such an ending could be deemed a 'good' death is hard to judge, but from the interviews conducted, the following key themes stand out:

- Most leaders said that it was a team decision to stop meeting
- Most felt that running Messy Church had been a very positive experience, but for some at least there was also a sense of relief, and maybe even providence, at the decision to stop:

*'It was a bit of a relief. We felt it had run its course.'*

*[We] 'realised that the Lord was bringing things to a close and it was time for a new season'*

- For some, the decision to end was a reluctant response to an unfavourable wider ecclesial environment (an unsupportive host / sending church)
- But for others, the decision to stop appears to have been a more positive development, in that the experience of running Messy Church helped prepare the ground for a new mission initiative:

*‘Having the Messy Church run for three years let the church learn what to do and what not to do for [new mission initiative]. They took the best bits of Messy Church and wanted to improve on it.’*

### What happens after a Messy Church has ended?

When asked ‘What has happened since your Messy Church stopped meeting?’, most leaders identified some positive spin-offs. These included:

- The start of new initiatives that built on the experience of running Messy Church

*‘The Messy Church values of intergenerational discipleship have been taken into an annual intergenerational holiday club which is proving really effective’*

- Members attending other church congregations or Messy Churches
- Continued connections with Messy Church families through other church and community activities
- Leaders starting or joining another Messy Church elsewhere
- Helping rejuvenate a local church

*[It’s] ‘brought a lot of creativity to an area where church is very traditional’*

One participant, however, did not answer this question. And some said the end of Messy Church had left a significant gap in a church’s ministry, which had not been filled:

*‘In terms of children’s work, I’m not sure there’s anything now’*

### What can be done to lessen vulnerability?

Some leaders of ‘died’ Messy Churches identified things they might have done differently. Their suggestions included:

- Building a bigger, stronger, or more diverse team
- Paying more attention to declining attendance - with a view to discerning why interest was falling off and what might be done
- Placing more emphasis on developing as church from the outset (fxC Messy Churches)
- Finding a more manageable frequency of meeting
- Reconsidering the venue / location

*‘Make sure it’s more accessible (not in the middle of nowhere) and perhaps a more neutral venue’*

Others, however, said they would not have done anything differently and suggested that the inherent fragility / vulnerability of some Messy Churches needs to be accepted and acknowledged. As one leader put it, Messy Church was:

*‘...really worthwhile although short-lived. Rejoice in what you have while it lasts and know that for things like this, it’s hard to have a strategy.’*

### Conclusion

This report has summarised key insights on the question ‘What can we learn about the lifespan of Messy Churches?’ that arise from the following:

- Statistical analysis of relevant sections of the main telephone survey
- Qualitative analysis of 11 follow-up telephone interviews with leaders of Messy Church that have died

This should be read in conjunction with our separate report on the findings of the five focus groups with Messy Church leaders. Although only one of the 29 focus group participants was there directly representing a ‘dead’ Messy Church, these focus groups generated a rich wealth of material that casts considerable further light on the deeper complexities and vulnerabilities that many Messy Churches experience.

**Church Army’s Research Unit**  
**February 2019**

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