

Introducing the research

This research project is one strand of a wider project ‘Playfully Serious’ that has sought to better understand the missional impact of Messy Church. It was a piece of qualitative research to gather data from the perspectives of Messy Church attenders - both children and adults - on discipleship. Has Messy Church helped make, keep and deepen their discipleship and if so, in what ways?

Participants were recruited from Anglican Messy Churches¹ that met monthly; this was to ensure attenders had sufficient involvement with Messy Church gatherings on a regular basis to engage with the research questions. We tried as far as possible to involve attenders who had had little regular contact with other areas of church life to focus on the particular contribution of Messy Church to an attender’s discipleship if that is the only community they are attending.

Data gathering took place on three separate occasions during April/May 2018; we visited two Messy Churches (the first of which acted as our pilot) and then held our own bespoke Messy-Church-style research day in Sheffield.

Fourteen children and twelve adults across six different Messy Churches took part² and made their contributions using pseudonyms they chose themselves. The children who took part were between the ages of 6 and 14 and were all accompanied by a parent or carer.

We acknowledge this small sample was potentially atypical of the wider Messy Church population. Participants were self-selecting and possibly already invested in exploring issues of discipleship to see this as a worthwhile exercise to take part in. We are also aware of a potential geographical bias; all the Messy Churches taking part meet in towns and cities in the Midlands and north of England. A potential social area bias would be adjusted by repeating this research for Messy Churches in rural contexts.

Participants experienced an opening presentation at the beginning of the research session to introduce them to the research questions.³ They were then invited to respond by creating a painting, sculpture, collage or drawing. Their creative work acted as a stimulus to conversation in subsequent informal interviews (recorded by audio device or video camera).⁴ The bespoke Messy Church day concluded with a short time of all-age



¹ Or an ecumenical Messy Church with an active Anglican partner.

² Only one child declined to take part and enjoyed some free play during the session.

³ The disadvantage of this approach is that it may have influenced or guided participant responses, but the advantage is that it offered a starting point for people to respond to rather than people wondering what they were meant to be doing.

⁴ The research design invited as much candour from participants as possible given the accompanying priorities of achieving a relaxed, safe and supervised environment for all involved. We invited participants to resist the temptation to tell us what they thought we, their leaders or family members wanted to hear. We also made sure interviews were not overheard by others.

worship and a sit-down lunch of hot dogs, jacket potatoes and ice cream.

This paper presents findings from the research data followed by methodological observations in the supplementary appendix.

Finding no. 1: When discipleship was defined as a lifelong journey of following Jesus, half of the attenders said Messy Church had started them on this journey.

Discipleship is a complex and sometimes bewildering term⁵, not always accessible by those on the fringes of church or new to faith.

The initial presentation⁶ (the photo on page 1) described Messy Church through its five values - all-age, creativity, celebration, hospitality and Christ-centred. Then a path was laid out as a symbol with the accompanying words, *“When we decide to follow Jesus, some people say it is like going on a journey. It’s like walking with Jesus on a journey, learning his stories, talking with him and learning to be like him.”*

We described ‘beginning’ to follow Jesus as something *“some people decide to start doing in an instant, whereas for others it happens gradually. Either way, it’s as though he calls us even though we may not hear his voice out loud.”*

In their answers to the question *“Did Messy Church begin the journey of following Jesus in your life and if so, in what ways?”*, we noted among adults:

- Understanding discipleship as following Jesus through your life resonated with adult participants. Some adults asked if they could take photos of the initial presentation.
- A few adults said they *had* begun following Jesus at Messy Church, explaining their lack of knowledge about the Christian faith before attending. These adults expressed their intention to attend Messy Church on a regular basis.
- A few adults talked of their faith “beginning again” through Messy Church, citing reasons of getting involved again in a previous or new church after a break, because Messy Church was a place they and their families could be themselves and/or being asked to take on a role within Messy Church.

Among the under 16s, we noted:

- Understanding discipleship as following Jesus through your life seemed to resonate with child participants.

“Yes, [Messy Church began our journey] because we didn’t know much about it before. We’ve never really come to church before...we started coming because of [someone on team] and now we never miss...”

Sally, Adult



⁵ See our research paper on Defining Discipleship available at churcharmy.org/playfullyserious

⁶ A video of the presentation is available on request.

- Most under 16s said Messy Church had begun their journey.⁷
- Reasons included: learning about Jesus, doing ‘nice’ things like crafts and activities and for one teenager, the sense that their faith had always been there but “not truly been there” until Messy Church.

Several comments from both adults and children reflected that Messy Church is creating an opportunity for children to invite their non-churched friends into an environment that introduces them to the Christian faith in a fun way.

Finding no. 2: When discipleship was defined as a lifelong journey of following Jesus, most attenders perceived Messy Church as keeping them on this journey.

The opening presentation explained ‘keeping’ or ‘staying’ on the journey of following Jesus like this: “When we decide to keep walking with Jesus, we begin to see things we’ve never seen before and do things we’ve never done before. It’s not always easy. We have lots of questions but something keeps us going. Some say that when life gets really hard, it’s almost as if Jesus carries us.”

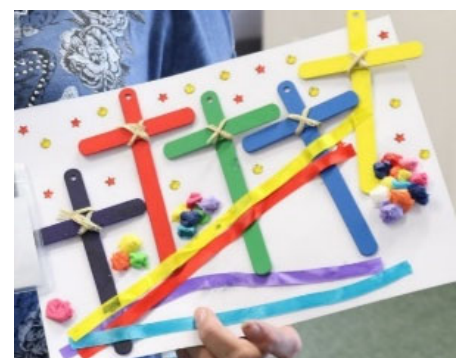
In the responses to the question “Has Messy Church kept you on the journey of following Jesus in your life and if so, in what ways?”, we noted among adults:

- Almost all adults said Messy Church had kept them on their journey of following Jesus.
- Reasons included: the opportunity to hear the teachings of Jesus in accessible ways and feeling accepted and encouraged in their faith. The atmosphere at Messy Church was often described as ‘fun’ and ‘joyful’ and like being among family or friends.
- A few adults talked about the challenges of worshipping as a family at traditional church services and the relative ease of seeing their children and their friends attending Messy Church regularly and with enthusiasm.
- A few adult attenders who were hesitant about whether they had begun to follow Jesus, still engaged with the question. They saw their attendance at Messy Church as a way they’ve ‘kept’ learning about Jesus.⁸

We noted among the under 16s:

- A few of the older under 16s gave answers similar in length and detail to the adults, reflecting on the sense of hope Messy Church gives them as well as the opportunity to be together and talk with others.
- Some children answered this question by *describing* what they did at a Messy Church gathering but often with a great deal of enthusiasm.
- A few children seemed to make the link between what they were learning and *how* they were learning; it was a positive learning experience because of fun, creative activities and the sense of being with friends.

“...if people don’t really know Jesus or they don’t follow him, it’s a sign to say about Jesus and if you want you can follow him.”
Candy, age 9



⁷ One eleven-year-old said she already followed Jesus. Two children said they weren’t sure they had started following Jesus.

⁸ This could be seen as a positive or a negative - an opportunity for further research into what keeps them happy to learn about Jesus even if they’re not sure they want to follow him.

In interviews with adults, we asked a supplementary question “How does Messy Church help you and your children follow Jesus in everyday life?” This question is less open⁹, but answers provided further detail to accompany the ‘keep’ and ‘deep’ questions.

Finding no. 3: Many children found it difficult to engage with the concept of deepening faith, but adults new to faith mentioned the support Messy Church gave them through tough times in their lives.

In the opening presentation, we introduced ‘deepening’ in the following way: “We decide more and more to follow his teaching and live in a different way to people who do not follow Jesus. This kind of journey doesn’t come to an end - it goes on and on for the whole of your life and it changes the whole of your life.”

In response to the interview question “Has Messy Church deepened your journey of following Jesus and if so, in what ways?”, we noted among adults:

- Most adults said Messy Church had deepened their faith, but the reasons given to the “in what ways” part of the question varied according to whether they had begun their journey before or during Messy Church.
- For adults who had begun following Jesus prior to Messy Church, ways that Messy Church had deepened their faith included: listening to children and preparing to teach children about faith deepened their own; working out how, as adults, to apply faith to everyday life - in order to help the children understand - had helped them too.
- The few adults who said they had begun their journey with Messy Church answered this ‘deepen’ question by talking about the ways in which Messy Church supported them through tough times such as poor mental health and family bereavements.
- From what was shared, it didn’t seem to be the vicar who had helped attenders through difficult times; it was primarily other helpers and adult attenders.

We noted among the under 16s:

“My picture is based on the salvation grace, that kind of thing, so you’ve got sort of the sin there, Christ’s blood - your growth as a Christian, then you sort of move onto baptism and then Jesus is like the top of it all... and we’re sort of the people working through.”

Skye, adult

“I...very much want to work with the children and what the children are saying... it’s taken me deeper in just understanding where people are coming from but the way God is using me...having to rely on his strength...[is] setting me free.”

Mrs Bean, adult

“The team are all really lovely...it’s my calm place even when it’s crazy. I feel safe.”

Sally, adult

⁹ Presupposing that Messy Church does help them and their children follow Jesus in day-to-day life.

- The younger children didn't engage much with the 'deepen' question on their own. Most said 'no' or 'I don't know'.
- A few of the older children talked of how the chance to ask difficult questions and understand more about the Christian faith at Messy Church was a way their faith had deepened.
- In other answers about life day-to-day, we were told by adults that Messy Church helped a few children pray by themselves at home. Another two adults talked of Messy Church helping children become more loving to one another. One adult talked about the way Messy Church has helped her family think about the practical help they can offer others in need.



Throughout all the interviews with adults and older children, we noted that although adjectives such as engaging, lovely, joyful, affirming, wonderful, calming and fun were frequently used to describe experiences of Messy Church, many also said Messy Church had been a place/space to be honest, share doubts and anxieties and be listened to, helped and encouraged.

Finding no. 4: Messy Church gives attenders more time and energy for learning than a traditional Sunday service.

As researchers, we began this research with an assumption that, as most Messy Churches meet monthly, this less-than-weekly pattern of gathering may be a hurdle in helping attenders follow Jesus.

This assumption arose out of the literature as well as our accompanying survey work with Messy Church leaders. On being asked to name some of the key hurdles in developing discipleship, leaders perceived the limits of one Messy Church gathering to do everything, the busyness of leaders and the busyness of family life as challenges.

The attenders' perspectives on this surprised us; their comments focused on the more helpful, enriching ways that learning occurs within Messy Church compared with their experiences at more traditional Sunday morning services.¹⁰

"I'm painting a forest...the journey through things...My craft is about the journey of being faithful to God...like you're walking through a forest and you're camping out for the night."

Panda, age 9

We noted:

- 'Learning about' seemed to be closely linked with 'following Jesus' in many attenders' answers.
- Learning was always experienced as something positive - often described as 'fun'.
- Some attenders identified the link between activity/creativity and learning, noting the limitations of a more passive style of learning in their Sunday morning experience.
- The older children preferred the simplicity of the younger children's teaching.
- Many adults said Messy Church helped them talk about faith with their children at home following on from the learning activities they'd engaged in together.

¹⁰ It wasn't easy to recruit participants who had no experience of Sunday morning services but, apart from one adult, all participants said Messy Church was their main or primary place of belonging in church life.

- A few adults commented on how much they appreciated the chance Messy Church gave their children to interact with other parents who were on the journey of following Jesus with their families.
- Some adults (without small children) expressed a sense that they didn't 'fit' or feel normal in a traditional church service, whereas Messy Church helped them feel as though they belonged.

"It's deepening learning...it's so much more practical...that very practical aspect of making mistakes and drawing comparisons with your own life through stories, maybe than I guess in comparison to a more structured service. There's not necessarily that time for exploration and application."

Heidi, adult

Finding no. 5: Attenders drew on God's creation to express their journey of following Jesus.

Those who have researched children's spirituality document the relationship that some children have with the natural world.¹¹ At first glance, children talking about animals when discussing faith might seem a bit twee to adults. Whether it is part of their instinct to be care-givers, looking after the environment or part of their imagination and play, it appears to be more normal for them.

The opening presentation may have biased responses towards nature by choosing the colour green to represent the path of walking with Jesus on a lifelong journey.¹²

However, we noted:

- An energy among research participants when using aspects of nature to describe their journey of following Jesus.
- The adult/child pairings working together chose to explore the link between Messy Church and following Jesus through nature.¹³
- Some of the 'made-up' names¹⁴ the children chose (and a few of the adults) were related to nature.



"When you do Messy Church it's like totally different to the rest of the services and it just sort of gives that 'yeah, I do need to grow...I've got a whole life to live...'"

Skye, adult

¹¹ Hay & Nye (2006) *The Spirit of the Child* London Jessica Kingsley Publishers pp. 116-117.

¹² But this was the only reference to nature in the presentation.

¹³ A few of the children were happy to take part but wanted to work with their parents to create a joint piece of art.

¹⁴ To protect the confidentiality of research participants we asked them to choose pseudonyms.

“... we talked about growth and journeying with Jesus and continuing that journey was the leaves, wasn't it?”

Ruth, adult

“Yeah. And then the blossom is they have a deep relationship with Jesus.”

Rebecca, age 11

Finding no. 6: Some adult participants seemed more at ease expressing their own faith journey by talking about what they did with their children.

From our own experience, our team are familiar with the comment that nurturing children's faith often deepens an adult leader's own faith; planning, preparing, thinking how best to explain complex things at a child's level and listening to their responses can be unexpectedly enriching.

What was more surprising was the number of adult attenders who tended towards *first* describing their own faith journey from the perspective of a parent or from a family perspective (rather than as an individual).



“...walking with Jesus is a celebration. I drew a picture of walking with Jesus and [I also made] a cat because she likes walking with Jesus too.”

Catninja, age 8



Parents' and carers' devotion for their children's spiritual growth was very obvious. It is difficult to know whether adults *assumed* we were more interested in their children's journeys of following Jesus or whether the intensity of parenting makes it difficult to reflect on following Jesus as an individual, aside from roles or relationships in this particular life stage.

We noted:

- Many adults talked about the practical/social dynamics that arise from the considerable time they spend with their children. Messy Church helps this to be quality time and sometimes nurtures more caring relationships.
- A few adults commented on the importance of Messy Church in giving their children their own space, a place in church to belong and explore faith in a way that interests them.
- One couple felt strongly that Messy Church was fulfilling a need for them that was no longer provided through their children's school. They wanted their children to learn about the Christian faith and the true meaning of Christmas and Easter.¹⁵

¹⁵ Without a nativity play being made into a comedy.

- Some comments from adults seemed to imply that simply seeing your children’s faith develop (or the children’s faith in your Messy Church develop) strengthens and enriches your own.

“My craft is a basic standard picture of a family, with a love-heart, and to me it resembles my childhood...we grew up in a very religious family, five days a week at church...too much...I’m here [at Messy Church] for my children...I’m determined not to have it pushed down their throats but [this] drip [feeds] a little bit about Jesus’ life and the Bible on a level for them because I don’t want ‘em to have what I had. ...[Day-to-day, Messy Church helps us...] be a bit kinder as a family...more loving as a family.”
Tilly, adult



Exploring potential learning points for Messy Church leaders

Findings 1-6		Learning points
1	When discipleship was defined as a lifelong journey of following Jesus, half of the attenders said Messy Church had started them on this journey.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understanding discipleship as “the journey of following Jesus throughout the whole of your life” resonated with our attenders, but find a way to explain it that suits your own Messy Church context. • We suspect de-mystifying the term ‘discipleship’ for leaders and attenders is a helpful a starting point.
2	Most attenders perceived Messy Church as keeping them on the journey of following Jesus.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Take heart that Messy Church played an important part in ‘keeping’ the majority of both adults and children on their journey of following Jesus.
3	Many children found it difficult to engage with the concept of deepening faith, but adults new to faith mentioned the support Messy Church gave them through tough times in their lives.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Look for activity ideas/resources that explore what a deeper, lifelong faith in Jesus looks like in practice. Children may not have reached that stage yet, but giving time to exploring the idea gives them a frame of reference for the future. • Perhaps sharing stories of well-known (and locally known) contemporary Christians who model deeper faith might be helpful. • Encourage your team to see their role as not just practical but a chance for them to offer friendship and support. • Maximise opportunities for pastoral care even if it’s a listening ear to begin with. • In some contexts, offering some pastoral or chaplain type training could help so the team feel equipped to help families during difficult times.
4	Messy Church gives attenders more time and energy for learning than a traditional Sunday service.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Quality may be more important than quantity. • If there is a choice, make Messy Churches the best they can be rather than increasing the frequency of meeting

		<p>(especially if it means quality might be compromised in meeting more regularly).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have your team gently ask attenders in passing what they've learned about faith through Messy Church. Reflect as a team on how learning happens best.
5	<p>Attenders drew on God's creation to express their journey of following Jesus.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continue to explore spiritual resources that might support attenders at Messy Church who find connections between their faith and nature. Explore Messy Pilgrimage and Forest Church ideas, as well as creating new ones. • Don't ignore or dismiss the way children sometimes express their spirituality through the natural world. Try and watch for God at work in their lives in these moments.
6	<p>Some adult participants seemed more at ease expressing their own faith journey by talking about what they did with their children.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support adults in their devotion to their children's spirituality. • At the same time, encourage them to explore and have their 'eyes opened' to look for more for themselves on their own journey.

Conclusions from the data

Many sources confirm that the Messy Church model has proved a remarkable type of fresh expression of Church for its reproducibility, manageability, 'staying power' (in terms of church trends) and its ability to connect with those of non-churched backgrounds. We can entirely understand the urgency to address the question asked by many, "*Can Messy Church disciple people?*", and applaud the humility of Messy Church leaders being open to the overall answer being either yes or no.

However, from the experience of this research project, we suspect that this particular question is too simple. A 'blanket' yes or no is not possible, nor is it useful in the same way that asking "Can joining the church choir disciple people?" or "Can attending a church away day disciple people?" is not very useful. For some people, the answer is yes. For others, the answer is no.

We suggest seeking to answer the related question of "*How can Messy Church disciple people?*" is more helpful. From our time spent listening to this group of children and adults, encountering their craft work and observing the overall process, we wish to draw attention to three main conclusions:

- Find ways to explain the term discipleship that suits your own Messy Church context and actively encourage opportunities for adults and children to share something about their 'inner lives' in safe, appropriate ways.
- Maximise opportunities for pastoral care, even if it's a listening ear to begin with, as care and support during 'tough times' was mentioned as ways that adult attender faith sometimes deepened.
- These attenders' responses suggest that the quality of what happens within Messy Church is more important than the quantity of gatherings.

Our sincere thanks to all our participants for taking part in this research.

Appendix: Observations from methodology

These methodological observations are extra findings in addition to the main 6 findings.

Observation 7: There were challenges in recruiting attenders but, when we did, their stories and reflections were incredibly rich and heartfelt.

As researchers, inviting attenders to express their thoughts and feelings through artwork as well as interview worked well. Art seemed an appropriate form, given Messy Church's named value of creativity and the extent to which the phenomenon is known by its visual branding.¹⁶ Working in this kind of medium also helped us with the challenges of non-verbal communication¹⁷ from a few of our younger research participants as well as the delicate issue of not wanting to be seen to have any 'power' or 'status' above research participants as far as possible.

Most importantly, using painting, clay and collage materials was an easier form or medium to begin to get beneath what one can see with the naked eye and explore emotional and spiritual issues that can be difficult to articulate in everyday conversation.¹⁸

*"...accessing church again...[my roots of faith] blossomed into something that was still growing...I wanted a spiral effect [in my sculpture to express] the complexity of things that you don't see inside as well as kind of the idea of flourishing at the top."
Heidi, adult*



In exploring something of attenders' experiences, we noted:

- Some practical challenges in gathering research participants but the overriding sense of positivity from those taking part on the day.
- The overall concentration of engagement in the task and the thought and care that went into the artwork.
- Emotional responses in the artwork and in the interviews. A few adults were a bit 'teary' in reflecting on the way Messy Church had helped them.

¹⁶ Banks (2007) *Using Visual Data in Qualitative Research* London SAGE p. 97.

¹⁷ Many aspects of our spiritual lives are experienced and expressed non-verbally: depression, grief, laughter, anxiety, peace, love and death. People of all ages need spaces to explore spirituality in non-verbal ways to help internalise what they are learning. Berryman (2012) *The Complete Guide to Godly Play: Volume 1* New York, Morehouse Education pp. 116 & 117.

¹⁸ Banks (2007) p. 52.

- Extensive use of symbol, colour and shade to express complex inner thoughts and feelings.¹⁹ Many symbols were to be expected (cross, path, heart), but some surprises too. This links to Zahniser's observation that disciples working cross-culturally should become experts in working with symbols.²⁰

Observation 8: Despite the specific life stage Messy Church serves and the familiar format of gathering, there are many different perspectives 'in the room'.

It came as no great surprise that every person had their own unique story to tell. Listening to our research participants reminded us that if our group were potentially representative of those gathering at a typical Messy Church, it is extremely difficult to neatly categorise them or generalise their experiences.

To any casual observer who assumes the same kinds of people always attend Messy Church, they should note:

- Some adults said they had made the decision to begin following Jesus many years ago. A few adults commented that they were just at the start of their journey or beginning again. One adult said he wasn't religious but respected the views of others.
- A few of the responses from the 11-16-year-olds were particularly rich as they reflected on the ways that Messy Church helped them follow Jesus, for example engaging positively with LGBTQ+ issues or how the hope in Jesus taught in Messy Church helps them cope with the pressures of school.
- As mentioned elsewhere, Messy Church was perceived as a place of acceptance and respect of different perspectives and faith journeys.
- Art was appreciated for the way it allowed people to express different journeys. One person even wished there were more colours available on the day to express people's different journeys through their sculpture!
- Roles and responsibilities are varied, fluid and not easy to summarise/categorise. In the recruitment process, it was not easy to separate out which adults were the main leaders of their Messy Church, which were part of the leadership team, those who helped on the day or those who simply attended with their children.



"[The pathways] are all in different directions and it doesn't matter where they start, or where they end, and they can even swap over...so that we're all following a path but we're all understanding in different ways."

Mrs Bean, adult

¹⁹ The initial presentation contained symbol and colour which may account for some of the visual content in the responses.

²⁰ "Because symbols bring together a lot for people in a compact form, they represent powerful discipling tools." Zahniser (1997) *Symbol and Ceremony: Making Disciples Across Cultures* Monrovia CA MARC, p. 81.

Findings 7-8 from observations		Learning points
7	There were some practical challenges in gathering attenders, but their stories and reflections were incredibly rich and heartfelt.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Don't be too discouraged when it feels like hard work engaging attenders in further conversations about faith. Don't give up! • Actively encourage opportunities for adults (as well as children) to share something about their 'inner lives' in safe, appropriate ways. • Finding ways that use symbol and elements of non-verbal communication as well as verbal conversation will help in exploring their spiritual journey.
8	Despite the specific life stage Messy Church serves and the familiar format of gathering, there are many different perspectives 'in the room'.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • As with any congregation, it is easy to generalise. Look and listen closely at the diversity of individuals you have, although they are often at the same life stage. • Unfortunately, there doesn't seem to be a 'one-size-fits-all' solution. But trust God's guidance in finding the right step forward for each of your attenders.

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