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Fifteen sessions for exploring the Christian life with families



Lucy Moore

*For Judith, brightest, best, most beautiful (and messiest)
of daughters, with love*

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I owe a huge debt, as ever, to the teams I work with, both at BRF and in St Wilf's Messy Church in Cowplain—which, at the time of writing, has just celebrated its eighth birthday and is enjoying getting messier than ever. My colleague Jane Leadbetter has contributed hugely to this book, and Martyn Payne has allowed me to mess around with ideas from the www.barnabasinchurches.org.uk website. Jane Butcher has been the source of many of the take-home ideas from the ever-fruitful www.faithinhomes.org.uk website. Lesley Baker devised the celebration on Martha and Mary, and Paul Moore came up with the celebrations for Easter and Christmas. Thanks, too, to Beth Barnett for her inspiring thoughts about Paul and childhood. The St Wilf's team in Cowplain and L19: Messy Church in Liverpool have kindly field-tested ideas and poured helpful scorn and derision on ideas that would otherwise have wasted your time with their unworkableness. Thank you especially to Pete, Kate, Elisabeth and Denise for your diplomatic suggestions, and my apologies for the ideas that got through the net despite your best efforts. Thanks, too, to the other Messy Church groups who have been given different sessions to field-test throughout the year.

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Foreword

Rapidly growing in a remarkably short space of time from one small church in Portsmouth, UK, to over 1,000 registered Messy Church expressions around the world, the story of Messy Church is an amazing one. Arising from the God-given imagination of one person, Messy Church has captured the imagination of a diverse range of individuals, congregations and denominations across the globe. Many communities of faith have been and continue to be blessed, challenged and served through Messy Church as they bless, challenge and serve their local communities through their uniquely contextualised expression of Messy Church.

One of the many blessings of Messy Church for local congregations has been a re-energising and re-commitment to multi-age engagement. Arguably one of the significant shifts taking place in ministry with children and their families is a move away from an individualist, isolated or segregated approach back to a community-oriented, integrated and inclusive model. In many ways Messy Church can be seen as both reflecting this trend and furthering the momentum of this welcome change.

In terms of challenge, a decision to explore Messy Church has prompted many local congregations to reflect upon their identity as 'church' (a somewhat inward focus) and re-think their engagement with local communities (an outward focus). A positive outcome of this, in many situations, has been a reconnecting of local congregations with their local community. Stories abound, too, of children and grandchildren of church participants reconnecting with a local congregation through Messy Church.

In addition to providing wonderful resources, *Messy Church 3* creatively addresses many of the questions that arise when churches embark upon the Messy Church adventure. Drawing not just on the experience of Messy Church, but the wisdom of others such as George Lings, Paul Moore and Keith White, *Messy Church 3* is

an invaluable addition to the ever-growing list of Messy Church resources. May Messy Church continue to bless, challenge and serve local congregations as they seek to participate more fully in the ministry of Christ in the world.

Chris Barnett, Centre for Theology and Ministry, Uniting Church in Australia

Introduction

Hello, Messy Church leaders! It's strange to think that when I wrote *Messy Church* in 2006 there were only a few people running Messy Churches. Now there are hundreds of us from different denominations and countries: all very good fun and more than a little mind-blowing. God is doing something very exciting for families and churches in our generation and it's a joy to be a tiny part of it.

I felt rather hesitant about writing the Messy Church sessions in this book, as there are so many people creating their own marvellous and inventive sessions month by month who won't need this book in the slightest—except to have the satisfaction of grunting, 'Hmmp. Our ideas are *much* better than these!' Which is just as it should be. But for those who email us in search of fresh ideas, I hope this will at least give a starting point for another year or so of Messy Church for the families where you are.

In this book you'll find 15 sessions for Messy Church that are, in the great Messy tradition, suggestions for you to adapt and improve for your own circumstances, rather than an inflexible programme to be adhered to. The reasoning behind the choice of themes comes from several sources.

The first is experience. It may look more constructive to have a series that extends over several months, but in practice, most people find it hard to hold the narrative thread across a month's gap, so a series isn't necessarily very helpful and can be restrictive. Instead, we've taken the Christian year as a whole, offering one-off sessions, which nevertheless have themes that link them. We also felt it was helpful to start offering 'tools' of faith, like the Lord's Prayer—so that prayer features throughout. And as we've got to know the families coming to Messy Church, we've tried to be more sensitive about themes that will engage them. So experience has helped us shape these sessions, and the three spoof letters that make up the final part of the introduction contain more experiences that may be helpful to your own situation.

The second source is Paul Moore's research on discipleship in Messy Church (see *Making Disciples in Messy Church*, BRF, 2013), where he advises that:

Messy Church should develop an intentional socialisation programme of imaginative, participative all-age celebrations at major festivals of the Christian calendar. God's people thereby learn to live in a rhythm of reviewing, renewing and passing on their faith. Alongside this we need to help people to develop a weekly Sabbath rhythm and also the vital heartbeat of faith being worked out together in the family home and in all aspects of life throughout the week.

So the sessions have a focus on the Christian year: Christmas, Easter, Pentecost and Harvest, with a nod to Rogationtide (a festival that is rarely celebrated these days, and falls just before Ascension Day) and All Saints' Day. These festivals help us to establish key points of the Christian faith: God's creation and ongoing care for the world (a theme also recognised in Session 14: 'Pets and Peace'); Christ's birth, death and resurrection; and the coming of the Holy Spirit. They also give us a chance to reflect on prayer (Session 6: 'The Lord's Prayer') and on the Bible (Session 10: 'Light up the darkness', or the 'non-Hallowe'en-but-still-lots-of-fun-dressing-up-and-doing-wacky-things' session).

The festivals are like a 'Christian basics' course that we follow every year, building a dependable pattern in a transient, shifting society. But the world we live and move in has other festivals that, although not exclusively church festivals, are important to us, and I've included some of these as they reinforce excellent Christian values. Since these may not be at the same times of year across the different countries in which Messy Church happens, I've tried to keep them as focused as possible on the theme rather than the season:

- ❖ Mothering Sunday (or Mother's Day as it is now more commonly known) and Father's Day give us a chance to think about the family of the church, to be grateful to those who parent us and to celebrate the parenting of God, whom Jesus called 'Father'.

- ❖ Valentine's Day is about that value at the heart of our faith—love.
- ❖ Remembrance Day is about service, sacrifice and gratitude.

Another source I've drawn on is Keith White's book, *The Growth of Love* (BRF, 2008), in which he describes five essential elements for child development and the growth of love. It seems to me that these are not exclusive to the growth of love in children but can be a useful basis for growing love in adults too. So the sessions reinforce the ideas of

- ❖ security: that we are loved unconditionally;
- ❖ boundaries: that there are wholesome guidelines within which to live our family lives;
- ❖ significance: that we matter to others and to God;
- ❖ community: that we are connected and not alone;
- ❖ creativity, which of course underpins everything in Messy Church.

While these are implicit in many of the themes of the sessions, there is logic in having a session about forgiveness (Session 1: 'A new start'), a session about celebrating our own community (Session 7: 'Our community') and a session to expand that concept of community (Session 8: 'Journeys').

A further source, *The 8 Secrets of Happiness* (Paul Griffiths and Martin Robinson, Lion Hudson, 2009) provides guidance for some of the emphases in the sessions. If Christianity is about transforming lives, there are worse places to start than trying to make a difference to the lives of families in the UK. The church is the perfect place to make opportunities for families to be happy, and to change the gloom level of a nation. So the eight secrets of happiness are to

- ❖ count your blessings;
- ❖ practise acts of kindness;
- ❖ savour life's joys;
- ❖ thank a mentor;
- ❖ learn to forgive;

- ❖ invest time and energy in friends and family;
- ❖ take care of your body and soul;
- ❖ develop strategies for coping with stress and hardships.

These provide a backdrop to all the sessions, and come to the fore in Session 11: ‘Money matters’ and in Session 15: ‘Healthy body, healthy soul’.

Without wanting to overwhelm overstretched Messy Church leaders, I have included some ideas for building on the opportunities we have been given in Messy Church to go that little bit further with families who are keen to explore faith.

Sunday treat

This picks up on the idea of reviving interest in a Sabbath rhythm and suggests a simple prayer for families to pray together on Sundays during the month. These short, imaginative prayers are based on the Lord’s Prayer, the Grace, the Trinity and the simple phrase ‘world without end’. They invite families to add their own words and ideas, and so will be different every Sunday. The Sunday treats could be included on a Facebook page or in a weekly text to your families; they might provide an excuse to drop round and visit your families; they could be printed out on cards and decorated at Messy Church or beforehand; or they could go on the handout sheet.

Take-home ideas

Many of us are already sending ideas home at the end of each Messy Church. These send out the message that church isn’t just about coming together once a month; it’s about living out our faith in our homes, schools and workplaces every day of the month. It also helps carers and parents become aware that it’s their job to guide their children in faith, rather than leaving it up to the church. I’ve only suggested one per month in the hope that churches will think of even better ideas, making use of the www.faithinhomes.org.uk website and encouraging their families onto this and similar websites. The ideas

aren't just about growing up in God; they're about growing closer as a family too.

Messy team theme

This is provided because many of us see Messy Church as a fantastic way to grow the group of disciples that make up the team itself. Gathering together once a month with something nice to eat and drink and discussing a few simple questions gives energy and purpose to the team. The topics covered are based on the themes of the actual sessions; you could discuss the ones for the session you're about to run as preparation for it.

Songs

I haven't included song suggestions in this book as people's tastes, musicianship and access to technology or performers vary so greatly, but look out for suggestions on the Messy Church website.

Meals

Again, every team has its own ideas about food by now and, as *Messy Cooks* (BRF, 2011) contains a wide variety of menus, and many Messy Churches stick to one or two recipes for very good reasons, there is no point in duplicating those recipes here. I hope everyone has seen by now what a crucial part the meal has to play in a Messy Church community and how important it is not to be tempted to miss it out.

And the future? Will we go on with *Messy Church 4... 5... 6*? Not unless there's a very good reason. Watch out instead for *Get Messy!*, a three-times-a-year subscription magazine, which will be the next regular resource from BRF. It will contain a Messy Church session for each month, plus Bible studies, up-to-date stories, reflections and reports. It will appear on your doormat in plenty of time to plan the next season of Messy Church with your team. Even better, it will be written by Messy Church leaders of different denominations,

backgrounds, areas and ages, so *Get Messy!* will draw on experiences from a far wider team and give a great pool of expertise for us all to benefit from as we keep on growing God's kingdom in the churches where he's placed us. Exciting stuff!

A LETTER TO THE CHURCHES IN CLODPOOL-IN-THE-MARSH SOME TIME AGO

Dear Helen, Revd Higgins and Pastor Percy

Thanks so much for your long and detailed letter asking about starting a Messy Church. It must have taken you a very long time to write, and something about the heavy crossings-out, the crumpled state of page 37 and indeed the splatters of blood on the paper indicate a certain degree of tension between you as you grapple with the best way forward for your community. But I'm sure this can be resolved in true Christian amity without further violence.

You ask for a summary of what Messy Church actually is. It's a way of being church that is for all ages, on a day and at a time that suits families in your area. It usually involves a welcome; a time of making things on a biblical theme; a celebration on the same theme with story, song and prayer; and a meal around tables for everyone. Its values are being all-age, being Christ-centred, hospitality, creativity and celebration. It started in 2004 in the Anglican church of St Wilfrid's in Cowplain near Portsmouth in the UK, comes under the wing of BRF, the Bible Reading Fellowship, and has since spread across all the major Christian denominations and around the world to at least thirteen countries. By the end of 2011 there were over 1,000 different Messy Churches listed on the Messy Church online directory. So much for the bare bones.

You ask about the practicalities of starting a Messy Church: 'We find ourselves unable to agree whether to start this month or to spend the next two years in prayer and meditation, seeking guidance before we visit the local Hobbycraft store.' You'll find the book *Starting*

Your Messy Church (BRF, 2012) very helpful, I think: it is short and to the point. There's also oodles of help and advice on the Messy Church website (www.messychurch.org.uk), along with templates for the documents you might want to use: registration forms; feedback forms; planning sheets; questions to ask when you visit another Messy Church; and advice on child protection, food hygiene and the like.

In terms of how long you should pray for—well, it's impossible to set a time sheet for God, and steeping yourselves in prayer beforehand is indeed the best possible foundation for your plans. At the same time, after you've spent two years in prayer, the children who are eight now will be ten years old... then twelve... then fourteen... and before we know it, another generation will have missed out on the chance to enjoy church with their family and friends. Some churches report finding a *kairos* moment to start their Messy Churches, a moment that is in God's timing, not ours. They try at one point and the project has no energy, drive, vision or support; they try again some time later and things slot into place effortlessly. You might pray that you find your *kairos* moment.

You say that your team has visited three local Messy Churches and found that each of them is slightly different:

Helen said that the one she saw had only three craft activities. Wilberforce has denounced the one he visited as heresy: it was not on a Thursday afternoon, did not start at 3.30pm and did not follow the prescribed liturgy as laid out in the book *Messy Church*. And Dwayne discovered that the one he attended on a Sunday afternoon served sandwiches and soup instead of a full cooked meal. After we had argued for two hours in the Spotted Pig about what constitutes a true Messy Church, we sat glumly round our pints feeling that we no longer knew what any church is.

Yes, it makes me ask what church is too. You'll be relieved to know that Messy Church is less of a rigid model to follow religiously than a suggested pattern that has proved useful to many. But the pattern needs adapting to your own context so that it's right for the people

around you. If you're in a sparsely populated village, or have only a short time available, you might find that a smaller number of activities is more suitable than the ten suggested in the book. Thursday happens to be a good day for us; Saturday or Monday might be better for you. And the order of events, or the nature of the meal provided, doesn't matter in the slightest. The appeal to all ages does; the Christ-centredness of everything does, as do the warm welcome, emphasis on creativity and celebration, and the inclusion of a meal. You are the experts on your area and will want to adapt the shape and details to suit your people, while guarding the tried-and-tested principles behind Messy Church. It's not a prescribed programme but a set of values that gives your creativity and imagination a chance to work to the glory of God in the place where you live.

There were one or two other issues about Messy Church that I picked up from your letter, which I'll address, if I may. You say, 'Can you suggest a different name? We've decided not to call it Messy Church as Mrs Penworthy-Smythe, a member of one of our churches, finds the word "messy" offensive, and threatens to leave the church if we call it by such a disrespectful and irreverent name.' You can call it whatever you like, of course, and if it has the same values as Messy Church and follows a similar pattern, there's nothing stopping you registering it on the online directory, whatever it's called. But I would urge you to consider carefully before you call it something different. You might be throwing out the gravy with the giblets. I hate to say it as it sounds so crass and consumerist, but Messy Church is a recognised brand and, as such, we could either wring our hands in horror at such commercialism or try to make the most of this fact. As there are now so many Messy Churches, it is already something that people trust. People move house and email us looking for another Messy Church in their new community. The anecdotal evidence is that people gossip about how much they enjoy Messy Church, so you could benefit from that news-spreading. By using the name you can make the most of the international network of generous supporters and friends who also run Messy Churches. You'd have a ready-made logo free to download

and use on your publicity materials, as well as a range of professionally produced craft items, mugs, T-shirts, posters, stickers and so on that you can easily obtain from the companies we work with.

I also think there's a big difference between giving this enterprise a different name because it works better for the people you're trying to reach, and calling it something different because a church member doesn't like it. Mrs P-S is already a member of the church: Messy Church isn't there primarily to help her grow in Christ, although that may be one of its side effects. In mission, the preferences of believers have to give way to the needs of unbelievers. The apostle Paul wrote, 'I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some' (1 Corinthians 9:22). I expect that wasn't always comfortable for him either.

It might help to explain to Mrs P-S that 'messy' refers to the liquid edges of church membership where people feel neither in nor out; it is about how God loves to work with people whose lives are in a mess, and the unpredictable way he takes us on adventures with him. But then again, she might be even more horrified at the thought that God might actually want to change things. It's probably best just to say you think the name's fun and plan to try it out for a six-month pilot period.

You describe your plans for 'a lovely messy club for the kiddies to have a nice time... a bridge into proper church on a Sunday so that we can restart our Sunday school and it can be as thriving as it was when we were young... a way of hooking the parents...' It's a crucial foundational idea of Messy Church that it is for all ages, not just for children. It makes my heart ache when I hear of Messy Churches where only the children are encouraged to do the crafts, or where the adults are excluded, implicitly or explicitly, from the celebration, or where there is only food for the under-fives. How do we learn best? By having models around us, living it out for us, showing us what to do and more importantly how to do it. If children see that the adults don't take part, doesn't this mean that the message you're sending out is 'creativity is just for children', or 'only under-elevens need to sit

round a table to eat' or 'grown-ups don't worship'? In other words, 'You'll grow out of it.' Are you depriving adults of a chance to meet a God who longs for them to know him as much as he longs for their children to know him? Messy Church isn't about attempting to attract the children so that their parents are 'hooked'. It's about being a transparent, honest, messy household of faith together, learning from and with each other so that our lost generations have the opportunity to encounter a living Lord and grow in faith with us.

And, forgive me, but is it really about starting 'a bridge to proper church'? Is it just a stepping-stone to the once-weekly service, which has a style and language and reflects attitudes that long-time believers have grown accustomed to? Although this has value, it may not be the best way for the old and young who are just dipping a toe in the water of church-going to feel the attraction, relevance, mystery and fun that make up church. I was clumsily expressing something of this once at a training event in Herefordshire, when a grumpy-looking elderly minister interrupted, 'But who says we've got it right on Sundays anyway? Why do we assume *that's* the best or only way of being church?'

If the Sunday school is no more, maybe God is bringing something new to birth, not trying to artificially resuscitate something that has done a wonderful job in its time. The Sunday school has served its purpose and gracefully died—just as I expect Messy Church will one day die to make space for God's next even-more inventive idea to pour out his love on people. 'There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under the heavens: a time to be born and a time to die' (Ecclesiastes 3:1–2). Try treating your Messy Church as a congregation that is just as important as other congregations, such as the early-morning Eucharist—it will take on a very different dimension from just being a 'club'. It will matter if it starts going wrong or when God works wonders in it.

You also mention the team you're putting together. 'We find ourselves unable to agree on the proper statement of faith for the helpers to sign before they are permitted to help, and attach the proposed 16-page

document for your approval.' I've taken the liberty of putting this in the recycling bin. This is messy leadership: you need to get messy people on board. You need people whose lives aren't perfect; people who aren't certain what they believe about every aspect of life and faith; people whose families are busy making as many mistakes as ours and who aren't ashamed to say it; people who are simply responding to God's call to serve his people and who are ready to grow in him along the way. You need older people who can show you what it means to have a love of God at the end of this life. You need younger people who will galvanise you with their ideas and attitudes. You need everyone in between: people with disabilities, women, teenagers, men, people of every colour, single people, married people, children, parents and grandparents to be the scintillating mosaic of community around the people who come. Let God worry about the purity of their beliefs and about the exemplary nature of their lifestyle. He can sort that out along the way as each member of the team encounters him, grapples with the Bible stories you're exploring and works out how to respond to the questions that come their way through their mission and evangelism.

A Messy Church team is work in progress. And that will be messy, just as an artist's studio is messy. Your job is to notice the God-moments for them as well as for the families who come, and to help the team members to build on every opportunity God gives them. One Messy Church I visited had to deal with a physical fight between two mums. Two years later one of the mums was on the leadership team. Give God a chance and he will work miracles.

You describe in veiled terms the scene that ensued when the treasurers of the three churches came together. I can only say I wish I had been there to witness it too. And you say:

Horace Ramsbotham, treasurer of The Church of the Wild 'n' Free, refused to believe there is no charge for starting a Messy Church and has insisted on seeing in print that registering a Messy Church on the directory will not, emphatically not, incur a series of annual charges

for the use of the name. We persuaded him to step down from the table top only after we had promised to ask you to confirm this.

OK, this is how it works from the BRF end. We took the decision, very early on in the development of Messy Church, that, since this was a ministry that God had, for some reason, entrusted to BRF, we wanted it to be freely available to churches to help the kingdom grow. So we would make no charge for using the idea, the name or the logo. We rely for help on the generosity of charitable trusts and individuals who have caught the vision for the way God is transforming people and churches through Messy Church. If Messy Church is valuable to your churches, we would love you to consider contributing a gift to the core costs of the ministry through the Messy Champions scheme, in the same way as your church no doubt contributes to other mission societies or charities to grow the kingdom. But please assure Mr Ramsbotham that we will never demand payment. We would simply ask that he considers whether it would be money well spent to help keep the centre of Messy Church in a healthy financial state.

I have left until last to say how excellent it is that you are considering starting up a Messy Church jointly. Despite your obvious disagreements, and however hard you find it to get on with each other personally, you are all passionately committed to working together on the principle of putting your community's needs before the needs of the individual churches. This is brilliant. People outside the church don't give a green teacup for the denomination of their local church—it's 'the church up the road' to them. Churches working together makes good use of limited resources—of the fact that St Portly's has a vast, comfy hall and kitchen but few people under the age of 90, St Genevieve-the-Less has a keen group of arc-welders and knitters but no contact with children, and the Wild 'n' Free Church has great links with the school and a thriving toddler group but has to meet in a decommissioned portaloo.

One of the glories of Messy Church is that it is church at its most pared down, so issues around robing or not robing, which form of

the Creed to use, or whether to sing from a particular hymn book or to a CD backing track, simply don't arise. You can just get on with what you do best: sharing your love of Jesus with families in your community and growing church around them. This allows God's Holy Spirit to shape them, you and the mysterious thing we call 'church' that happens when people come together in Jesus' name.

With prayers for a fruitful, timely and creative relationship as you work these things out together.

A MORE RECENT LETTER TO THE CHURCHES IN CLODPOOL-IN-THE-MARSH

Dear Helen, Revd Higgins and Pastor Percy

Thank you for your letter and photos from your most recent Messy Church. I particularly like the one of Revd Higgins dressed as Bathsheba, although perhaps it isn't one to show the Bishop. You must be so thrilled about the way God's working. You're right, it's not just in Clodpool, and we rejoice that people all over the world are feeling their way into the kingdom through Messy Church. However, for you it's Clodpool that matters, as that's where God has called you to minister and live and work, and you are his hands and feet there. If we get too excited about the big picture, we might forget the huge importance of the tiny part of it for which we're responsible. The signs of growth you write about matter massively, cosmically. The comment from the six-year-old over the spaghetti about death; the smile on the face of the great-grandmother as she watched the families streaming into church; the mum who told you over the bath bombs what a rough time she's having with her abusive boyfriend; the dad who spent the whole hour helping to build David's palace out of junk instead of hiding behind the newspaper as he did the first time he came—all these moments are rare and precious and significant in themselves. They are paving the way for other wonderful things to happen in the future.

Yes, Messy Church keeps on growing, although we've no idea how much longer it will grow numerically. I can only think that the continuing wave of energy and goodwill across the world is God's Spirit taking advantage of the opportunities given to him by changes in the church and in society. Bishop Graham Cray calls these changes new imagination about the church, new permission from church leaders and new resources (*e-xpressions* e-newsletter, August 2009). I'd add to that a growth in humility in the church, and a timely acceptance that we can't insist on everybody doing things 'as we think they should be done, as they have always been done', which has been a terrible cork in the bottle for reaching people in a fast-changing society. Church is no longer at the privileged centre of society in places like the UK; it's where it belongs, on the messy edge, where it can do most good and take most risks.

As for the changes in our society that give God's Spirit space to flourish (in other forms of church as well as the Messy sort), we can see the effect of developments such as the postmodern lack of trust in authority, making parents more inclined to stay with their children than to trust the church to teach them whatever it likes. There's also a sense of families being fragmented and parents feeling unskilled through not having trustworthy models to copy for parenting, or being geographically distant from the different generations of their extended family. For a growing number of people, there's the longing for somewhere to belong in a broken society—a longing for community. Financial pressures on families mean that anything offering free food and entertainment is worth considering. I wonder too if 'tasting and seeing' the schools of thought that leave us isolated on an impersonal, hopeless, godless and purposeless planet has given people who are bringing up children a desire for a kinder world view that sees love at the start and end of life. Such a world view values love as the cause, purpose, hope and sustaining force of life. This is the love shown gently in story and in action by a community of people; it comes to them when they experience the joys, wonder and brokenness of modern family life; and above all it meets them in the most wonderful person who ever lived.

Whatever the state of our society, God has wriggled through the gaps and given us this messy gift for reaching families and others for the present time. One piece of research suggests that the sheer weight of numbers of children coming to church is important, because statistically they are then more likely to become believers as adults (John Walker in 'A socio-theological critique of Fresh Expressions in the Diocese of Canterbury', January 2012, page 117, quoting R. Gill, *A Vision for Growth* (SPCK, 1994), page 39). In other words, if very few children come to church in the first few decades of the 21st century, there will be an exponentially massive drop in the number of churchgoers by 2050: people won't be 'finding their way back to church' because they will never have been to church in the first place. I can't get my head round that, but I do hope that although people of my generation tend to say, 'Church? Outdated, outclassed, irrelevant, boring,' the next generation may be saying, 'Church? Fun, food, friendly, warm, welcoming, inspiring, motivating.'

Whatever the future holds, you are part of the happy band of intrepid explorers hacking a path through the wilderness with scissors, double-sided sticky tape and glitter glue. You are helping children and adults today and tomorrow to find their way to the goodness of God and enjoy the life-changing benefits of being citizens of his kingdom. Or, if you take a more sombre attitude, we're Hansel and Gretel dropping cupcakes and sausages in the wild, witchy forest so that people can find their way safely home.

You have a few questions that have arisen since you started Messy Church. 'Helen is keen to have a Messy Eucharist, and has been hand-stitching a set of altar cloths with matching copes out of binliners and rickrack braid in liturgical colours ready for the occasion. Have you any advice?'

For what they're worth, here are my thoughts on the sacraments—those strange rites that are something meaningful in themselves and something greater than themselves, the thin places of church life where the crossover between heaven and earth can be most transparent. I think the main ones that affect Messy Church at this stage of

its development are Holy Communion and Baptism, with a few Messy Confirmation services sneaking in. I haven't yet heard of a Messy Funeral, although there has been a Messy Wedding reception for a couple who met at Messy Church. Oh, the possibilities for confetti...

I think that as individual Messy Churches reach a point in their development where they feel that Holy Communion would help their congregations experience more of God's love, they should make a point of mentioning it to their Bishop, Chair of District or equivalent. Communion is one of those services that links us firmly to the rest of the church in history and geography, and we should be mindful of not being isolated in our celebration. Anglicans may feel, as we did in our Messy Church, that the prescribed liturgy, even in its most flexible form, is not appropriate. In this case, talking to your friendly authority figure is a must, to see what options are available to you (which might be more flexible than you imagine). There is a suggested Communion liturgy in *Messy Church 2*, and another way of celebrating Christ's death and resurrection in this book. However, it is important to get a balance between touching base with the wider church and letting the liturgy genuinely grow as the 'work of the people', coloured and shaped by the local context and the local people who are present. Given the existing shape of Messy Churches, where tables are central to crafts and to food, it seems logical that we might develop forms of celebrating Communion around those tables. But we need to combine respect for the mystery with a sense of fun and joy. We should have minimal verbiage, but make what there is into 'portable poetry' that sticks in the mind and goes home with the family. Also ensure that there are maximum opportunities for participation. We need to talk with our denominational leaders and try to change the climate to help new congregations meet God in this unique way.

Baptism and confirmation present similar issues for Messy Churches in some denominations, in that the prescribed services can be very wordy and there is no provision to make the language more similar to that used in everyday Messy Church. If services are supposed to link with the wider church, and if Messy Church is part of that wider church, it needs to be a two-way process. We shouldn't expect Messy

Church people to conform to churchy language on ceremonial occasions without expecting inherited church people to experience something of Messy Church language or liturgy. You do say something startling:

One of our Messy Church families has asked to be baptised. This provoked something of a clerical feeding frenzy behind the scenes as we naturally all wanted them to be baptised at our own church. We have decided to tell them that they must choose a church to attend for a six-month period on Sundays, then be baptised there.

Hang on, hang on: is Messy Church a church or isn't it? Have they been committed members of that Messy Church? Why are you insisting on transplanting them to a different congregation to be baptised? Invite them to other congregations by all means, just as you might invite your Sunday morning people to try out a midweek communion to enrich their worship experience. But could you not at least give them the option of being baptised in the congregation in which they have come to faith? What message are you sending out about the authenticity of their experience at Messy Church if, when it comes to the crunch, it is not seen as a suitable place to celebrate such an important rite of passage?

While we're on the subject of rites of passage, wouldn't it be great to have more waymarkers to help people on their Christian journey? There is baptism and confirmation, but that's about it. Wouldn't it be brilliant to have rites of passage to mark the smaller but still significant steps of faith—the little steps of belonging, believing, behaving and blessing? What about ones that celebrate the joys and sorrows of family life: the new job, the death of a pet, the change of school? Or one that involves a gracious leaving ceremony for those who move on to another congregation or church, or go off to college, or move house: something that celebrates what God has already done and blesses the departure and next stage of life? Or what about confirming *everybody every year* in an annual party celebration, giving us *all* the chance to recommit our lives to God for the next year? The ceremony

could be woven into a seasonal pattern so that it could be planned for and looked forward to, allowing people to observe it before they actually say those words for themselves. I don't have the wisdom to create these ceremonies yet, but you might.

You mention:

We seem to be attracting more mums than dads. Indeed, when Revd Higgins put on his Bathsheba costume, he blended in perfectly. Our few dads run the risk of being ignored or flirted with. Pastor Percy had to flee the advances of one grandmother who was worryingly intent on initiating him into the art of herbal foot massage. How can we appeal to dads too and redress the balance?

Even in our egalitarian society, it's still more usual for mums to do things with children than for dads. However much we fight it, Messy Church can still look like something for children. But for the children's sake as well as for the dads' sake, we need male role models. We need the men to feel at home there and part of any journey their family is on. Here are a few strategies that may be helpful:

- ❖ Make sure there are men on the core team. Another Messy Church leader was bemoaning the same problem. When I asked how many men they have on their team, she looked startled and said, 'Oh! None!'
- ❖ Drag a man onto the planning team to ensure that the range of activities includes blokey things done in a blokey way. This doesn't exclude women or girls. When Manly Pete brought his manly saws, hammers and workbench to make wooden boats in our Messy Church, of course there were just as many females as males having a go.
- ❖ Have activities that aren't 'making something to take home' but are just things to do, for example, science experiments, or things to construct or destroy, ideally noisily or in a smelly way. Gross is good. Big is good. Competition works well: who can achieve the

highest, biggest, fastest or longest...? And technology has its place, with judicious use of cameras to make videos, and computers to facilitate comment on what is important in the news, life or Messy Church itself.

- ❖ Encourage some Manly Men to look over your publicity and handouts. Have you inadvertently excluded them with your design or wording?

But all this is relatively trivial. It's the quality of friendships more than anything else that will make men and women, children and teens want to come. And by the way, it's worth having a look at organisations like the wonderful *Who Let The Dads Out?* (read the book, BRF, 2012), which focus on dads spending time with their children.

'Pastor Percy's neighbour, Hannibal, enjoyed coming till September, but then started at secondary school and now considers Messy Church something just for children.' There are two lines of thought on teenagers. One is that they need a church congregation that is specific and exclusive to young people. The other is that they need to be part of an all-age congregation for their own sake and for the sake of those younger than them (who need role models) and those older than them (who need their prejudices challenging and help with their iPhones). I think both are true. As far as Messy Church is concerned, the teenagers who attended a consultation day about their role in Messy Church came back to us loud and clear with the message that their Messy Church is the only place they can hang out with younger and older people, and they value that. Teenagers, however, also need a supportive peer group so that they don't end up simply childminding or endlessly discussing what they want to do when they leave school.

If your teenager happens to be someone who isn't interested in helping others, serving the wider community, making things, leading from the front or simply being with other people, it's no use saying what we usually do, which is, 'Get the teenagers onto the leadership team as quickly as possible.' Messy Church will appeal to some teenagers and not to others, just as a youth congregation will appeal

to some teenagers and not to others. Perhaps it appeals primarily to those young people who are looking for a ministry within the church. The key is in relationships, in knowing your young people well and looking imaginatively at what they can give to and receive from a church as they go through a time of rapid change in their lives. It's about remembering that Messy Church is only one part of a wider church, which of course means that keeping strong links with that wider church is important.

Revd Higgins is concerned about Messy Church being 'church lite'. He feels the need to preach a sermon series on Romans over the next twelve months to give the Messy congregation some proper teaching, but we're finding it hard to come up with many crafts on the theme of justification by faith.

Our friend and mentor Revd Dr George Lings pointed out the very useful image of the triangle of learning that makes for good all-round discipleship. It involves three equally important sides of learning: formal learning (for example, from sermons), informal learning (such as that which goes on around craft tables) and social learning (what we pick up by being with other people). Messy Church gives oodles of opportunities for informal learning (chatting through Bible stories; picking up creative skills; discussing spiritual matters; singing and praying) and for social learning (watching how other families behave; seeing what a Christian community is like; sitting and eating with people). But, in its current state, there is less opportunity for formal learning. A traditional church service, on the other hand, gives plenty of opportunity for formal learning (through sermons and Bible studies) but less opportunity for informal or social learning, except over coffee afterwards, and of course at home groups during the week. So we need to value the different types of learning already going on at Messy Church and not assume that formal learning is the only valid approach to discipleship.

In one piece of research, Messy Church is likened to the shallow end of a swimming pool, a safe place for families to play and grow in

confidence as they learn to swim, dive and break out into deeper water. However, the deep end isn't empirically 'better' than the shallow end: you can't do handstands underwater at the deep end; you can't relax there with a toddler; Peter couldn't have run to Jesus through the depths of the Sea of Galilee. It's simply different, and there are things you can do there that are impossible at the shallow end.

Church is about helping each other to grow towards God, whatever stage we or they are at, not abandoning what is good just because other people look down on it. What was Paul really saying when he wrote, 'When I became a man, I put the ways of childhood behind me' (1 Corinthians 13:11)? Was he really applauding himself for leaving behind the ways of childhood or was he regretting their loss? Jesus certainly saw children as models of discipleship (Matthew 18:2–4) rather than seeing childhood as a state to be abandoned as quickly as possible. It may be topsy-turvy, but we should expect that. It's part of God choosing the 'foolish' things of the world to shame the 'wise' (1 Corinthians 1:26–28).

The place for formal learning for a Messy congregation may be outside the actual Messy Church in a much smaller group, so that it doesn't try to take everyone on a journey that might be too fast, too soon for some. Some Messy Churches are experimenting with groups and courses. Perhaps you should look imaginatively at the range of programmes available and find one that will appeal to the people in your care, rather than imposing something alien and potentially off-putting on the actual Messy Church gathering. But do value the discipling that is happening at your Messy Church—the gentle, ongoing role-modelling and mentoring that mean so much and are so easily overlooked.

You finish with a very affirming statement: 'What an impact we're having on the families who come. What lifelong memories we're helping to create. Church is about Jesus and blessings. Messy Church has changed our children's concept of church, and ours.' Many of us would echo that awe and wonder, partly because it feels so unlikely that God would choose to work in such a direct way through people

like us, and partly because we're asking questions about things in church that we've always taken for granted: who is it for—believers or those who don't believe? What does hospitality mean—does it flow one-way or has the 'guest' as much to contribute as the 'host'? How are we best 'fed'—through being served or through serving others? What should we be aiming for in our faith development—to become more or less childlike? Is 'fun' the opposite of 'respectful'? Is the one church gathering the main or only aspect of being church? Are we better together or apart?

We don't know what the future holds for Messy Church. But we have 2,000 years of wisdom to draw on, a church family from many different countries and of differing expressions and denominations, together with the best guide in history to steer us through, so there's plenty of help at hand to make sure that whatever happens as Messy Churches spread, grow, make mistakes and work miracles, Jesus is at the warm heart and the messy edge of everything.

May God be with you in the messiness of your painting, your praising and your planning.

[The final quotation attributed to the Clodpool team is adapted from an email from Elaine Trendell in South Australia in January 2012:

Our special speaker for the day brought his children and wife. His son three times that evening thanked Dad for taking him to Messy Church. The next morning he thanked him again, saying that when they are in the grave together, his soul will roll across to Dad's soul and say, 'Thanks for taking me to Messy Church, Dad.' Think he loved it. What an impact on a child, and that's only one. What a lifelong memory. Church is about Jesus and blessings. Messy Church has changed our children's concept of church, and ours.]

A LETTER TO THE CHURCHES IN CLODPOOL-IN-THE-MARSH SOME TIME LATER

Dear Helen, Revd Higgins and Pastor Percy,

So you've celebrated your fifth Messy birthday! Congratulations! The cake sounds amazing. It was very brave of you to use five fireworks instead of candles, and I'm so glad the subsequent 'pebble-dashing' effect of the cake decorations on the hall walls came off with white spirit and a chisel. You probably don't realise what you and your team have achieved in establishing your Messy Church and running it for five years. It really is a major achievement to have got it off the ground jointly, making the most of the differences between your three churches. That you've maintained it all this time so faithfully, when it's such hard work and requires so much creativity, imagination and sheer sweat to make it happen, is amazing. You say you're getting up-and-down numbers, but average out at about 50–60 people each time. Just think how many families you've touched with God's love over the last five years. Phenomenal.

Despite this celebration, you wrote because you are all feeling a bit down, having received discouraging feedback from two sources, the first being someone within your own church.

St Genevieve's has a new curate fresh from theological college who is far more up to date than we are with the latest cutting-edge thinking on mission and discipleship. She's proposed shutting down the Messy Church for the following reasons: nobody has become a Christian in the five years we've been running, and nobody wanted to go on an Alpha Course from it. Also, she has critically analysed the last three sessions and found that we are too heavy on 'blessing' and not 'challenging' enough. All in all, she can't see the justification for continuing.

It's always useful to have an outside eye to look afresh at what we do and to offer critical reflection. At the same time, we need to be

confident in what we're doing when we trust it's where God has led us, and where we can see him at work, even if that isn't in the way we'd expected. As an aside, it's worth noting that the provision for training on all-age or children's ministry in many theological colleges in the UK is minimal, and it would be interesting to ask how long your curate has spent studying either of these disciplines. I suspect you may have more hands-on experience and knowledge than she does, even if you don't have the academic language to frame it—although her wider reading on mission and discipleship will no doubt prove very helpful.

Your Messy Church isn't a course for people to pass or fail. It's a church that welcomes people in, whatever their belief or way of life, and invites them to encounter Jesus. We may have made that once-for-all commitment to follow Christ—when we deliberately opted into the process of becoming more like him—and your congregation members may not have 'become Christians' in this sense. However, they may well, by God's grace and your faithfulness, be in the process of 'becoming Christians', which in a way we all are. Your Messy Church isn't like dropping in on a distant relative; it's like a parent bringing up children, there for the long haul as they come and go, fight with you, laugh with you and weep on you. No parent expects a child to grow up overnight. It's a gradual process in which the parents' role is to know when to step in and when to let go, but most of all to be there faithfully, shaping their child's life and values, which in turn shapes the person they are and the impact they have on the world. It's also about being able to let go at the right time.

Research indicates that the process of becoming a disciple can take years. Many of the people coming to Messy Church are not only miles away from any knowledge of Christianity, they may also be closed and hostile towards it, or apathetic and lacking expectancy about what it can offer (John Finney, *Finding Faith Today* (Bible Society, 1992), pages 22–25). What you're doing is helping those people to grow in knowledge and understanding about what it means to be a Christian, who Jesus is and how they can see God's fingerprints in the world and their lives. You're also opening them up emotionally to realise that

church can be a happy, welcoming and fun place and one that makes them grateful for the blessing it is for them and their children. You're making church part of their family story. That's a very tall order, but you're actually doing it!

Yes, some Messy Churches have found courses like the Alpha Course, the Start Course, the Puzzling Questions Course, the Emmaus Course or the Journeys Course helpful tools to help individuals to grow in understanding and faith. They've been imaginative and discerning about who to invite on such courses and have been overjoyed to see people come to a personal faith and to baptism. But putting someone through a course isn't the only sign of growth and blessing. The rest of your letter showed many signs of the kingdom working their way through your congregation. Just look at how your team is working so happily together, even managing to resolve the knotty 'wholewheat or ordinary pasta' dispute without schism; the way your team member stood by the mum going through her messy divorce and kept her going with phone calls, emails and lattes; the way the double rainbow appeared over St Portly's at the very moment you came to that point in the story of Noah; the way the whole of Year 4 at Clodpool Primary School is buzzing about faith since eight-year-old Blair introduced them to the Yo-Yo of Doctrine that he made at Messy Church.

What about the signs that God is finding his way into family life? There's the mum who was corrected by her child for saying 'Jesus Christ!' ('Jesus wouldn't like that, Mummy.') There's the bath-time singing of Messy Church songs. There's the Messy Grace being said at mealtimes. There's even the way one family has started championing the local foodbank since you made it an issue last year. And as for the change in Horace Ramsbotham the treasurer—well!

Horace has had a change of heart, and since seeing his own grandchildren becoming regular Messy members after he'd given up all hope of them ever coming to church, he is trying to force us to spend more, rants at every church meeting about the need to fund mission and discipleship realistically, has signed up for the

Mission-Shaped Ministry Course and has increased his personal giving by 30 per cent.

Even if Mrs Penworthy-Smythe continues to stand outside your Messy Church every month with a placard saying, ‘Take the mess out of church,’ you say the families quite enjoy seeing her there and that several have presented her with Christmas chocolates as if she is a sort of lollipop lady. There seems to have been a whole lot of growth in godly things in your community, in personal relationships, in faith at home, in service and in individuals since you started your Messy Church. Very mustard-seedish. Very yeasty.

As for the emphasis you put on ‘blessing’ rather than ‘challenge’ in the themes you choose—what can I say? I can’t imagine you’re lying to people about the cost of being a disciple of Christ, telling them it’s all sunshine and roses. But what do people need to hear first and loudest? How much God wants to change them or how much he loves them unconditionally, just as they are? Maybe something we’ve inherited from past generations of church has been a voice that says, ‘No! You’ve got to stop! You’re not good enough!’ louder than it says, ‘God loves you even more than you love your nearest and dearest—he loves you just for being you. You can never do anything that will cut you off from his love. God’s plan for you is one of hope, adventure, purpose, safe boundaries and happy endings.’ We may be loading the scales too much on one side, but that’s partly to counterbalance the weight of the inheritance we’re dealing with. A helpful piece of advice current among Bible storytellers is not to give children things to *unlearn*, however imaginatively you work with the story. You could apply the same principle to doctrine.

The other discouragement you told me about was from the area’s ‘What’s happening in the churches?’ roadshow:

We put up a display of photos from Messy Church, had a tray of cupcakes, and set up several crafts for people to try. But when the Archdeacon arrived at our display he told us we should change our

Messy Church to a Sunday, hold it every week and make sure that people started coming to Sunday church out of it.

The problem here isn't what you're doing, or how or when you're doing it—it's a misunderstanding on the part of the Archdeacon as to what Messy Church is all about. It wouldn't hurt to drop him a non-confrontational line and explain why you're doing things the way you're doing them. BRF has produced a leaflet for ministers explaining what Messy Church is, which we can send to you if it would help; a DVD that shows Messy Churches in action; and a range of published resources. We provide as much information as we can on the website; we continue to be available for training events in circuits, dioceses or individual churches; and we will happily go and chat to any denominational leaders or groups who would like a one-to-one conversation about it.

Helen is wondering about leaving the core team as she feels exhausted and has run out of cereal boxes. Pastor Percy is moving on to a post in Guatemala at the end of the year and Revd Higgins has been given another six parishes to look after. We are not sure what the future holds for Messy Church here in Clodpool.

When are we ever sure what the future holds? We try to be faithful and wise in the present, but the future isn't our responsibility. God has always used 'people moving on' to advance the spread of the kingdom: look at the way the early disciples of Jesus fled persecution in Jerusalem and spread the gospel around the Mediterranean. I know you've been giving young Britney more responsibility—have you invited her onto the core team yet? And what are you doing about giving those teenagers a real role to play in Messy Church? They sound as if they would be more than competent at some form of leadership. Perhaps you could share the load and give new people a chance to grow their own ministries by letting go of some of the responsibility.

Now you're well established and know what you're doing, it's also

worth thinking about ways of re-energising your team members. Holding a monthly team meeting with treats to eat and a theme or aspect of the Messy work to consider could be very rewarding and would provide a chance for everyone to gain a better understanding of the bigger picture of what you're trying to do. You might find the extra sessions on the Messy Church DVD a good resource for themes and training. The *Get Messy!* magazine will also have a few 'focusing questions' for the team to talk about each month. In addition, BRF can organise Messy weekends in different locations, where leaders can spend time with each other and with members of the BRF Messy team, swap ideas and have a chance to take time out with God. It's the Messy equivalent of Continuing Ministerial Education. These weekends have proved popular and might be just the fillip Helen needs to help her continue her valuable ministry. It sounds as if Horace would find the funds for her to go! Discipleship is about the team just as much as it is about members of the congregation, and we must treasure each other. And we look forward to the first Messy Church in Guatemala before long.

Where will it all go from here? BRF will continue to provide a central service to Messy Churches, responding to requests for resources, ideas and advice and acting as a melting pot for the wisdom and experience that is coming in from all over the world as people make new discoveries through their Messy Churches. We'll make the most of new technologies to have a two-way relationship with Messy Church leaders. We'll continue to be advocates for ministry among families and to encourage the wider church to take it seriously. We'll do our best to support the new Messy growth overseas and to learn from those churches in their very different contexts. We'll hold the whole movement lightly and make every attempt to be partners in the gospel rather than stifling the Spirit. And, like good parents, we will try to discern when to hold on and when to let go.

You are doing such a brilliant work where it matters and with the people who matter. You're waterskiing in the wake of God's boat.

Yes, your arms ache, it's bumpy, and it hurts when you fall down, but he'll always stop and let you find your feet again—and isn't it glorious when you're on the move with him at the wheel?

With every blessing for your ongoing adventure.

Session material



A new start

HOW DOES THIS SESSION HELP PEOPLE GROW IN CHRIST?

Forgiveness is a key part of God’s rescue plan: Jesus died on the cross so that we can be forgiven. In families one of the hardest, yet most healing, things to do is to forgive each other and ask for forgiveness. This may be the start of the year, a time for making resolutions, when people are thinking about making a fresh start in all kinds of areas of life. Helping families find strategies to forgive each other could have a massive impact on the lives of children and adults.

Main Bible story: Luke 5:17–26

ACTIVITIES

1 Soap making

You will need: a soap kit (available from craft shops and hired out by many Regional Coordinators—check the Messy Church website for your Regional Coordinator’s contact details) or bars of cheap, soft soap; table knives

Make, or carve, soap.

Talk about

Forgiveness is like washing dirt away with soap. It is like wiping away

the bad things from the past and starting out all new and clean. Jesus helps us do this incredibly hard thing.

2 Gift box

You will need: small boxes or an origami pattern to make a gift box; decorative scraps; air-drying clay; sequins; beads; tissue paper; PVA glue; spreaders; pens

Make a small clay heart and decorate it with sequins and beads. Decorate your origami or ready-made box with scraps, leaving one side clear. Pad the inside with tissue paper and put the heart in. Write on the box's undecorated side, 'Forgive as the Lord forgave you' (Colossians 3:13). You can give it away as a sign that you forgive someone, or keep it to remind you to forgive other people.

Talk about

Is it easier to forgive someone or to ask for forgiveness?

3 Chalkboard scribbles

You will need: a chalkboard or pieces of board painted with blackboard paint and allowed to dry; chalk; cloths

Have fun scribbling on the chalkboard. Older people might enjoy the challenge of writing as many words as possible to do with forgiveness. Then clean the board.

Talk about

Jesus knew it was really important for people to be healed from the inside out, and he offered them forgiveness as part of their healing.

4 The big scribble

You will need: soft pencils; erasers; paper

Use the soft pencil to scribble all over the paper or to cover it with words about hurt, pain and sin, so that there are no gaps or areas of white paper showing. Use the eraser to write 'I forgive you' through the scribbling.

Talk about

Jesus saw beyond what was on the surface and spoke to people about what really mattered. For the man in the story, this was his need for forgiveness.

5 Shredding

You will need: a paper shredder; pieces of paper with pictures of people doing wrong things or descriptions of sins and shortcomings on them

Invite people to find a piece of paper that means something to them or is part of their own life. Encourage them to put it through the shredder as a sign that they want God to forgive them and take that unhelpful action or habit away.

Talk about

Jesus wants people to be close to God, not caught up in habits and actions that cut them off from him, so he offers forgiveness to people who want to make a new start.

6 Clockwork races

You will need: wind-up toys that move forwards; scraps of material; masking tape

Tell the story of the paralysed man who was let down through the roof and how Jesus forgave him his sins and told him to pick up his mat and walk. Say that this was a new start for the man. Stick a piece of masking tape down on the floor as a starting line and say that this is the new start line for us. (Make a finishing line too.) Encourage people to attach a piece of material to their chosen clockwork toy with masking tape. This represents the mat of the healed man. Invite people to race their clockwork toys from the starting line.

Talk about

How do you think the man felt when he was able to take part fully in life again?

7 New-start mat-weaving

You will need: sticky tape; strips of paper or cloth about 30cm long, each with one of the following words or phrases on: new life, forgiveness, fresh start, clean slate, new beginnings, new hope, face the future, repent, sorry, clear conscience, no guilt, apologise, no shame, no blame, no resentment, faith, hope, love, trust, grace, mercy

Choose a handful of strips whose words say the most about forgiveness to you. Weave the strips of paper or cloth over and under each other to make a mat that connects all these aspects of forgiveness together. Stick tape around the edges if necessary to hold the strips in place.

Talk about

Jesus said, 'Forgive and you will be forgiven' (Luke 6:37). What do you think of that?

8 Model house

You will need: large and small cardboard boxes; old crayons or dowling rods; lengths of string; sticky tape; rectangular pieces of card or cloth; paper; colouring pencils; scissors; PVA glue; spreaders

Put the box on its side. Cut a rectangular hole in the top, 1cm smaller in length than the crayon or dowling rod. Take a piece of card or cloth and stick two lengths of string to it, one at each end. Tie the free ends of both pieces of string to the crayon. Tape a small box either side of the hole in the top of the box. Poke the ends of the crayon into both boxes so that it is supported horizontally. When you turn the crayon, the string should gradually be wound up, bringing the mat up. Unwind the string to lower the mat. Make the scene inside the house using paper, scissors and colouring pencils. Include figures of Jesus and the people inside. Cut out paper figures of the man and his four friends. Lay the man on the mat and put the friends on the roof. Retell the story using the model.

Talk about

Which part of this story do you think is the most important?

9 Puffy-paint writing

You will need: 4 dessert spoons each of flour, salt and water; 1 dessert spoon of baking powder; food colouring; a bowl; squeezey bottles or brushes or self-sealing food bags; sheets of card; a microwave (optional)

Mix up the dry ingredients and add food colouring and water to make a thick paint consistency. People could either use a brush to paint with or squirt from bottles. You could also mix up all the ingredients in a self-sealing food bag and snip off a corner to make a painting tool. Invite people to write 'forgive' or paint a heart onto a piece of card. Air-dry or heat in a microwave for 20 to 60 seconds.

Talk about

Why do you think Jesus said to the man in today's story, 'Your sins are forgiven,' when the man hadn't told him about any sins?

10 Cross of forgiveness

You will need: water bombs; runny, washable paint; a wooden cross or a large picture of a cross on a sheet of cardboard; marker pens

This is one for outside. Set up the wooden cross or attach the cardboard cross to a wall or fence. Fill the water bombs with runny paint and write on them in marker pen one of the following words: pride, laziness, despair, greediness, selfishness, envy, idolatry, nastiness, gossip, meanness, cruelty, spite, horribleness, bad temperedness, tantrums, disobedience, letting friends down or cowardice. Leave some blank in a separate container. Give three to each person and explain that these are things we all struggle with at one time or another. Jesus died on the cross so that we could be forgiven from them all. We can take them to the cross and get rid of the guilt we feel because of them. Encourage people to throw their bombs at the cross as hard as they can. Now ask them to pick a blank water bomb and write on it something only they and God know they need to bring to the cross, and then throw that one too.

Talk about

You'll have done enough talking by now on this activity.

CELEBRATION

Tell the story from Luke using people to play the parts of things and characters in the story.

First we need a HOUSE—who can be the walls of the house? Now we need someone to be JESUS and some really clever people to be the PHARISEES and TEACHERS OF THE LAW. Could you all sit in the house listening to Jesus? And we need a CROWD of people—that’s everyone else. Could you come and sit here around the house, trying to get as close as you can to Jesus?

One day Jesus was teaching, and Pharisees and teachers of the law were sitting there. They had come from every village of Galilee and from Judea and Jerusalem. And the power of the Lord was with Jesus to heal the sick.

Now we need four FRIENDS and someone to be the MAN WHO COULDN’T WALK (someone small). Let’s put the man on the blanket. Now can you carefully carry the blanket with him on it to the front door of the house where Jesus is?

Some men came carrying a paralysed man on a mat and tried to take him into the house to lay him before Jesus. When they could not find a way to do this because of the crowd...

Oh dear! There’s no way through to Jesus. But look at that little outside staircase that leads to the flat roof. Can you take him carefully up there? Now can you lift off the tiles? And the reeds and straw holding the ceiling together? Oooh, Pharisees and teachers—what’s all that dirt coming down on your heads? And very gently, friends, lower the man down in front of—not on top of!—Jesus.

... they went up on the roof and lowered him on his mat through the tiles into the middle of the crowd, right in front of Jesus. When Jesus saw their faith, he said, ‘Friend, your sins are forgiven.’

Now this was a very dangerous thing to say! The Pharisees and teachers of the law didn't like that at all.

The Pharisees and the teachers of the law began thinking to themselves, 'Who is this fellow who speaks blasphemy? Who can forgive sins but God alone?'

Do you think that inside thought showed on their outside faces?

Jesus knew what they were thinking and asked, 'Why are you thinking these things in your hearts? Which is easier: to say, "Your sins are forgiven," or to say, "Get up and walk"? But I want you to know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins.' So he said to the paralysed man, 'I tell you, get up, take your mat and go home.' Immediately he stood up in front of them, took what he had been lying on and went home praising God.

Yes, praising God. What do you think he said? What do you think he did?

Everyone was amazed and gave praise to God.

Yes, they gave praise to God too! What did they say? What did they do?

They were filled with awe and said, 'We have seen remarkable things today.'

Let's say that together: 'We have seen remarkable things today!'

Jesus healed the man on the outside, but he also healed him on the inside. He forgave the man all the bad things that were dragging him down and holding him back. Imagine what wonderful places our homes and schools and workplaces would be if we all forgave people the bad things they did to us. I wonder if we can try this month to see what it's like when we forgive people around us? It won't be easy, but Jesus is brilliant at helping us if we ask him. And we can help each other by reminding each other what today's story was about.

Prayer

Just where we're sitting, let's pass round these pens and write on the palms of each other's hands a little F, one on each palm. Now let's pray just one line from the Lord's Prayer. Put one F in the air. 'Forgive us our sins.' Now lower that F and lift up the other one. 'As we forgive those who sin against us.' Let's pray that again... and again... now really quietly... now really loudly... now with our eyes shut... now opening our eyes and standing up... Just as our hands go up, our prayers go out to God from the inside out.

And now, as God's forgiven and forgiving people, let's sing...

Sunday treat

Our Father in heaven...

This week, God, please help us to know you as our Father in heaven.

Thank you for the way you love us to bits whatever we do.

Thank you that you're always there for us, holding us tight.

Thank you that you want us to be close to you.

Thank you especially that you... (say your own ideas).

Take-home idea

Go for a walk in the park, town or countryside and see how many new things you can spot—new starts of any sort, such as new bulbs sprouting, new fashions, new books or games just published, new babies or new buildings. Score a point for every new start and see who spots the most. Talk about any new starts you need to make as a family—small things like saying sorry for doing something wrong or big things like starting a new term, a new job or new nursery. Reassure everyone that God is there to help.

Messy team theme

- ❖ The man went away praising God; all were amazed. What has God done in your life this month that has made you praise him or be amazed?
- ❖ Friends are crucial in this story in bringing the man to Jesus. How can we be friends like this to the families who come to Messy Church? What can we do better?
- ❖ Is there anything we need to ask God's forgiveness for in the way we're leading our Messy Church?