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How to use this magazine

Suggestions for planning

1. Ask God to bless and guide you as you consider what's most helpful to bring families in your community closer to him in the coming months.
2. Glance through the four sessions so that you have an overview of the months ahead, and note down any resources that will take time to source.
3. Use the downloadable planning sheets to share this month's session with your core team in plenty of time, and meet to shape the ideas together to suit your own situation.
4. If you're meeting face to face with the team, talk about this month's theme, using the Messy Team Theme provided.
5. Tell God what you're worried about.
6. Ensure that the whole extended team has copies of your final version of activities, together with the Bible reflection provided to give them the background they need. You could give them the link to the passage on www.biblegateway.com if you're not certain they have their own Bibles.
7. Include the take-home and Sunday treat ideas on handouts, texts, a Facebook page or emails to families.
8. Print copies of the mealtime question cards for the meal tables.
9. Encourage review and reflection from everyone after the session has taken place and respond to suggestions for change ready for next time.
10. Thank God for wherever you saw him at work.

Themes in this edition

In this issue we gallop happily from the Old Testament (as we look at the very messy son and husband, Samson) into the Epistles (as we consider a very different family set-up in the gentler life of Timothy, Lois and Eunice). We take in Easter, focusing on the achingly lonely Gospel account of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, and circle back to the Old Testament with the joyful eruption of praise for God's creation that is Psalm 148. There's no need to worry about the apparently wild hopping back and forth in time and biblical genres. For one thing, Messy Church is generally only once a month, so it would be hard for everyone to remember in detail what the last stage of the story was the previous month. For another, the bigger plan makes sense as you look at the variety of passages we explore over the whole of the year of *Get Messy!* We're helping families explore key Gospel passages, but also cracking Old Testament ones and parts of the Epistles, because we believe with Paul that 'all Scripture is God-breathed and useful' (2 Timothy 3:16).

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You're welcome to photocopy the Bible reflections and session outlines for use within your team, but please don't send copies further afield. Copying other parts of the magazine is not permitted.



Lucy Moore writes...



What on earth is going on? In the busyness of running a Messy Church—selecting and resourcing activities with the attention to detail of a military exercise; pulling together the celebration with wisdom, grace and not a little hair-tearing; deciding a menu, despairing over what quantity of cheese or carrots you need, and getting a hot meal onto a table (I'm already panting for breath, but still the list goes on); debating the finer points of what you could do to enrich the Christian discipleship of your families and team when you have a full-time job to pay the mortgage and a family of your own who need your love and time—yes, in the middle of all this, it's really good to take a step back and just say, 'Wow'.

Or 'Alleluia', or 'Praise God', or whatever words you use to articulate that sense of awe that God is living and active and unstoppable and doing something new, not just across the world but where you live.

It's a good thing to do because it makes us notice the unnoticed and value what might otherwise go by unvalued. In other words, it makes us grow more like Jesus, who always noticed the unnoticed and valued those who felt they had no value. At this stage of Messy

Church's development, when we're still busy ploughing the field, never mind sowing seeds, it's very hard to have a way of 'ticking a box' that would mean 'success', of proving empirically that all the effort we're putting into our Messiness is 'showing results'. What we need to do is be like gloating gardeners who rejoice as much over one germinating seed as over a bumper crop of prize pumpkins. We need to rejoice in little things—a sea change in attitude, a gradual movement towards togetherness and trust, the delight and pride where once there was wariness and cynicism. These are signs of the kingdom.

It's really good to take a step back and just say, 'Wow'

I was going to write this editorial marvelling at the indication of God alive and active, as proven by the speedy, supernatural growth of Messy Church across the world. But as I've pondered, I've come to think that while that's exciting, what is of eternal worth is rather the small stuff that we all see in our Messy Churches on the ground at grass-roots level.

We get down on our knees not just to scrape the congealed ketchup off the floor but to thank our loving God that he's alive and active and has chosen us to be alive at a time in history when he's chosen to act so visibly. Something as unexpected as Messy Church can, I think, only be attributed to God's Holy Spirit taking matters into her own hands. She's scooping up the churches she's loved and nurtured for centuries, moulding them gently and breathing new life into them for this age and generation. She's sweeping away in dusty rooms, shining her lamp in dark corners and finding lost and buried treasure that's waiting to be put into circulation. She's adding the yeast to

the dough and giving it space, time and warmth to rise up. She's mothering her church like a hen mothers her chicks, so that we in turn can be fathers and mothers and children to the lonely of all ages in our communities. It's something new, but something that's growing out of something ancient. In his poem 'God's Grandeur', Gerard Manley Hopkins beautifully describes it as 'the dearest freshness deep down things'.

That freshness shines out as we share the lives, joys and sorrows of the families in our communities. 'We're never welcome twice—you've seen how my kids behave. But you've made us feel you really want us here,' said one person. 'Helping at Messy Church has made me not only stop being afraid of those women, I've actually started loving them,' said one team member. 'I used to be scared of people with dementia. Now I can't wait to see them,' said another. How brilliant! These words, stories, insights are like light breaking through the cracks of a ceramic jar. It's as if there's been a pent-up fire burning in some churches that's been blown into such a heat that it can't be contained any more and is bursting out of the stone walls, warming and lighting up the families standing nearby. This seems a violent image to use of something as warm and friendly as Messy Church: perhaps a better picture would be of a big, benevolent panda breaking out of its cage and hugging all the families it can reach... Hmmm. I'll have to think about that one.

What on earth is going on? Heaven on earth is going on. The kingdom of God is going on, unstoppable, unpredictable, uncontainable as a wildfire. Or a panda. Take your pick. But do pause to say, 'Wow'.



Is Messy Church 'church'?

Graham Cray explains why he believes Messy Church is as much a church as the traditional Sunday-morning model.



I am quite often asked if Messy Church is 'church'. I have no hesitation in replying with a resounding 'yes', as I shall explain. Then, as a good Anglican, I shall add a few 'buts'. These are not about Messy Church in particular, but ones that I apply to all models of fresh expression of church, because the church never exists for its own sake.

The essence of church is a community of disciples, living in Jesus' presence, worshipping the Father through him, and sharing in his continuing mission from the Father to the world. That mission involves the calling of others to share in the same life of discipleship.

A fresh expression of church is a new congregation of an existing church, or a new church plant, created especially for people who have not been engaged by the church's existing ministry. To be a fresh expression of church it will be a congregation in its own right, growing to greater maturity, not a bridge to get people to 'real' church. Building bridges to existing congregations is a perfectly good strategy, and many churches use work with children and families in just that way, usually with the major emphasis being on the children. But the whole point of fresh expressions of church is to create church for those who probably won't feel at home in our existing congregations, or for whom we can provide something much more transformative if we plant something new.

A lot of Messy Church material is adaptable for a bridge-building approach; it is good material. But the heart of Messy Church is to plant a new congregation for families. It is not a new spin on children's outreach. Its essence is about creating church. It is Jesus centred. It has worship. It is community with a meal at its heart—which makes it more communal than a

lot of churches I know. It is, above all, about Jesus and it is missionary: it is for those who aren't otherwise part of the church. In the New Testament the word 'church' is applied at various levels. The core unit seems to be home based, then town-wide, then regional, and finally of the universal church. So fresh expressions of church, whether a church plant or an additional congregation, fit very well into this range of usage.

What about my Anglican 'yes-buts'? There are four words we have developed as characteristics of all healthy fresh expressions of church. They are **missional, contextual, formational and ecclesial**.

Messy Church is clearly **missional**. It is for people who don't otherwise attend church. The challenge, as with all models of fresh expression, is to keep its missional edge and to reach further and further away from the existing church's network of contacts.

Messy Church is also **formational**, as Paul Moore's book *Making Disciples in Messy Church* clearly demonstrates. Its long-term intention is to make disciples. As with all fresh expressions, this raises questions about growth to maturity. What does a mature Messy Church look like? Certainly not Tidy Church! All fresh expressions begin as catechumenate groups—people on a journey towards Jesus. They develop into communities of committed disciples who still welcome and focus on new explorers. They are communities in which it is essential to belong before believing, but in which it is always possible to take steps to deeper faith. Baptism and Holy Communion become a regular part of their life, and it is vital that these take place in Messy Church, not in some other 'real church' location.

Fresh expressions are **contextual**. It is of their essence that they fit the

local context. They are an expression of contextual mission, not something cloned because it works well in another context. This is the criticism sometimes made about Messy Church: that it is more of a franchise model than a contextual one. But in best practice it is the process of local discernment that leads to the decision to develop Messy Church rather than another model. The same process of discernment will also help to customise the general model to its local context. The point is not that every fresh expression should be unique, but that it should be appropriate to context. In a culture full of brands and franchises, it would be surprising if this were not also a component of contextual church planting.

And fresh expressions are **ecclesial**; new congregations are being planted all over the UK and overseas, and, thanks be to God, many of them are Messy Church!

Although I have scrutinised Messy Church against fresh expressions criteria, with positive results, I do not want to limit a gift of God. The spread of Messy Church is a movement of the Spirit in its own right and we may not yet have seen the full scope of God's missionary purpose. It is a gift to be received, in its own right.

Graham Cray is Archbishops' Missioner and leader of the Fresh Expressions team. He spent 14 years as vicar of St Michael-le-Belfrey, York, before being made principal of Ridley Hall, Cambridge, a Church of England theological college. Graham was consecrated in 2001 and became the Bishop of Maidstone and Bishop for Mission in the Diocese of Canterbury, where he remained for eight years. His special concerns are the engagement of the Gospel with contemporary culture, youth ministry and the theology of renewal.

Session material

January

Samson
—Messy hero

by Sharon Lakin

Activities

How does this session help people grow in Christ?

The New Year is a perfect time to think about new starts. Through Samson's story we are reminded that when we focus on what is important and turn back to Christ we are given a new start. We all make mistakes, but God can turn any weakness into strength—we just need to ask for his help.

Bible reference

Judges 13—16

Messy team theme

- Is it ever too late to turn to God?
- Can God use you even if you live your life imperfectly?

1. Headband

You will need: long strips of card for the headband; staples; brown paper; scissors; sticky tape

Measure your headband and staple the two ends together. Cut strips of brown paper and stick to the inside of the headband with tape to create 'hair'. Leave it straight or curl with scissors.



Talk about why Samson told Delilah his secret.

2. Weights

You will need: small foil bowls (four each); kitchen roll tubes; foil; double-sided tape; stickers



With double-sided tape, stick two bowls together by their rims to make one weight. Repeat with two more bowls. Cover your tube with foil, leaving extra foil at both ends of the tube. Stick the ends of the foil on the tubes to one of your weights and repeat at the other end. Decorate with stickers if desired.

Talk about how Samson used his strength. How could he have used it? What has God given you?

3. 'How easy?' test

You will need: a jar with a lid; a Bible with thin pages; a shoe with laces; wrapped sweets; large bulky gardening gloves; scarf

Unscrew the lid of the jar and put it back on, open the Bible to page 100, tie the shoelaces into a bow and undo a sweet and eat it. Now try the same tasks with the gardening gloves on and finally repeat with gloves on and blindfolded.

Talk about how easy the task was to begin with. Did it make a difference when you could no longer use your hands in the same way and were blinded? How does this relate to Samson?



Samson—Messy hero

4. Strength test

You will need: four bags of plain flour, plus a few spares in case they burst; a large plastic mat; stopwatch

Stand on the mat opposite a friend. Take two bags of flour each, one in each hand. Hold your arms out straight and hold for as long as possible. See who can hold out for the longest. Drop the flour when your arms are too tired.

Talk about whether you needed just physical strength for this task. When do you need mental strength? When Samson told Delilah his secret, did he have mental strength?

5. Junk temple with pillars

You will need: cardboard boxes in varying sizes

Create a temple with pillars using the boxes. When it's finished, have one person act as Samson and stand between the pillars and destroy the temple. If there is time, rebuild the temple and allow someone else to be Samson.

Talk about why Samson turned back to God. Why did he ask for his strength back one last time?

6. Hair braiding

You will need: embroidery threads; scissors (for the threads, not hair!)

Use the embroidery threads to plait into your hair or a friend's hair.

Talk about how God gives us all different strengths. What are yours? How do you use them? What would you like to ask God for?

7. Edible Samson

You will need: paper plates; colouring pencils; fairy cakes; butter icing; edible red 'laces'; Smarties; icing pens; uncooked spaghetti; marshmallows

Draw Samson's upper body, neck and arms on the plate so he is in a weightlifting pose. Take a short piece of spaghetti and place a marshmallow on each end. Repeat so you have two sets of weights. Decorate your fairy cake to make Samson's face and give him long hair with the laces. Place the cake on the plate at the top of his neck and place the 'weights' in each hand.



Talk about what makes you strong.

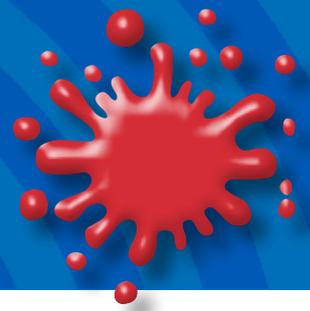
8. Hair prayer tiles

You will need: mirror tiles (or mirror card); wool in hair colours; double-sided tape; hole punch; ribbon; strong sticky tape; verse printed on card: 'I can do all things through Christ who gives me strength', Philippians 4:13 (NIV, adapted)

Put double-sided tape around three edges of the mirror tile. Stick wool to it to create a hairstyle. Take a verse slip and punch holes in the top two corners. Tie a length of ribbon through each hole and secure the end of the ribbons to the back of the tile. The verse should hang from the bottom of the tile when held up.

Talk about the year ahead with God, looking into the mirror and asking him to help you. Use the mirror at home to remind you that Samson needed God's help, and we do too. Use the mirror as you pray to God for strength when you have difficult decisions to make.

Samson—Messy hero



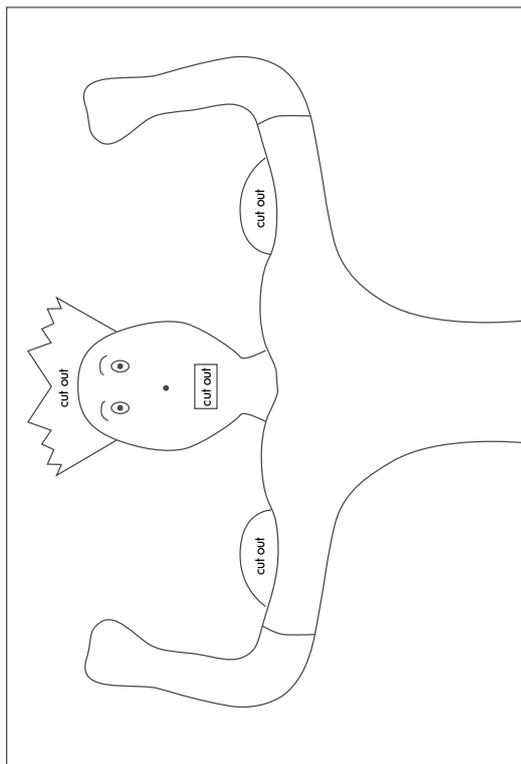
9. Lion memo peg

You will need: wooden pegs; magnets; yellow card circles; small orange or yellow pompoms; googly eyes; felt-tip pens; double-sided tape; small cards with the words 'Samson was stronger than a lion'

Stick eyes to the circle and draw a nose and mouth. Using double-sided tape, stick pompoms around the edge of the circle to create a mane. Turn the peg on its side. Using tape, stick the lion's head to the peg. Stick a magnet to the other side of the peg (make sure young children don't put the magnet in their mouth). Open the peg and slide in your memo.



Talk about how Samson was stronger than a lion. Do you think that made him feel more important than others? When is it good to feel proud, and when is it not so good?



10. Samson's muscles

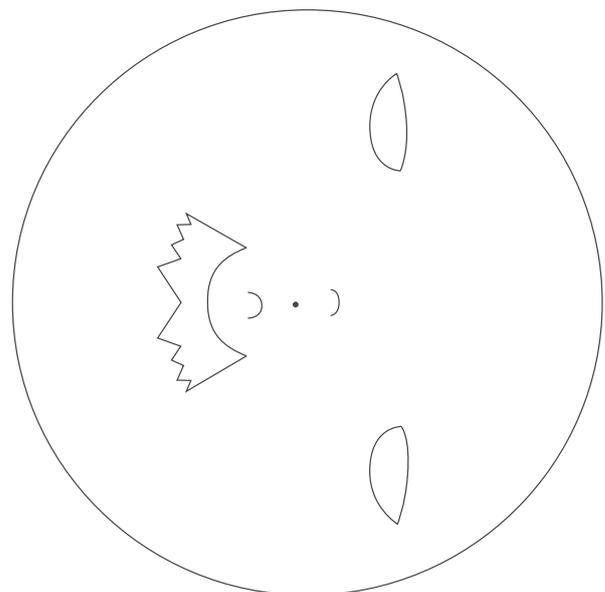
You will need: circle and Samson templates printed on white card; paper fasteners; felt-tip pens

Cut out the parts marked on the Samson template. Colour Samson in. Cut out the circle. Make a hole in the centre. Colour in the hair and muscles (same colour as Samson's body). Make a hole for Samson's nose. Put the paper fastener through the nose hole and then through the hole of the circle and secure. Turn the wheel and see what happens to Samson's hair, muscles and smile.



Talk about why God asked Samson to make certain promises. How do you think Samson felt when God took away his strength?

Go to www.messychurch.org.uk/resources/extra-resources to download all templates at A4 size.



Samson—Messy hero



Celebration

This story can be told using knitted puppets and props.

Samson was a very special boy. His parents hadn't been able to have children, but one day they were visited by an angel who told them that they would have a baby. This baby would be very special and, most importantly, he would save the Israelites from the Philistines.

Soon, Samson was born. He had to make promises to God that he wouldn't do certain things, and one of those things was that he was never to cut his hair. As he was growing up, he realised that he was incredibly strong. He was so strong that he was able to kill a lion with his bare hands and even fight a thousand men, all alone. Samson really didn't like the Philistines and the Philistines really didn't like Samson. They desperately wanted to know why Samson was so strong. There must be a secret to his strength, surely? They wanted to know what it was so they could get rid of him.

Samson soon became interested in girls, and one day he spotted a girl that he liked. Her name was Delilah. Samson's parents weren't very happy with his choice because she was a Philistine, but Samson loved her and didn't listen. The Philistines decided that now was the time to find out Samson's secret. They made a deal with Delilah. They promised to pay her lots of money if she found out how to make Samson weak so they could capture him. Delilah agreed. She tried all sorts of tricks to get Samson to tell his secret. At first, Samson tricked her back by telling her things that weren't true, like being tied up with bowstrings. When Samson fell asleep, Delilah would do whatever Samson had told her would make him weak. But each time, when he woke up, Samson was always strong enough to escape. Delilah kept nagging him, pretending that she was sad that he didn't trust her.

Eventually Samson had had enough! 'For goodness sake,' he said, 'Enough! If you shave off my hair I will be as weak as any other man.' This time, Delilah knew it was true. When Samson fell asleep, she shaved off his hair. She called the Philistines into her house. She woke Samson up and he struggled to get free. The Philistines were so excited. They had him! They put him in prison and they blinded him. One day, during a festival, the people decided they wanted to see Samson so they could all make fun of him. Samson was brought to the temple. He asked to feel the temple pillars and so his hands were placed on them.

While he stood there, Samson prayed to God. 'Lord,

remember me. Please strengthen me one more time.' God listened to him and gave Samson his strength back. Samson pushed with all his might and pushed apart the pillars so that the temple came crashing down around him, killing him and all the Philistines inside. Even though Samson hadn't taken God's rules seriously and had broken his promises, God still used him to save his people. Samson wasn't perfect, but when Samson turned back to God, God listened and worked through him all the same.

Prayer

Give each person a leaf (real or paper). Ask them to close their eyes and think about the things they would like to change in their lives. After saying the prayer, ask them to take the leaves home to remind them that they have the opportunity to turn over a new leaf and enjoy a new start.

Dear Jesus, we don't know what the future holds for us, but we place our future in your hands. We thank you that we can trust you. Help us to have faith in you, that you will keep your promises. As the New Year begins, help us to make good decisions. Help us to stay close to you, no matter what life brings us, and remind us that nothing can separate us from your love. Amen

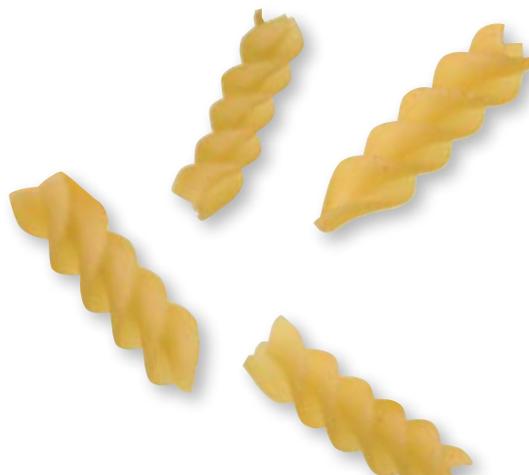
Song suggestions

'Our God is a great big God', Jo and Nigel Hemming, SOF4 2004

'I'm gonna jump up and down', Doug Horley, SOF4 1887

Meal suggestion

Anything to which a garnish of spinach can be added!—casserole, pasta, pizza...



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