



Fresh ideas for building a Christ-centred community

Lucy Moore



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Introduction

St Wilfrid's is an Anglican church in a suburban area of Portsmouth. It's an area that has to fight for any sense of community as the old village has been swallowed up in housing estates. There are many elderly people in the area and many young families. By and large it's a pretty comfortable area, neither massively well off nor deeply impoverished. The church has fantastic facilities, thanks to the vision and commitment to growth of the previous incumbent and congregations: two halls, kitchen, toilets and church all interlinked, with a car park and small garden. On a Sunday there are four services: a quiet 8 o'clock Communion, a traditional 9.30 Communion, an informal service at 11.15 with a small Junior Church, and an evening service. There used to be an annual holiday club for children, but when that stopped there was only the small Thursday night children's group that could be seen as any sort of opportunity for children in the parish to encounter God.

We sat down and thought hard about the direction we should head in, and what we came up with was Messy Church. This first part of the book looks at what it is and how it works, and suggests how you might go about thinking through the issues for your own situation.

Messy Church came out of the frustration of knowing that we had good premises, good leaders, some good ideas, but few children and families turning up on a Sunday. The realization that we simply weren't connecting was the starting point. I hope it will be a model as much in its many mistakes as in its successes. It's not meant to be a showcase perfect model to be copied slavishly (heaven forbid), but an example to learn from.

I also hope that the book will get your creative juices flowing and help you as you think about who the messy edges are in your church, and how you might reach them.

FRESH EXPRESSIONS

This is a book that starts to explore a particular ‘fresh expression’ of church. Fresh Expressions is a movement within the churches that seeks to show how churches are being church in different ways for different people and situations. You’ll find inspiration and challenges in the growing directory of imaginative churches on their website: www.freshexpressions.org.uk.

It’s been very frustrating to write this book, as new developments keep occurring in the Fresh Expressions movement—and even within Messy Church. Every month we come up with new ideas to try out and there’s no way the book will be able to keep pace with them all. But it’s a start, and arguably an appropriately messy one.

What defines a fresh expression of church? A fresh expression of church is intended as a community or congregation which is already (or has the potential to grow into) a church in its own right. It is not intended to be a halfway house or stepping stone for someone joining a Sunday morning congregation.

FRESH EXPRESSIONS WEBSITE

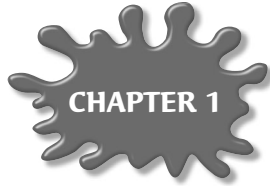
Is what we do a fresh expression of church, or is Messy Church just a club? It would be far easier to run a craft club! Far easier to swim with the cultural tide and avoid reminding people that they’re more than material beings, that there’s a personal God who loves them just as they are and wants them to get to know him better. Far easier not to make space for an encounter with God through worship as well as through creativity and friendship. Oh yes, far, far easier not to try to devise acts of worship that appeal to all ages, but merely to sink into a secular ‘educational club’ mode where our main aim is to develop fine motor skills and table manners. It would also be so much easier to get our hands on external funding if we didn’t mention God!

Our vision, though, has always been to use the wonderful tools of

Messy Church

creativity and food as a way of helping people come close to God and to each other. We don't want to hide behind a misleading name: we call it Messy Church up front, so that people have no illusions that it's just a social club. In our particular area, at this particular point in history, this is a fresh expression of church that is right for us.

Concept and considerations



An overview of 'messy' theology

If nothing else, the name 'Messy Church' was an inspiration: it begs the question, 'What on earth is it?' and it makes people smile. The idea comes partly from the observation in Pete Ward's book, *Liquid Church* (Paternoster Press, 2002), that 'a liquid church will have fuzzy edges'.

Pete uses parents and toddler groups as an example of a network close to the church community when he says:

With the parents and tots we see that the network of connections spreads from those inside the church to those who may have no connection with regular Sunday worship. When we start to regard the network itself as church, then the notion of insiders and outsiders starts to break down. Instead, we have a network of communication and relationship where Christian love and mutual support form part of the flow. The boundaries have started to become more fuzzy and less well defined.

LIQUID CHURCH, PP. 47–48

There's a certain point at which a person might have friends in church, pray, attend the odd Communion service and try to make the annual jumble sale, but they'd think it strange to go to a house group or to be asked to put more than 50p in the collection bag. In the nicest possible sense, they're part of the messy edge, neither out nor in.

Church has moved from a central role in our society to the edges. At the same time, the 'centre' of our society is moving around. As churches, we need to learn to live at the edge again—to rebuild community there.

FRESH EXPRESSIONS WEBSITE

So networks are fuzzy and church is on the messy edge of the fuzzy networks. Life isn't tidy: one great strength of the Church of England is that it welcomes people on the messy edges without requiring them to decide whether they're in (so pay your tithe and sign up for ten weeks' heavy discipling) or out (so begone to outer darkness where there is wailing and gnashing of teeth)—and many other denominations work in the same way.

I suppose it's an apt reflection of the way many of us journey messily towards God. There might be 'road to Damascus' moments when we career in our spiritual Ferraris up the Autobahn to glory. Equally, there might be lots of gentle moments when God the Spirit nudges us a little further into his arms through a smile from a child, a moment of awe and wonder at the beauty of nature, a new thought about an old Bible story or a caring word from a fellow traveller. It's a messy way of working, but surely a Father God who can invent a sea cucumber and who is happy to work through people like me, like you, must have a creatively messy streak in him? His created world isn't renowned for its tidiness, after all: order and pattern, yes, but when did you last see a symmetrical tree that never shed a leaf? Jesus spent most of his time not at the tidy religious centre of Jerusalem, but out on the messy fringes of Jewish society among the ambiguous collaborators, the foreign settlers, the demi-monde of disreputable women and dodgy dealers, the scruffy disciples and mucky children.

Perhaps we would like people to be clear-cut: either a Christian or not, a member of the church or an outsider. Life would be so much easier. Yes, there comes a point when many of us can say for definite,

‘Yup, I’m a Christian’, with the same certainty that we can say, ‘Yup, I’m married’, but surely, on the way, the journey to faith involves bits of belonging, a little believing, a certain amount of ownership all swilling around together in a life-changing primeval soup while the Spirit works in us to bring us nearer to Jesus in our many different ways.

Post-Christendom churches will be messy communities where belonging, believing and behaving are in process rather than neatly integrated.

STUART MURRAY, *CHURCH AFTER CHRISTENDOM*, PATERNOSTER, P. 35

Oh yes.

Hmmm. If you juggle with this idea, you soon arrive at a church that not only *is* a joyful mess but which *makes* a mess joyfully. While the second half of this book contains outlines for sessions on art and craft for people who want the basis of a ready-made programme, the book’s main intention is to kickstart some thinking about what particular form your fresh expression of church might take. Your end product will have a creative impulse and drive if it comes from your own prayer, people, needs, talents and assets rather than if you simply lift what we’ve come up with here.

Why not Sunday?

Why does the church need to put on something extra midweek for people on the edge? Why not simply expect them to come along to church on a Sunday? After all, many Sunday services are modern, friendly, use up-to-date language and have activities for the children.

Well, there are several problems with Sunday church. Here are a few.

It's on Sunday. For many people who don't come to church, Sunday is now a day for family, sport and shopping. It may be the only day that families have together. It may be the day we visit Grandma. It may be when separated parents send the children off to the other parent at the other end of the country for the weekend. Rugby trials, football practice, netball tournaments, swimming competitions—children will be involved in all sorts of leisure activities on a Sunday, and church will have to be on a par with Disneyland to compete if the adults in the family aren't already committed Christians.

It 'belongs to someone else'. I had a taste of what it must be like, coming into a church for the first time, when we went to cheer on a friend who was performing at a folk club in West Yorkshire. Suddenly we hadn't the foggiest idea how to behave. Could we just walk in or should we knock? What was expected of us? Could we sit anywhere or were some seats reserved for regulars? Could we talk during the singing? Could we go and get a drink from the bar while music was playing? Were we expected to sing along, or muse silently on the performance, like in a theatre? Would anyone speak to us? It was very disorientating, even irritating, to feel so wrong-footed, like a foreign tourist. However friendly our churches are, there can be a feeling for the outsider that this is an alien culture with so many unwritten expectations that it's too risky to set foot over the threshold. Church is not even part of the wallpaper of most people's lives any more, and fewer and fewer people are automatically at home in a church. *But what if church were a place where the 'outsiders' helped to set the expectations?*

A Sunday service may have a great deal invested in it already. Is Sunday church designed for the insider or the outsider? It's very hard to put on a service that meets the needs of both regular committed Christians and those on the messy edge. There are so many needs. For a lifelong churchgoer there may be a need to sing a favourite hymn, which happens to be full of such complex theology that a newcomer is totally bewildered.

*Oh generous love! that he, who smote
In Man for man the foe,
The double agony in man
For man should undergo.*

CARDINAL J.H. NEWMAN, *HYMNS ANCIENT AND MODERN REVISED*

Brilliant hymn; sung it all my life; I find more in it every time I sing it. But it's not Radio Two, is it?

Ironically, church liturgical rules can also make barriers between a visitor and God. Take saying the Collect every week in an Anglican church, for example—a massively long single sentence, describing God for three lines with four-syllable words, squeezing in the nugget of a request in the middle and finishing off (with barely a pause for a comma) with another three lines of doxology. Is this designed for a *Sun* reader? Or a six-year-old? Or me? Which of us can remember what we've prayed for by the end of it? How long does the Eucharistic Prayer seem to an eight-year-old... or to someone with chronic back pain?

From the other point of view, is a child-friendly sermon what a committed adult disciple needs every week? Does every song have to be simple to the point of simplistic? *Are they going to make me clap?* (Before you panic, Graham Nunn has selected the songs for the celebration services in this book and 'dumbing down' does not enter into his accessible and thoughtful selection.) Yes, there are gifted worship leaders and speakers who can appeal to all ages simultaneously. But not everyone can, and it would be unfair to expect them to, for all sorts of reasons: personal aptitude, habits, gaps in theological training, among others. Leading an all-age service is more difficult than you think until you've tried it.

While I love the principle of a service where all people from all backgrounds and ages worship tolerantly together, there is a massive gap between the needs of someone putting a toe in the church pond and someone who's already ploughing up and down in it like an Olympic swimmer. Sunday's may not be the easiest service to adapt as there is so much invested in it for so many people. We need to

know when we should be down on our knees fighting for change and when we would just be stubbing our toes against an immovable object. The ongoing challenge for us with Messy Church is to create a true church, not to see it as a halfway house to Sundays.

The place of children in your church may be unclear. Many churches welcome children and provide for them to worship God appropriately. Some still feel uncomfortable about where they fit in. 'We love to have the children here...' can include an unspoken get-out clause: '... as long as they're quiet and well-behaved and do what we do.' If children are happy in church, parents are happier to come. If children are happy in church, they are more likely to keep coming through the difficult tweenage years and to keep bringing along their friends. Does your church have a rule of thumb of welcoming and respecting children or are children seen as a necessary evil? If you changed Sunday services to make them more child-friendly, how would the rest of the congregation react? Is it a cop-out or common sense to design a fresh new approach to whole-family worship at another time of the week? (This is a genuine question, not a rhetorical one: we are for ever wrestling with the ideal versus the workable!)

But isn't Sunday sacrosanct?

Many Christians feel that Sunday is the right time to come together to worship. It is the new sabbath, the day of rest. It's an opportunity for the whole church family to come together. Ho hum. I'm put in mind of the line from 'King of glory' that used to puzzle me terribly as a child:

*Seven whole days, not one in seven,
I will praise thee.*

GEORGE HERBERT, *HYMNS ANCIENT AND MODERN REVISED*

(Of course I couldn't work out why the writer was so peevishly determined not to praise God even for one day in seven.)

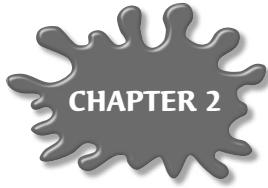
God is a God who bursts out of compartments. Christians can't keep holiness just for Sundays. It must shine out into the whole of life, so that every part is holy for this 'royal priesthood', this 'holy nation' of believers—holiness in the ordinary, if you like. There is no reason why worship offered on a Thursday should be any less worship than that offered on a Sunday. Where the difficulty comes is in the established congregation's perception of the Thursday congregation and the Thursday congregation's perception of themselves. Is it a church in its own right? We'll look at this later on.

To consider

- ❖ Is Sunday the best time of the week for the people you are trying to reach?
- ❖ Try going to an established club or group to feel what it's like to be an outsider. What would make you go back?
- ❖ Is there so much invested in a Sunday service as it stands that to change it would be too painful for the 'regulars'?
- ❖ Look at your service through the eyes of a child. Which parts of it help them come closer to God?

O God, grant us the serenity to accept what cannot be changed, the courage to change what can be changed and the wisdom to know the difference.

REINHOLD NIEBUHR



What is Messy Church?

Messy Church is a once-monthly time when families come together to enjoy being together, making things together, eating together and celebrating God together through his word, through music and through prayer. It's different from a children's activity day because it's an event for children and their carers or parents together, and it's more than a local authority fun day because of the element of worship that underpins it all.

With Messy Church we are trying to be a worshipping community of all ages, centred on Christ, showing Christian hospitality—giving people a chance to express their creativity, to sit down together to eat a meal and have fun within a church context.

Our principles, in no particular order, are:

- ❖ To provide an opportunity for people of all ages to worship together.
- ❖ To help people of all ages to feel that they belong in church and to each other.
- ❖ To help people have fun together.
- ❖ To give people a chance to express their God-given creativity.
- ❖ To invite people into an experience of Christian community.
- ❖ To introduce people to Jesus through hospitality, friendship, stories and worship.

The session runs something like this:

| | |
|-----------|--|
| 3.30 | Doors open. People arrive, play board games and have a drink and biscuit |
| 4.00–5.00 | Craft time |
| 5.00–5.15 | Celebration service in church |
| 5.15–5.45 | Hot meal together |

THE COMPONENT PARTS OF MESSY CHURCH

Welcome

The session starts at 3.30, but we don't begin the craft time until 4.00. The thinking is that, if people want to, they can come straight from picking their children up from school and save a journey home and back again, but there is also time to go home and get changed if they want to. During the first half hour, we serve tea, coffee, squash and biscuits and have a variety of games set out on the tables and floor: board games, jigsaws, colouring, word searches, table football and so on.

Everyone signs in as they arrive (so that we have a list in case of fire) and writes their name on a sticker. We encourage helpers to have their crafts set up and ready before 3.30 so that they can join in with the games and get to know people better. The temptation in Messy Church is to be busy doing jobs and to forget that the real work is in making friends with everyone who comes, young and old. We also put a 'donations' bowl by the sign-in list. It's nice to be able to offer everything for free as a gesture of hospitality, but it's also nice for people to feel that they are giving as well as taking. So we leave it up to the individuals concerned. You might do it differently.

At about 4.00, one of the team climbs on to a chair and welcomes everyone very briefly, says what the day's theme is and gives a quick rundown of the crafts on offer. We keep this very short, as people are there to have fun, not listen to us droning on.

Craft

Between 4.00 and 5.00, everyone goes free range to do as much or as little craft and art as they want. We have about ten tables set up round our two halls, with an adult, teenage or child leader at each to show all comers what to do. Child and teen helpers are great, but it's best to have several of them responsible, so that they all get a chance to go off and have fun at the other tables as well as running their own. Our third-agers are brilliant at leading crafts too: you should see the surreal ideas Bob and Louise come up with, or the way Doreen (a great-grandmother) gets alongside the most timid of children.

In each unit of this book (the 'thematic programmes') there are ten craft ideas. They are almost all very basic, easy things to make, each taking around 5–10 minutes. We have found that people want to do lots of short activities rather than a few long ones. This is frustrating because you can't actually learn many new skills in a five-minute slot, but they are all fun to do. We are not afraid to repeat some craft activities. Put together in a book like this, two lots of stone-painting seems needlessly unimaginative, but if you're only holding the sessions once a month, it's a very long time since people last did it.

We try to have a range of things to make that include all the senses. The food option is always very popular, but we put someone dragon-like in charge of this, who will not only make sure hands are washed '*with soap!*' beforehand, but will also be strict about apportioning quantities of ingredients. Otherwise the first three children eat all the jelly teddies.

Something we've noticed is that the parents of the older children sometimes feel awkward about joining in the crafts as their children are so independent that they don't need or want Mum making stuff with them all the time. So we try to lay on something that these parents can do as they sit and chat to each other—something that's a little more delicate and satisfying for them than getting their new

top covered in poster paint. That way, they can still have fun making things, and their children can join in with them if they want, rather than the other way around. For example, we had some pretty gift bags for them to decorate with cut-outs, and we bought some glass-painting pens so that they could decorate bottles and pop some bath salts in them, all to sell at the church fair. It's satisfying, allows the creative impulse full rein and is useful as well.

Worship

It is worth putting dedicated energy into the worship as this may be the only time in the month that many of the people who come to Messy Church have a chance to worship. Our celebration is held in church and is a very short service to celebrate some aspect of God, based on a theme that has been picked up in the crafts. Details of some ideas are included in the session outlines. The Barnabas website also has lots of additional ideas for worship that includes children (see www.barnabasinchurches.org.uk).

As with all the Messy Church ideas in this book, some of them we already do, some we know we should but haven't yet got organized to do, and some we know we'll never manage in a month of Thursdays, but they are Jolly Good Ideas all the same and if we had a dedicated family worker we would certainly do them. Had we but space enough and time... So I offer them tentatively, hoping that if you visit us, you won't expect to see everything in place. Like a building site, it's still all a bit... well... messy.

We try to keep in mind that most of what people experience in a church situation comes not from a sermon but from non-verbal messages. It comes from what we see, hear, smell and touch, from the way we are greeted (or not) and from the expectations and behaviour of the people around us.

Coming into the worship space

Traditionally, churches have a greeter or welcomer on the door to be the human face of the love of God. With a service full of 'extended family members' who may not come into church otherwise, if you are holding the act of worship in your church building it is doubly important to have someone to greet everyone as they come in. We used to just pile into church after the craft, but now we gather in the hall and move in a ramshackle but definitely processional throng. As we get more organized, we'll try out banners... ribbons... instruments... a good marching song?

It might also be helpful to have some 'sidespeople' to help people find an appropriate place to sit. Away from the rigours of Sunday services or school assemblies, the expectations are different and children especially need gentle but firm help to know what is appropriate in church. Do we want them perched in the pulpit? If not, we'll have to make it clear, as the pulpit is a delightful place to choose to sit when you're six. Do we expect adults to sit with their children and supervise them? A lot of the older children will want to sit with their friends instead and we can't rely on parental supervision. The expectations come from our team and, if they're all laying tables or clearing up their craft, they won't be able to set many of those standards of behaviour.

Whether or not you are using your church building for the act of worship, look at your worship space with a child's eyes. Is the furniture a comfortable size for short-legged people? Where will the pushchairs go? What hazards are there? How would I feel about coming into it if I were a child? Is it warm enough for a young baby or an elderly person? Is it clean enough for toddlers to crawl in?

We'd like to think about changing the worship setting slightly every time so that there is continuity with variety. Perhaps there could be something new to look at as everyone enters: a picture at the front, a thematic decoration along the seats, a focal table with something thematic on it to inspire awe and wonder.

Music is also important in creating an atmosphere: a CD playing

or live instrumentalists have very different effects. We have to decide whether it's better to have people singing as they come in or whether they would be more at home having a chance to chat and find their seat without worrying about song words. Perhaps the music is stilling and peaceful, or uplifting.

The smell of a church or worship space can also be something to think about. Sometimes it might be appropriate to have oil burners, incense, or aromatic foods, which can all help to create different atmospheres.

Children also like to have something to do with themselves in the messy time while everyone's finding a seat.

- ❖ Singing a song.
- ❖ Watching a candle.
- ❖ Finding a story in the pew Bible for later.
- ❖ Watching a PowerPoint show of photos of the crafts they've just made, or a short clip of video (*Veggietales*, for example, or one of the ones that show action praise songs, such as Doug Horley's).

A puppet making an appearance over the edge of a pulpit or lectern will keep incoming children gleeful for those difficult minutes.

The service itself

We keep it simple. We keep it as participative as possible. We tie everything to the theme to bring it home in a variety of ways. We keep it real.

Keep it simple. While teenagers love high-tech effects, black boxes with knobs on, screens and flashing lights, children don't need all that. Children also enjoy interaction, human contact, live people or puppets, quietness as well as (and sometimes more than) noise. They love story, drama and singing—activities that involve them and feed their imagination.

A simple story, well told, will stick with adults and children more than all the flashy effects we could afford. Find your church storytellers and wheel them in.

Keep it participative. Wherever possible, we avoid the one-man show, expecting everyone else to sit meekly in their pew. We get everyone involved as much as possible. Children get to know God through movement as well as stillness, through play as well as prayer, through their hands and feet as well as through their intellect. (And adults...?)

So, for all aspects of the service—in the teaching, the prayer, the singing—we try to provide opportunities for everyone to be looking at things, holding things, touching things, imagining, joining in. We weave in opportunities for people to discuss a question in groups, to produce a drawing, prayer or other offering together. This reinforces the way that we are here together, not just as individuals but as a big family.

Tie everything to the theme: We need to provide plenty of reinforcement to help people remember what the theme is all about. We make everything visual, using OHPs or digital projectors, books, pictures or objects. We make ourselves tie all aspects of the service in with the theme.

We give free rein to our creativity. How, for example, can we do prayers related to the parable of the farmer (Mark 4:1–8)? Could we all imagine tiny seeds in our hand, imagine that they are the things we have to offer God and mime planting them as an offering of all that we have to him? Could we write or draw prayers on seed-shaped cards and place them in a cardboard field at the front? Could we plant actual seeds for each prayer offered and let them grow for next time? Could we devise a short series of hand movements showing sowing, nurturing and harvesting, giving thanks for the good things that God has given us, saying sorry for the way we don't use them properly and asking for our lives to give good harvests?

There's a fantastic list of imaginative ways of praying on page 75 of *Creating a Learning Church* by Margaret Cooling (BRF, 2005).

Keep it real. We keep the transcendent truths about God related to the concrete realities of people's lives: we keep it real. We lose all the churchy jargon except when it helps people and when we can be sure they understand it. Even the innocuous 'Please be seated' has a

pretty pompous ecclesiastical ring when you think about it: why not just say, ‘Please sit down’? We keep relating the story or passage to the lives of the people there with us. What has this story got to say to them? Why should they care about this hairy historical bloke crossing the Reed Sea? What on earth has a vine or a shepherd got to do with their life in suburban Portsmouth? We use real examples from local life and modern-day situations, resetting the stories if necessary: ‘A man was going down London Road late one night when some drunks from the Spotted Cow beat him up...’ Jesus used places and characters that his listeners would instantly understand, and we need to do the same.

Having said this, rites and ritual are important, especially for young children, so we try to keep some parts of the service that are always the same—the welcome or the blessing, for example. We frame quiet moments as well as noisy ones. We try to help people to have a moment when they can feel they are in the palm of God’s hand.

Think about which parts of your usual service might help these people draw close to God. What about the Lord’s Prayer? The Creed? Confession and absolution? The Eucharist? The Psalms? An Old and New Testament reading? Are these crucial building blocks that you feel you must have every time or valuable ingredients to be used once in a while? Or are they always inappropriate for use within this context? We don’t try to include a full *Common Worship* liturgy in 15 minutes. We’re selective and do less but try to do it well.

A basic shape that works well for us is:

- ❖ Opening song
- ❖ Story or illustration
- ❖ Response song
- ❖ Prayer
- ❖ Grace

Although the celebration is usually led by the vicar, this is only because the rest of us are up to our ears in craft and cooking and he’s free to concentrate on that one part of the whole session. (He’s also

quite good at it.) Often, though, parts (or all) of the celebration are led by different laypeople.

Messy Church invites us to be creative in our worship. Of course, we'll make mistakes, just as an artist or composer makes mistakes during the creative process, but it's far better to try and get it wrong than never to try at all. Surely that would be true failure.

Perhaps the 2005 Persil adverts are near the mark, when they show people of all ages in different activities that entail their clothes getting filthy, and claim that what matters isn't the dirt but the intensity of emotion or creative pioneering that is behind the dirt. By extension, staying tidily in our pews, in well-behaved ranks, is not in itself a virtue. Having the guts to find ways to worship God in spirit and in truth might involve a certain amount of creative chaos. It will certainly involve failure at times.

Over time, it's obviously our goal to decrease our failure rate and to take calculated risks because of all we have learned. But we'll never be able to say goodbye to failure altogether if we choose to aim for creativity. It's part of the deal.

NANCY BEACH, WRITING ABOUT WILLOW CREEK CHURCH,
IN *AN HOUR ON SUNDAYS*, ZONDERVAN, 2004, P. 182

There is also the interesting question of how the midweek Messy Church people relate to those who worship on a Sunday. The two need to know how much they belong to each other and how much they need each other. For us, this issue is still work-in-progress. We should pray for Sunday people on Thursdays and vice versa. We should occasionally have display boards showing each group what the others are up to. We should make sure that those who only attend Messy Church have the same access to the prayer structures (the prayer requests e-mailing list, for example) that the rest of the church family has. Do they know how to buy a parish magazine? If they needed to, would they know who to talk to about problems or spiritual matters?

Do we flag up carefully selected church events to the Messy Church people: the socials, the Alpha suppers, the parenting courses, the Emmaus course, the Confirmation course? Can we persuade someone from the pastoral team to be on hand simply to chat and get to know Messy Church people month by month, so that if crises arise, the relationship is already there? There are so many opportunities. We're not managing to make the most of them yet, but bit by bit we will get round to turning them into more than just good ideas.

It's interesting to imagine how messy ancient Old Testament Jewish worship must have been: the animals and birds on the altar, crumbled cakes with oil poured over the top, fires, water sloshing around, incense smoking away, fat and kidneys being butchered up, the priest showering everyone with blood from the sacrifice. You only have to read the opening chapters of Leviticus to see that God's priority cannot be a clean carpet. We'd never get away with that level of mess in our church: the wardens would have kittens. Surely God doesn't notice mess in that sense. What God notices is how the worship is honouring to him and how it draws people closer to him. Our responsibility isn't to make worship neat and tidy but to make it the best we can offer and as genuine, relevant, living and Christ-centred as we are able to—and to have the graciousness to exercise our ministry of Hoovering afterwards.

We started by holding the celebration after the food, but swapped them round eventually, as some people were leaving as soon as they'd eaten their cake and we wanted to give everyone every excuse to make space for worship in their busy lives. The advantage of finishing with food is that everyone stays until the end and gets to participate in the key point: the worship. The advantage of finishing with the worship is that it makes a clear 'dismissal': a point when everyone knows it's time to leave. Also, the kitchen helpers can get cleared up more quickly.

Churches can enhance the sense of identity within their different congregations by considering some of the following dynamics. The more these are in place, the stronger and healthier will be the sense that each congregation is a 'church' in itself:

- ❖ Establish a planned and consistent divergence of worship style—for example, an afternoon Taizé congregation, or a service for parents and toddlers, or strongly choir-led worship.
- ❖ Grow a dedicated and recognized leadership for each.
- ❖ Establish a particular mission focus for the differing congregations. This might be an age-related focus, or geographical responsibility within a large parish, or by concern for a local social issue.
- ❖ Provide discrete pastoral care structures for each congregation, which are known by them.
- ❖ Deny and refuse all language that calls one of the congregations 'the main congregation'.
- ❖ Create an overall team or group ministry in which each congregation has fair representation.

One danger of a multiple congregation approach is that it is often heavily influenced by the worship needs of those who already come. Care must be taken to adopt a clear missionary approach, and seek to connect with a community outside the church, instead of simply using a multiple congregation approach as a way of trying to keep the existing church members happy.

JOHN HULL, *MISSION-SHAPED CHURCH*, CHP, 2004, PP. 59–62

Food

We didn't want anyone to have to turn out for Messy Church straight after school, be busy with the children for two hours and then go home and need to cook tea, so we try to provide the sort of meal that a family might have at home on a school night—even including vegetables. Check out the recipe section of this book for some basic ideas that don't cost a bomb. Each meal has a serving suggestion with it in the individual units, as we've found through trial and error (mostly error) that getting hot food out to large numbers is more complicated than it sounds.

Cake is our traditional pudding and saves washing up another bowl or plate. We ask each helper to bring a cake with them. For our first birthday party, one of the twelve-year-old members, Sophie, asked if she could make and decorate the birthday cake—it was far better than anything we would have made. However, having said all that, there are times when we're short of leaders and it's a choice between easy food or cancelling Messy Church. A summer Messy Church was a great success when the food consisted of boil-up hot-dogs, crisps, cheapo choc-ices and fruit. It was all eaten outside as a big picnic and there were only the hot-dog pans to wash up. Splendid!

It might sound intimidating, even impossible, to sort out a hot meal for a large group. We're blessed with a big kitchen and a dishwasher (oh bliss), even if the gas cooker is temperamental to the point of lunacy, but in some church halls I've worked in, there's been one dodgy microwave and a wobbly sink. Yes, we panic on a regular basis as we dish out platefuls to anything between 60 and 90 people, ranging from ravenous teenagers to picky toddlers, but if you decide that eating together is worth doing for the way it brings people together, you will find a manageable way of doing it. You might not feel able to cook shepherd's pie for 60 but could six of you each cook enough for ten people? Could everyone bring a plateful of sandwiches to share? Could every family pitch in some money for fish and chips, or could you dial up a pizza or two? Could you simply have a cake break and sit down together to enjoy them?

There is something sacred about eating together, however little is actually on the plates. I also wonder if some of the children ever sit down at a table together as a family. Perhaps, for some, Messy Church is the only occasion when they do.

We always begin with Messy Church Grace. Our version needs three fingers in the air. Turn your hand round 180 degrees with each number and put fingers up or down to go with the numbers, saying, '3, 2, 1; 1, 2, 3; Thank you, God, for all our tea.' You can find different graces by doing a search on the net for 'children's graces'.

To address the problem I mentioned earlier of 'How do people know when to leave at the end of the meal?' we've introduced the birthday slot at the cake stage of the meal. It's a time to call out anyone, young or old, who's had a birthday in the last month, to sing a special blessing version of 'Happy Birthday' to them and give them a small present. This not only gives individuals a special place in the gathering, but signals a gentle 'Thank you very much, hope you've enjoyed it, see you next month and you might like to think about going home now' moment.

Variety

While it's good to have a standard session outline, we're learning the need to keep ringing the changes as well. Every now and then, we try to introduce something a little different from normal. This might be because of necessity: on the summer day when we had very few leaders available, we got everyone to do just four activities and to do them all together. This had the effect of getting people more involved and talking to each other. Alternatively, it may be seasonal: we had a special ceremony during the meal for Easter, to echo the Passover meal. It was a simple question-and-answer ritual about the different foods on the table.

Other seasonal festivals are opportunities to ring the changes and mark them out as something special with a break in routine. Harvest might include a harvest procession to a field or carrying gifts to a

retirement home. The meal might include a specially baked roll for each person and a short meditation on bread as it is eaten. Christmas, of course, provides plenty of opportunity for celebrations loud and quiet. One Christmas, Messy Church included a disco run by the youth group as their 'bit' for the community. It might be fun to hold the whole thing out-of-doors one week, perhaps if you're looking at one of the 'outside' stories, such as the feeding of the five thousand or the Sermon on the Mount. Another surprise might be to organize games for the first half hour, with a parachute or a bouncy castle, or invite a dance or drama leader in to share their skills.