

MESSY CHURCH THEOLOGY

Exploring the significance of Messy Church
for the wider church

Edited by
George Lings



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Introduction

The Rt Revd Paul Butler, Bishop of Southwell and Nottingham

I first heard about Messy Church early on in its life. It sounded great, because it was creative, all-age and committed to reaching out to the de-churched and non-churched. Back then, though, it appeared as one more idea among several that were floating around. The way it then took off, and has continued to grow across the world, has been phenomenal. Rightly, this has attracted masses of interest and research. This book offers some great insights into what has made Messy Church the phenomenon that it is.

It has been my privilege throughout the ‘Messy Church years’ to have visited quite a number of different Messy Churches in action. I have been on different days of the week, at varying times of the day and in a range of buildings. I have joined it in villages, inner cities and the suburbs. I have observed a variety of quality. I have seen some that appear to be not much more than a varied style of worship for the already faithful, but most have really been reaching out to people for whom this is church for the first time—and it is their church. I can honestly say that every one I have visited has been good to join in.

I have also been privileged to talk with lots of people involved in leading these churches and have been very impressed by the thoughtfulness and commitment given to developing things as they go. It has also been a privilege to talk with the Messy Church national team fairly regularly; they are an impressive bunch!

So by way of getting you, the reader, thinking at the start of this helpful set of essays and reflections, here are my seven ‘F’ factors that contribute to Messy Church being what it is.

Family: We all know that families come in all shapes and sizes, but it is obvious the moment you walk into a Messy Church that there are families present. Parents and children are either busy doing an activity together or can be seen to have split up to do different kinds of things—only later to be busy showing each other what they have made or achieved. Sometimes there are grandparents there too, even great-grandparents. Dads are in evidence (although not always, it has to be noted). Families love Messy Church because they can do it together. It genuinely caters for all ages. This applies to every element when done well. Songs cross age barriers; a reflection on the Bible story has insights for all ages to consider and take away to put into practice.

Family matters to Messy Church.

Friendship: On one visit I was talking with a 90-year-old lady who has been following Jesus all her life, and has been part of a church throughout. ‘This is the best church of my life,’ she said quietly. ‘Why?’ I asked. ‘Because it is the friendliest I have ever known, and the most fun.’

She was experiencing friendship in Messy Church that apparently was often either missing or weak in all other expressions of church she had known.

A danger of ‘family-focused church’ is that those who are not in families can feel excluded; not so in a well-run Messy Church. All ages are welcome, and single people feel integrated and involved. Friendships develop and grow here, including friendship with the one who ‘sticks closer than any brother’ (Proverbs 18:24).

Food: Eating together has always been a part of how families and communities function well. It was core to Jesus’ ministry, and he gave us a meal by which to remember him. And eating together is a vital part of how and why Messy Church works. Where the meal is left out, something is missing. This may be inevitable as some move to meeting fortnightly, or occasionally weekly. But it must not

be lost from the ongoing life of a Messy Church. Perhaps those who do start meeting more often need to ensure at least a monthly full-blown meal together. There is something special about community, friendship and family that only happens around eating together.

Fun: Immediately one thinks of all the fun had in the creative crafts and activities. Messy Church has brought out the creative in many a person. It has managed to keep coming up with fun ideas. But there is a holy fun about the whole of Messy Church; when everyone gathers for worship it does not suddenly become sombre. There is fun in the songs while praising God. Christian truth from the Bible is shared in ways that engage and are fun. We all learn best when we are enjoying what we are doing. Remember the 90-year-old lady.

Faith: The whole of Messy Church is about communicating and sharing faith in Jesus Christ. But I want here to highlight that Messy Church was born, has continued, and must go forward, in faith. When Lucy and Paul Moore first tried it out as an experiment in Portsmouth, they were taking a step of faith. They had no idea how it would go, or how people would respond. They certainly had no idea that it would become a worldwide movement crossing denominations as well as continents. At each step of the way, as others asked if they could 'copy' the idea, as BRF agreed to invest time and money in it and as invitations from around the world were taken up, faith has been involved. Steps of faith have been required, involving trusting in God, who calls us to go 'with the wind of the Spirit' and walk into his future. Such faith commitment has been rewarded. The biggest reward is that people of all ages have come to faith in Jesus Christ. They have expressed this faith in baptism and confirmation. Others whose faith had waned have had it brought back to life.

There has been a real willingness, by Lucy and others, to grapple with some of the hard questions that have arisen in this journey. Where does a Messy baptism take place? What does a Messy

confirmation look like? And how might Communion be celebrated in a Messy Church? What does growing as a disciple, or community of disciples, look like for Messy Church?

Answers are still being worked on, but this is being done in faith that the God who calls is faithful and he will lead on.

Flexibility: Exploring these questions of faith has demonstrated another requirement of Messy Church, and that is flexibility. From the start, as more churches experimented, there was flexibility about day, time, venue and format. In growing and developing, further flexibility has been demonstrated to allow for different cultural and geographical settings; flexibility in developing ways of exploring discipleship. Yet I am glad that there has been the courage to be inflexible with some aspects of Messy Church: its all-age nature; the importance of the three aspects of creativity, hospitality including food, and celebration in worship. This inflexibility is intended to be for the un- and de-churched, not just transforming the way an existing church operates. There has also been the flexibility to recognise some derived alternatives, like Sweaty Church, although this raises some hard questions too. There is now the flexibility of providing ideas and materials through a magazine as well as books and the web. Flexibility will remain important as Messy Churches become more ‘mature’ in experience and length of existence—and to avoid becoming too fixed in their ways.

Fruitfulness: My final ‘F’ factor is the wonderful fruitfulness that has come—the fruit of lives changed by the good news of Jesus Christ; the fruit of families being enriched by joining in worship and fun together; the fruit of friendship that crosses the ages; the fruit of people discovering gifts and using them to serve other people and God; the fruit of spiritual life.

Jesus made it clear to his disciples that the true worth and value of people and their lives is seen in their fruitfulness. Messy Church

is being seen to be born of the Spirit and filled with God's life. It has many years of fruitfulness ahead of it.

A note on Lucy Moore

Lucy herself sees Messy Church as a Holy Spirit-inspired idea. She understands herself as somehow being caught up, and blown along by, the wind of the Spirit. I believe she is correct. The glory does and should go to God.

Nevertheless, in human terms we recognise that Messy Church and its growth owe an enormous amount to Lucy herself (and indeed to her family for the way they have supported, encouraged and released her to do this). It has been Lucy's vision, passion, drive, creativity and sheer doggedness at times that have been vital to the growth and development of Messy Church. She has been very skilful in also bringing on board some very creative team mates in the journey.

Why might God have used Lucy in this way? Well, the 'F' factors apply to her too. Her family, and family life, are key to her whole being. She is a wonderfully friendly person who is a friend to many. Food is important to Lucy. She is enormous fun—see her act, and hear her laugh! She is full of faith in her Lord. She has been amazingly flexible as Messy Church has developed—and she keeps thinking flexibly as it grows. Her life is fruitful, with the fruit of the Holy Spirit.

Messy Church is God's work, but thank God who made, saved, called and equipped Lucy to do this particular piece of kingdom work.

Section 3

Messy practicalities



9

Messy maturity: paradox, contradiction or perfect match?

Beth Barnett

Beth Barnett is currently the Children's and Families' Facilitator for the Baptist Union of Victoria in Australia. For many years she has been a passionate champion of multi-age/multi-sensory Bible engagement as the foundation of inclusive, creative and adventurous worship and mission. From a background in music and education, Beth has trained and resourced those who serve children and families for the past two decades. She loves to engage in the godly art of risk-taking and to encourage others in doing the same—in their families, in their worship, in their mission and in their personal healing. Beth is the author of eight books of integrated resources and theological frameworks for Bible-centred mission in churches, communities and the home.

A question has been preoccupying my mind for quite some time. When Jesus calls us to become disciples, to follow along, what is meant to happen? Within that broad question, further ones arise. Do disciples become mature and, if they do, what does that maturity look like? Is maturity inherent to the discipleship deal? Or, like wealth, position, power, privilege and status, is 'Western maturity' something that the gospel frees us from? Is there such a thing as spiritual maturity?

I have been around the church all my life, which is long enough

to have gained a strong sense that I should be growing in my faith—or is it in *the* faith? Whichever it is, I am constantly hearing that I should be growing and maturing. Sometimes people even say that I have a ‘mature’ faith, as if that were a compliment.

The language of ‘maturity’

What are we talking about when we speak of ‘maturity’? It is a term that is open to euphemistic misuse. Some examples include the following: a twelve-year-old’s body is not yet fully mature, a 35-year-old’s body is fully mature, and a 75-year-old’s body is past maturity and has begun a process of degeneration. Often we use the word ‘mature’ in order to say ‘old’ politely. We speak of films with strong sexual violence as being suitable for ‘mature’ audiences, but one wonders whether a person with an appetite for sexually explicit violence warrants the term ‘mature’.

In a church setting, sermons are often delivered as pre-packaged thoughts with three key points and an application—a fairly thin communication form, yet this is said to be teaching for ‘mature’ Christians. By contrast, children are typically engaged in multi-sensory, interactive learning that challenges them to wonder, imagine and formulate their own theories and requires an integrated action of some kind. I do not necessarily doubt that ‘mature’ people can engage fully and critically with monological sermons, but I am suspicious of claims that rank a controlled monologue as a more ‘mature’ form of thinking or communicating.

In this chapter I explore the idea of maturity from a theological perspective. To do this means to submit the ideas and ideologies of maturity to scrutiny and criteria that ask major questions, such as the following:

- Who is God?
- Who are humans in relation to God?
- How does the cosmos work?

- What is the large story of God that we are in?
- What does all this tell us about our questions of maturity?

I also examine the models of the Messy Church movement to evaluate the capacities and culpabilities of such communities in relation to the agendas of personal, communal and institutional maturity. However, my deepest consideration focuses on whether Messy Churches sustain disciples of Jesus in fruitful missional community. I hope that this is, in fact, a more pressing biblical question than the issue of maturity.

Discourses of maturity, development and growth

Where does this ideal of maturity come from? What drives us to include such a topic in a theological discussion?

In Western culture, the word ‘development’ is loaded with a positive charge. If something is developing, we usually see this as a good thing. It is an assumed criterion as we divide nations into categories of ‘developed’ and ‘developing’. It seems that no one wants to be an ‘undeveloped’ nation. In Australia, children are routinely assessed in terms of ‘normal’ or ‘delayed’ or perhaps ‘accelerated’ development against a set of normative milestones, which are mapped out on government-issued charts and given to every new parent. This phenomenon of growth and change is, on the one hand, assumed and might be considered unremarkable, and yet ‘developmental progress’ has become a value-laden system by which we assess success and ascribe status.

Thus, in the public consciousness and in discourses of everything from the individual person to organisations, ideas, economies and nations, scales of development and progress have become our norm. This forms a double standard. Along with the assumption of growth as ‘normal’, markers of growth are offered as cause for honour and pride.

Many people have heard of the idea of ‘stages of faith’.⁹⁵ Even

if they haven't heard of it directly, they have acquired the idea that people go through maturing stages in their faith. This vision is conceived individualistically, from conversion, through early discipleship, into leadership or serving, and perhaps then on to a mentoring role. Or, thinking of it less actively and more devotionally, people begin trusting Jesus for salvation, and then gradually submit more and more areas of life to Christ, becoming more indwelt by the Holy Spirit and theoretically more like Jesus.

These are prevalent assumptions, but unfortunately they lack substantial biblical models. The great characters of faith (including Noah, Abraham, Samson and David) in the Old Testament seem as prone to weakness, sin, foolishness, pride and destructive behaviour in their latter years as in their youth. The New Testament communities to which Paul writes can barely have been shaped by the gospel for more than a decade at the very outside. None of them has had time to do much maturing. They live in eschatological expectation of Jesus' return at any tick of the clock, so it doesn't seem to be much on their minds that maturity is important. They have a 'hold steady while you wait' policy.

Leaping forward to the contemporary church, after my 45 years in various denominations, I've seen plenty of immature behaviour from people who claim to be elders in the faith, through manipulating meetings, dominating conversations and holding pastors and congregations to ransom with the budget. I have also seen some delightful old saints who are marked by their risk-taking, their capacity for change and their enthusiasm for another faith adventure with Jesus, who hold everything they have thought in the past lightly and are ready for the Holy Spirit to blow them in a whole new direction.

As we consider the idea of maturity, we must be conscious not to impose on our lives of discipleship an imperative that is no concern of God's. Yes, we are to imitate Jesus. Yes, we are to seek wisdom. Yes, we are to keep the faith. Yes, we are to live in the Spirit. But we are called as much to inhabit the kingdom as a child

(Matthew 18:3), to be made a new creation (2 Corinthians 5:17), to be born again, again and again (John 3:3; 1 Peter 1:23) and, in Old Testament terms, to receive the mercies of the steadfast love of the Lord, new every morning (Lamentations 3:22).

These are terms that sit strangely with the language of maturity. So while we address this topic to wring from it every good thing that God might have us consider in it, we hold it lightly, mindful that it is a preoccupation of Western, Enlightenment, developmentalist, progress-oriented culture, while the gospel is concerned with God reconciling all things in Christ (Colossians 1:20).

Some helpful biblical images

Sorting through all of these voices and agendas, I find it refreshing to return to the voices of the Bible. Although they have their own complexities and challenges, they are the place where I find clarity and freedom.

Paul

Paul constantly used images of vulnerability to frame his own participation in the life of Christ. Most of the occurrences of the word 'mature' in the New Testament can be found in Paul's epistles, and the word itself is not straightforward. The same word, *teleios*, and related grammatical forms, is in some places translated as 'perfect' or 'complete', but on a few occasions translators have opted for 'mature'. The actual word 'mature', then, is not certain in the vision of Paul, and there are good reasons to prefer the idea of perfection/completion in the few cases where 'mature' appears in our English translations.

These translation issues may seem to muddy the waters at first. However, to engage in this challenge is to remember that the Bible didn't come to us prepackaged, leather-bound, in the King's

English, but through the living words that came from the mouths and into the ears of real live followers of Jesus, in a particular place and time. This recognition helps me to shed some of the cultural layers that have encrusted the text, and to allow my suspicion that the way we think of ‘spiritual maturity’ might not be as embedded in the Bible as it is in our cultural imaginations.

No one in the New Testament was baptised into an established parish church and brought up going to Sunday school; no one went to youth discipleship camps, did a leadership training course or went to theological college and got ordained. So this kind of progressive structure can be set to one side. Those to whom Paul wrote had only recently received the gospel; the Corinthians, for example, may have had seven years of gospel influence at the most. None of them was a long-term Christian. More than this, the early apostles had a strong expectation that Jesus would be coming back soon—within their lifetime—so the aim of developing into a ‘mature’ Christian didn’t figure as strongly as the aim of being ready for Jesus’ imminent return.

To be reminded of the historical dimensions of the biblical text releases us from all kinds of expectations and patterns that might prevent us from recognising the fresh call of a radical gospel mission in our days. If Paul could establish ‘churches’ based on households, without trained pastors and mature leaders, what might be possible, in the power of the word and the Spirit, in our time? If you raise your eyebrows, is it because you know about the tensions and pretensions of the Corinthian church? It was beset with all of the same issues of selfishness, status-seeking and conflict that are typical of most churches I know—but Paul simply calls them to love. He sets the example of the crucified, weak, vulnerable, humble Christ in their midst to imitate—not greatness but lowliness. It seems that his great development strategy was something in which the smallest child and the frailest grandparent could take the lead.

Jesus

Jesus is silent on maturity—or is he? He doesn't speak of becoming mature. He especially doesn't speak of becoming great. Jesus nowhere tells his disciples to go and make mature people, not even mature disciples. He speaks of becoming like a child—'growing young', as G.K. Chesterton called it. Jesus gives thanks that truth has been hidden from the wise and given to the young. A radical reworking of the expectation of honour through maturity is found in the teaching of Jesus, who placed a child in the midst of adult disciples as a model of the kingdom (Matthew 18:1–4). Jesus did this not to advocate for children but for the sake of adults whose grasping for power was crippling their discipleship.

Thus, a radical reworking of the expectation of honour through maturity is also found in the life of Jesus, who eschewed 'grasping equality with God' (see Philippians 2:6, NIV 1984). At least as far as Paul understands it, Jesus distances himself from spiritual strength and capacity (see also Luke 4:1–13).

Thinking absolutely literally about maturity, Jesus himself lived a short human life. Reaching an advanced age seems not to have been as significant in the project of incarnation as infancy, childhood and adolescence.

So, if not by using the language of maturity, and if not by embracing it in his human life, how does Jesus address the issue of maturity? Beyond the use of the actual word 'mature', Jesus uses images and metaphors that reveal his kingdom thinking on growth and maturity.

Messy Jesus: stories of maturity

Jesus uses lots of stories and word pictures about growth. He draws on the seeds that sprout, the vines that bear fruit, the fields of wheat and weeds, and the farmer who builds barns and tears them down to build bigger barns. Another farmer plants seeds, which grow while he sleeps, without any effort from himself. Growth—

at least, economic and agricultural growth—is not all sketched in bright colours.

What does Jesus say? Yes, be growing; be a vine that is alive, connected, growing and bearing fruit. But you will be pruned: you won't get too big for your boots. The prodigious field bears grain in measures of thirty, sixty or one hundredfold, but it is ripe for harvesting. So here we have growing, abundance and fruitfulness, which result in an image of cutting.

This is an upfront cue for us not to equate maturity and growth with bigness—not with numerical bigness, but also not with prominence or notability and not even with honour. If we are growing and fruitful, we will become less. We will give away our produce and be renewed in smallness. It sounds both strange and familiar, doesn't it? Followers of Christ empty themselves and become nothing; the one who is great is the one who serves.

I have enjoyed thinking about the association of the two words 'messy' and 'maturity'. The agricultural, fruit-bearing images have rung true. I grew up in a typical Australian suburb with the legendary 'quarter-acre block' that was the epitome of the Australian dream. The land of our suburb had, in the early days of settlement, held rolling orchards, and most blocks had at least a few fruit trees left on them, probably self-seeded after clearing, all quite established and mature.

Our block had a couple of varieties of plum tree, a fig tree, an apricot tree, a nectarine tree, a lemon tree, and a couple of apple trees that had been pruned with an axe at one stage and were grotesquely disfigured. I was moved with pity for them, sensitive child that I was, and would tentatively, gently and inquisitively touch their gnarled scars as my vivid childhood imagination wondered about their lives. But Dad coaxed them back to fruitfulness. Our summers were marked by bumper crops and the heavy smell of fruit filling the house. We tripped over buckets of produce everywhere, and my mum worked like a Trojan over the steaming Fowlers-Vacola bottling unit through the hottest part of

the Australian summer to fill the shelves of our shed with preserves and cut fruit that we would eat right through to the next season. So here is my sweet, heavy-scented, sweat-inducing, delicious image of maturity, which is bound up in fruitfulness.

This image seems to fit with the experience of Messy Churches and Messy mission. Perhaps it can help us to understand what maturity looks like in any church, and can particularly encourage us to have confidence in the capacity for maturity in Messy Churches.

Maturity just happens

Jesus spoke of the seed that is planted in a field and grows while the farmer sleeps. This growth is nothing to be proud of. It just happens. Kingdom communities, it seems, will grow, all by themselves (Mark 4:26–29). The growth sketched in Jesus' parables highlights the fact that organic growth to maturity in agriculture involves multiple processes of change (v. 28), in fact, almost constant change. This all occurs out in the elements, exposed to predators and nourishments alike, and alongside competitors and threats (4:3–9). Growth and maturity are cyclical and seasonal, not linear and progressive, and, if truly 'successful', a plant sheds leaves, dies and disappears (John 12:24). The organic growth images that Jesus uses point not to cumulative improvement but positively to seasonal death. This is a somewhat arresting image for those of us interested in planting and growing. We need to be ready for death.

Let's go back to the grape on the vine, or the apricot on the tree. While it is still growing, it has only one thing to do—hang on. If it doesn't do this, and does anything else, it's all over. The growing fruit needs to be completely connected to and integrated with the life of a fruit-growing system. But once it is ripe, there are lots of things that might happen to that fruit in its mature fruitiness. The grape might be pressed for wine or eaten fresh or sundried in oil as a raisin. These are all very decent destinies for a humble grape. The apricot might end up as sauce for chicken or as jam for toast or (and this is my favourite) as a frosty serving of sorbet. All of these

destinies, though, are messy and involve giving up life as a whole piece of fruit.

The plant, if fruitful, will be pruned or slashed or beaten as a result of harvesting. It will be reduced. As we consider the long-term life of communities of faith, including Messy Churches, this theology of death and new growth must be central to our vision of maturity. In some ways, the phrase ‘messy maturity’ is neither a contradiction nor a paradox, but a perfect match.

Messy maturity and the child

To a certain extent, we need to be wary of our own desire to be mature. Why is there a chapter in this book on maturity? Why are we concerned that Messy Churches should become mature or produce mature people when the language of maturity in Jesus’ teaching is, at best, obscure?

Before exploring positively the shape of maturity in Messy Church, I want to sound this warning very clearly. We have noted above how the notion of maturity, in Western culture at least, is heavily burdened with pride, false gravitas and status. In following a faith that is based on becoming empty, not great, on service, not strength, and on love, not success, we should not be too preoccupied with concerns about maturity. It is not in Jesus’ vocabulary. Jesus directly asks us to become like children. He calls us into downward mobility for the sake of others.

Messy Church models, and other fresh expressions of Church and missional initiatives like it, offer great ways for people to come as children. To be deliberately blunt, we must be careful not to damage or deplete a theological strength that is inherent in Messy Churches, for the sake of our pride.

If we are concerned that our Messy Churches are not making mature people, we are not asking the same questions as Jesus did. If we are concerned that our Messy Churches are not making converts and committed or confirmed church members, we are not

asking the same questions as Jesus did. If we are concerned that Messy Church is not a financially sustainable model of church with appropriate fiscal growth strategies, we are not asking the same questions as Jesus did. If we are concerned that Messy Church doesn't feed people who have been followers of Jesus for 30 years already, we are still not asking the same questions as Jesus did.

Messy Church's models, which are intrinsically multigenerational in design, have been strongly associated with children. The presence of children in a service of worship should be as normal and straightforward as having children around the meal table. Dinner time with children can be a messy affair, but there is no question that children need to be at dinner, actually eating and drinking, and that they need to do it with adults. There are situations (and I'm sure you can think of them) that are exceptions to this rule, but the places in which children are routinely absent from meal times become sterile and artificial. It's not good for children to eat only among other children, and it's not good for adults to edit children out of their meals, either.

The meal table keeps a certain tension. Questions arise. We are reminded why we are eating. The bigger story of food production and consumption that we sustain and draw from is invoked and rehearsed. Where does cheese come from? Why can't we eat just chocolate? Who is not eating today in our world? Why is using a fork a good idea and why do we wash our hands? How do we handle leftovers? We are less likely to overindulge if our children are present, and conversation over food holds a strong connection as it becomes linked to physical and emotional, not just verbal, experience.

Children are an essential part of a whole and healthy community, and, if our congregations lack children entirely, they might well be diagnosed as lacking maturity. It is, sadly, often the case that a congregation lacks children because the older members are not willing to be generous enough to participate in ways that aren't quite their 'cup of tea' in order to allow accessibility and affirmation

for children. Clearly this is a failure of a community to embrace the selflessness that is part of growing up. Many churches require greater flexibility, tolerance and convenience from their children than from their adults. A messy theology of maturity may need to speak with prophetic grit, as it articulates the mission and vision of Messy Church. We need to speak plainly about the role of children in the midst of a community.

The insights of the Child Theology Movement focus attention on the action of Jesus in placing the child in the midst of the disciples for the sake of helping the disciples, and not so much for the sake of the child. The movement also works from a multidimensional rubric of understanding children, recognising the varying nuances of how they are imaged in the Bible, not just as developing beings needing nurture but also as carriers of wisdom and revealers of the kingdom, prophetic voices and bearers of the *imago Dei*.⁹⁶

Maturity is messy

In 2006, before Messy Church had reached Australia, we planted a strange Sunday afternoon congregation called ‘Family Spirit’. It varied in some ways from Messy Church but shared some of the important elements—especially that of messiness. It was a huge experiment for us. We had no idea what we were doing, and I’m sure we made lots of mistakes, but we learnt lots.

One of the most important things we discovered was the non-negotiability of allowing those who came from the community to serve alongside those who came from the church. When the church people tried to ‘serve’ the community exclusively, community people became uncomfortable. They wanted to be a part of the Family Spirit community and pull their weight. Someone wanted to bring the milk each week for the coffee, someone else the cordial for the kids. We had to accept this and put aside the small issues of what to do when they didn’t turn up, which, of course, happened sometimes. We had to learn that it was no big drama. Someone

would rush home to get some milk or do a quick run to the shop to get some cordial, or we stole some from the cupboard and fixed it up later. (Don't tell the playgroup!)

It was fine. I think this was part of the maturing process for those of us who thought we were God's special missionaries, there to serve the lost. Maturity meant being willing to be served, being willing to be let down, and being willing not to have things running perfectly smoothly and 'keeping face'. Looking competent and well organised is not the same as maturity.

When it came to opening the Bible together, we had to accept the same protocols. We had to trust the process of reading and incarnating and exploring together. Children shaped our time as much as adults did with their insights, questions and actions. Some things were a roaring success and others were spectacular debacles, but neither of these were the centre of attention. Seeking the kingdom in our relationships, our ethics and our words and deeds in the world through our engagement with the Bible was the focus. Thus, it wasn't just our understanding of the content of scripture that shaped us, but the narrative of what the Bible actually is—the journey that the text has taken through the hands and minds and mouths of many to reach us and invite us to be part of its story too.

As responsible exegetes of scripture, we need to recognise the way in which texts bear the marks of their time. Some of our Gospels and Pauline letters were written earlier and some later than others; and across the decades the tone of the text gets less edgy, less radical, more conventional and in line with culture. Is this drift, evident in the writings from the early communities of the gospel, a sign of a church 'maturing' or of a wildly radical movement gradually being tamed?

This might point to a reflection that your Messy Church needs to consider as time passes. Do you see a taming of your adventurous spirit? Are you becoming more like... something else? This, and the questions below, are good ones to ask yourselves. There are no right

or wrong answers; they are simply ways of provoking reflection and discernment for your Messy Church.

- What did we start doing and what have we stopped doing?
- What are we still doing but slightly differently?
- Are we feeling things getting harder or easier?
- Who is here that was here at the start?
- Who has gone and who has arrived?
- How often are we surprised?

Sustaining Messy Church maturity

How can the Messy Church model move into the strange, counter-cultural kind of biblical maturity that Jesus envisages in his parables and Paul models in his cruciform life? There is no rocket science here. It will be in the same way as for any church that allows constant renewal and transformation as well as growth and maturity. The sustaining, maturing and renewing source for any community of faith will be found in constant engagement with the Bible.

This is where I think Messy Churches have a great advantage over many traditional churches. A breakdown of the time a person spends reading and engaging with the Bible during an average service will come to less than 10 per cent of the time they have spent in the church. You'll note that I don't count the sermon in this calculation, because sermons are mostly second- or even third-hand thinking for passive listeners. They haven't had a great track record of bearing fruit, and it's easy to see why. In the Messy Church model, in its best expressions, the biblical text is worked over and over in multisensory and incarnate ways, for perhaps an hour or more.

Perhaps this is the place to sound a prophetic warning to Messy Churches that may be tempted to degenerate into models that view the 'celebration' time as the 'God time' or 'Bible time', and miss the

true fertility of the model in which we roll our sleeves up and work the text together. We don't let armchair theologians do our thinking for us (and I say this as a theologian myself). We trust the power of the Bible to speak as we let it impact us sensorially, relationally and communally. We trust the power of the Bible to form and transform us as disciples, not through trite, three-point talks of any length but through the strong weaving of story and community and senses. Our model invests in the simple art of hearing and doing the biblical text, and because we want all of our senses to be open to the text, this takes repetition.

We hear the text with focus on *action* as the community physically 'rehearses' the actions/verbs of the text. We hear the text with focus on *place* as the community observes or constructs or investigates the context of the world of the text and the community's own context. We hear the text with focus on *power and politics* as the community simulates and articulates the 'systems' in the text—economics, customs of honour, hierarchies, rules or governments.

We hear the text with focus on *materials* as a community handles, touches, builds and processes the material objects of the text—foods, animals, plants, buildings, things made of stone, wood, fibre or metal. We hear the text with focus on *vocabulary and poetry* as a community vocalises the text, rehearsing the patterns, the pauses, and the rise and fall of tension and tone. We hear the text with focus on *emotion* as the community identifies and validates, through expression, creativity and the arts, the heart language and affective drama of the narrative.

With these multiple readings of the text (and I hope you will find others to add to this repertoire), the community of faith is exposed to the powerful realities of the text, with attention to the historical context, genre, form, language devices, imagery and structure.

I offer these suggestions, which give both too much and not enough detail, to help identify the dimensions of the scope and depth, complexity and vibrancy of biblical exegesis. There is no need to compromise the quality of scholarship available to our

communities. There is no need to reduce the complexity of exploration. There is no need to mute the pastoral or prophetic poignancy of the Bible. There is no need to water down the application in our lives for younger or older members of the faith community.

By the time we have read with attention using all of these multiple methods, and listened together, our apprehension of the text is conceptually broad and concretely incarnational. Many wonderful resources for this process have already been published in the Messy Church materials.

Readiness, thoughtfulness and risk

You will realise that I am not convinced that ‘Western maturity’ supplies the most helpful categories for evaluating the viability and vitality of Messy Church. There are three characteristics of discipleship, which I think can form a useful rubric for considering the structures and strategies of good news discipleship communities.

The dynamics of readiness, thoughtfulness and risk can be encouraged at any age and for any activity or task, in learning, in praying, in compassion, in service and in leading. Think of your cook at Messy Church—ready, thoughtful and open to risk-taking, not knowing how many people will come. This is a posture towards God and towards one another that can be cultivated in all kinds of ways. Think of your woodworker at Messy Church—ready for God, thinking of God, open to the risks of God; ready for people, thinking of people, open to the risk of loving people.

Readiness

Readiness expands in several directions. It means being ready in the sense of prepared with an activity, materials and instructions, but also being ready in the sense of being alert, with our antennae up for what’s happening next. It means being ready for change, because if Messy Church is what we are going to run with, it will

change and it will change us. On a wider scale, this readiness calls our whole ecclesiology to ‘prepare the way of the Lord’. Our denominations, academies and colleges will need to embrace a ‘readiness’ for leaders who are preparing for Messy Church mission. They will need to be ready for students who have been nurtured in Messy Churches and have perhaps come with an alternative biblical methodology, different expectations of agency in their own formation, and a vision of the gospel that doesn’t necessitate many of the accoutrements that are large features in our current traditions and are reinscribed in the formation of clergy.

Thoughtfulness

The posture of thoughtfulness aligns with the best tradition of Christian theological reflection. Followers of Jesus are learners: we act and live, but we don’t disengage from the structures of belief and the intellectual architecture that inform our practices. This is a discipleship pedagogy, a serving pedagogy, a gospel-centred pedagogy.

Beyond asking either ‘How will Messy Church “mature” as a movement?’ or ‘How will Messy Church mature its participants?’ we also must ask, ‘How will Messy Church have a “maturing” (in the best sense of this word as explored above) effect on the church as a whole, including our theological and academic cultures?’

Messy Church has much to offer, including challenges to our theological colleges. For centuries now, our clergy have been consistently trained in the one monophonic expectation. The basic mechanism of communication in churches, for which clergy are trained, is monologue. This, we know, in our visual and mostly literate society, is a very poor means of communication and an even poorer means of transformation. Messy Church helps us to stop pretending otherwise. If the academy takes the past paths and potential of Messy Church seriously, applying its best theological reflection and critical skills from biblical scholarship, there is opportunity to develop a vibrant culture of biblical and theological

methodologies that equip all in the community to minister with one another.

In speaking of maturity, I would hope that our academics and scholars find this idea challenging and exciting, not threatening and alienating. Messy Church methodologies give great room for questions, for multiple readings, employing the thoughtfulness that genre, form, redaction, reader response and many other tools bring.

Further than this, Messy Church operates on the premise that what we do each day in our households and neighbourhoods, living ordinary lives in the ways of Jesus and power of the Spirit, is how faith is formed and informed, tested and proved. An intentional gathering once a month acts as a place of expression and resourcing for the life of faith. To view the monthly gathering of Messy Church as the 'source' for maturing would be to depend on a very thin thread indeed, and this has nothing to do with the format or 'depth' of Messy Church gatherings.

To view the weekly gathering of traditional or contemporary church as the 'source' for maturing would be to depend, equally, on a very thin thread indeed. To name it bluntly, many people do operate as if this were the idea of attending a weekly gathering of worship. There is a background assumption that the church service somehow 'delivers' the substance of maturity. This idea takes a few different forms. Sometimes it is seen in the access to 'teaching' via a sermon. In other traditions it is seen in the performance of sacraments. Other ecclesial cultures articulate the value of a weekly worship service as an opportunity to meet with God, to be in the presence of the Lord, to be ushered into the presence of Jesus and, in doing so, somehow to improve or at least sustain one's faith or spiritual life.

These are all variations that are vulnerable to the same heresy—the heresy that we have a spirituality that is contained, a 'thing' that can be added to or diminished, and that needs 'topping up'. A further vulnerability related to our dependence on a weekly church service is the sense that God's presence is 'stronger' or 'more

available' in some places, or, as we often hear said, that 'God rocks up there'—as if God's presence in the universe were limited to some localities.

These heresies are seductive. Followers of Jesus are easily tempted to think of church in these ways and to envisage their own 'spiritual development' in relation to the participation in and performance of certain ecclesial acts. A weekly worship service has become a cultural mainstay of Christendom. We do well to remember that this phenomenon is not historically consistent or inherent to the practice of faith. Messy Church, then, helps to break the nexus of expectations that have congealed around this practice and provokes us to consider how faith persists and is expressed in other patterns—domestic, voluntary, informal, relational, public, hourly, daily, seasonal patterns of practice. The monthly rhythm of Messy Church may lead us to recover spiritual disciplines that connect us to patterns of imitation of Christ, and mindfulness of the call to serve neighbour and love enemy.

The practices of simplicity can be helpful—eating simply, with perhaps no meat or dairy, or dressing simply by wearing black or brown or green. The practices of celebration can be helpful—daily lighting candles for the small good news stories that friends share, or holding brief moments of song and dance. Messy Church provides an impetus and a framework for exploring the value of daily and (at the other end of the time spectrum) seasonal or episodic practices.

Openness to risk

The posture of openness as an expression of maturity in Messy Church takes us beyond the idea of our own doors being open and returns us to the call to missional adventure. When I was little I was mostly housebound, visiting the chicken house, the grass lawn and the veggie patch; Dad's shed and the gravel driveway were the regular limits of my cosmos. To venture further, I needed older travelling companions.

Interestingly, my grandma was also mostly housebound, although she was physically quite fit. The horses in the back paddock, the rose garden and the front-gate letterbox were her limits. But there was a sense that this was not quite right. Even as a child, I could see that her isolation, her lack of connection beyond the domestic patch, and the anxiety associated with ‘outside’ meant that something was amiss in her grown-up status. There was no risk.

Thinking, then, of our Messy Church communities, an openness, an adventurous spirit, the capacity for risk, a willingness to go out as well as come home, will characterise a healthy ‘maturity’. We are, after all, a community of faith. Faith involves doubts and risks and uncertainties. If we are sure, there is no space for faith. How ironic that the church has acquired a reputation for conservatism! Of all people, we should be those most willing to risk everything and lose everything, even our very selves—or, as radically as the New Testament writer Paul put it, our own salvation that others might be saved (Romans 9:3).

This idea might need to be articulated in your church community. I don’t know that I’ve ever heard a sermon unpack that radical part of Paul’s faith seriously. Much of the preaching I have heard directs us to strengthen ourselves and improve our own piety. Paul’s letters to his gospel communities, by contrast, spoke of dying to self, of becoming empty for the sake of others—that those who were strong should give up their strength and become as the weak are. His ideas, unsurprisingly, are similar to Jesus’ call to become like a child or a slave in service of others.

Paul laid his bets on the idea that to try to grasp God and accumulate spirituality will leave us impoverished and devoid of the Spirit (1 Corinthians 13:1–3). To live in faith is, in Paul’s words, to be grasped by God, to be taken hold of, which means being out of our own control (Philippians 3:12). In C.S. Lewis’s *Prince Caspian*, there is a beautiful scene in which the cynical, careful, canny and conservative dwarf Trumpkin finally meets Aslan. When confronted

by the mighty lion of whom he had been so dismissive, he bows. A bow is a very controlled and contained posture. But, to his fear and delight, he finds himself tossed in the air—flailing but flying free. Lewis is a clever and subtle writer. He is offering us an image of what it is to be confronted by the reality of Jesus—a wild and risky ride—and he is showing our false attempts at reverence and dignity to be not so much futile as simply not what God is interested in.

Think of Noah adrift on floodwaters, or Jonah thrown in at the deep end, or Abraham on the road to nowhere, or the disciples following a renegade rabbi whose actions were often unreasonable, moving beyond risky towards downright ridiculous. It is not just that we might be called to actions that seem foolish, rash, immature or undignified. The disciples witnessed Jesus feeding 5000 families, interrupting funerals and rioting in the temple courts. Embarrassingly, it is God whose actions are foolish, rash, immature and undignified, seeming to fly in the face of the established order and collective wisdom of ‘how religion is done’. We do not worship a wise old sage. We follow a young man whose ministry lasted barely three years.

When we established our missional community, Family Spirit, which ran on a Sunday afternoon, there were some wonderful families from established congregations who formed the core team. They were truly servant-hearted and regularly went the extra mile. Some of them would lead a Sunday club group in our morning congregation and still have energy to bring resources and engage in the afternoon. Some played in bands that provided music for two morning family services and then came faithfully in the afternoon as well. I was at full tilt at all three services, but that was as a member of pastoral staff; these families were pulling the double shift voluntarily. I was staggered by their commitment and energy.

However, this extraordinary commitment had an unfortunate side effect. Those who came from the community to Family Spirit soon realised that we were double-dipping, and, although we always had a wonderful time and everyone was fully engaged, it

ate away at the integrity of Family Spirit as ‘church’. A couple of the families who came to faith through Family Spirit eventually decided to come to our earlier services as well. Although I was fully convinced that Family Spirit, with all its interactive mess and engaging chaos, was a rich and enriching, sustaining and sustainable ecology for faith, in order to demonstrate this, we needed to stop looking as if we still depended on and invested in the morning service as a ‘back-up’.

Similarly, a Messy Church will need to cut the umbilical cord if it has been born out of a mother congregation, in order to become a place in which faith that is ready, thoughtful and open to risk can flourish and be tested. While the participants, including the team, in a Messy Church maintain their ongoing regular attendance at another congregation, the integrity of the Messy Church model will be compromised. A messy theology of readiness, thoughtfulness and openness to risk is most vitally expressed in the everyday.

Messy and mature: contradiction or paradox?

I have considered whether ‘maturity’ is a helpful idea to connect with life in the Spirit as a follower of Jesus. I have noted the scant biblical basis for pursuing the idea of maturity in relation to faith and examined the phenomenon of maturity in agriculture, exploring the metaphorical ideas that Jesus referenced in many of his parables. This meant attending to the seasonality, fruitfulness, shedding and diverse transformations that are theologised in these biblical images, which liberate us from the oppression of constant, consistent, cumulative compulsions for growth.

I have shown how notions of ‘development’, ‘progress’, ‘growth’ and ‘maturity’ carry strong cultural overlays in the legacy of Western Enlightenment modernity, which are not necessarily in alignment with Jesus’ vision of the kingdom as heard in the Beatitudes and seen in the cross, or emerging across the Roman empire through the lens of Paul’s epistles to fledgling communities, which were

endeavouring to shake off other systems of status and embody the self-giving and self-emptying model of Christ.

I have considered a vision of 'mature' community and posted warnings of the lure of status, position, pride and conservatism, which have come to distort the patterns of vulnerability, mutuality and childlikeness with which Jesus challenged his disciples. I have suggested that the postures of readiness, thoughtfulness and openness to risk might be seen as congruent values with the life of discipleship and the gospel of Jesus. These characteristics may provide a more dynamic rubric for energising, encouraging and evaluating the communal life of a Messy Church and the life of each participant.

I have affirmed the centrality and exclusivity of word and Spirit, understood as inspired scripture, as the formative and normative agent in Messy Church. It will be the corporate reading and appropriation of the Bible together in the midst of our local and global context that shapes us and becomes our centring, from which we take our vocabulary and materiality, our structure and ethics for gathering.

Messy Churches, which are multigenerational and participatory, call each person to mutual service, stretch our engagement in the form and content of scripture, and are aptly conditioned for the discipleship of readiness, thoughtfulness and openness to risk, which, I suggest, characterise the life of maturing, fruit-producing, giving, shedding, dying and renewing faith.



Case study: the story of the ‘Messy angels’

Sharon Pritchard

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A couple of years ago, I had a call from a woman who was part of a group thinking about starting a Messy Church. They wanted a way of engaging with their local community—a former pit village with its fair share of socio-economic problems—and they felt that a Messy Church in the local school would be a good idea. Would I be able to come along to their next meeting to help them?

I dutifully went along to meet them one cold winter evening, finding my way in the dark to the house, which was right next door to a funeral parlour. I saw a light through a window and knocked on the door. What met me inside couldn’t have been more different from the cold winter night: a group of twelve or so women, sitting expectantly in a small living-room with a roaring fire. The armchair next to the fire was empty, reserved for me as their guest. I sat down and knew straight away that these ladies meant business! After going through the basics, it became clear that they were already prepared: the headteacher at the school welcomed the idea and they just needed an extra bit of motivation and encouragement to go for it. We talked about the usual things—funding, budget, planning, crafts, worship, helpers—and within a couple of weeks they were off.

We managed to get our then bishop, Tom Wright, to pop into their first Messy Church, as he just happened to be visiting our deanery that afternoon, which proved a huge encouragement to everyone. With lots of extra hands and two of the clergy helping out,

it became a great success, and today it is still going well. It is based at Sherburn Hill Primary School and is run by women from Shadforth village—'Team 1'. It happens once a month in school, with around 30 children attending and some of their mums helping out.

About a year after that first Messy Church started, the vicar, Eileen, felt it would be a good idea to run another Messy Church, but this time in the church building itself, St Mary's in Sherburn village. The parish is made up of four villages—Sherburn, Sherburn Hill, Shadforth and Ludworth—and, as in many such situations, although the school was not too far away, it was far enough to mean that the second Messy Church had a different core of people coming. This time, families were specifically encouraged to come along, and the same group of women worked together to open their doors to more people, once a month, with around 30 attending.

The vicar asked me if I would be able to meet with the team again, to evaluate and do some planning for the next term, and she said that they had an idea they wanted to share with me. One spring morning, I went along to the church in the village and sat round the table with the volunteers while we chatted about the things we were learning from the two Messy Churches they were running. We worked through some of the points raised, and planned and plotted what was next on the agenda for the coming months. Then came the 'idea'. There was another school, just down the road in Ludworth, a very deprived area. This village had once had a small wooden church, but it had been demolished approximately 40 years before. The clergy who had lived there previously had not been welcomed, and no clergy lived in the village any more. Eileen had felt for some time that there must be something she could do, something that was non-threatening, something that came from the church but was for that village, with all its problems. She had seen just how effective Messy Church had been in the Sherburn Hill school and indeed in her own church building, and she was determined to be a witness in the Ludworth school. She was planning Messy Church 3.

Eileen knew it wouldn't be easy and that the road was rocky, but

she also knew that we serve a big God who loves all his children, wherever they may be, and blesses the work of those who serve him. She had decided to go and see the headteacher and talk about how the church and the school could work together more. God was already at work, and the headteacher welcomed the idea.

With the first hurdle cleared, next came the planning, funding, budget and helpers—the list went on. The group had already accessed all the available funds and grants from the diocese, and their Messy Churches were not generating any income to keep them going, which made some of the practicalities more difficult, but the joy in the faces of those women as we sat round the table is something I often think about. They were thrilled that the school had said ‘yes’, and what really spoke to me was that in their twilight years, this group was making such a difference not only in their own village but in the next village too, and that Messy Church had offered them a way of doing it.

The vicar walked me to my car and said that she had something to tell me. Not wanting to embarrass the team from Sherburn, she shared with me privately how they had decided to raise the money to start Messy Church 3. They had gathered all their old pieces of gold jewellery, as well as some from friends and family, and had sold it to one of the shops in town that buys gold and silver. They had raised £200, which was enough to get them started. As Eileen told me what they had done, I was fit to burst. The fact that this group was so committed, so dedicated, so devoted to what they were doing that they were willing to sell off their gold jewellery to bring Messy Church to a group of children in a small village school is one of the most inspiring stories I have ever been told. I know that as they have honoured God in setting up these Messy Churches and enabling the work to begin in a new place, God will honour them.

When I tell this story to others, I call the Sherburn team our ‘Messy angels’. Their love for children and their passion for sharing the gospel with them through Messy Church inspires me to keep going when things get tough. I hope it will inspire you too.