

The Bible Reading Fellowship

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BEING MESSY, BEING CHURCH

**EXPLORING THE DIRECTION OF
TRAVEL FOR TODAY'S CHURCH**

EDITED BY IAN PAUL



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MESSY CHURCH AND THE SACRAMENTS

Philip North is the Bishop of Burnley in the Diocese of Blackburn. Born in London, he has served in parishes in Sunderland and Hartlepool and spent six years as Priest Administrator of the Shrine of Our Lady of Walsingham. After that, he became Team Rector of the parish of Old St Pancras in Camden Town, where his team formed a Messy Church that regularly celebrated the Eucharist.

What is ‘church’?

In her book *Natural Symbols*¹, anthropologist Mary Douglas analyses the conditions under which groups of people abandon their rituals. Ritual, she claims, is a form of communication that gives definition and identity to a culture, and when that culture is under pressure or in decline, it first seeks to explain its rituals in rational terms and then gives them up altogether. One of many examples she draws on is the Roman Catholic practice of abstaining from meat on a Friday. At first, that ritual is unquestioningly followed and becomes a means of defining the community. But as the identity of the community comes under pressure, the ritual is first explained (‘we abstain from meat on Friday in order to save money that can be given to the poor’) and then abandoned.

A feature of human organisations and communities that are under pressure or in decline is that they become embarrassed by their rituals, language and traditions. They seek first to rationalise or reinterpret them and then they drop them as no longer convenient. This may be an explanation for our confusion over the meaning of the word ‘church’, a debate that lies behind a great deal of the controversy that Messy Church can arouse. In many parts of contemporary Anglicanism,

we are losing hold of any sense of the church as something that has a supernatural or transcendent dimension. Rather, we rationalise it and understand it as a purely human phenomenon, a voluntary gathering of like-minded Christians, an earthbound organisation that is contingent, awaiting the coming of the kingdom, when it will no longer need to exist. At times, indeed, the word 'church' is seen as actively unhelpful, indicating a dry, dusty, irrelevant institution that needs to be reimagined, reinvented or renamed. Many fresh expressions will go to great lengths to avoid even calling themselves 'church'.

Unsurprisingly, then, we end up with confusion about what 'church' or 'the church' actually is. We are entering a realm in which any group of people with any sort of vaguely Christian intention can be named 'church'. Schoolchildren attending assembly are surprised to be told they are 'church'. Mums attending a parents and tots group find themselves on the Church of England's attendance statistics because a prayer has been said there. If people aren't going to church, just rename the groups they are attending as 'church' and the problem is solved. Humpty Dumpty lives!²

The answer, as always, is to return to the Bible, which is incredibly rich in language and imagery to describe the church. The church is the bride (Matthew 9:15), covenanted in an everlasting marriage with the Son. It is the new Israel (Galatians 6:16), God's people chosen for all eternity. It is the new temple (Ephesians 2:21), the place where Godhead and humanity meet. It is the holy people of God (Colossians 1:12). What is interesting about much of this imagery is that it makes no clear distinction between the church on earth and the church in heaven. To be part of the church here and now is to be part of the same church for all eternity. There is only one church, one body of Christ, which exists in a way that is, at one and the same time, contemporary and eschatological, earthly and heavenly, here and still to come. Christ is equally incarnate both in heaven as the ascended Lord and here on earth in his body. The church therefore both announces salvation and constitutes salvation, for to be part of it is to take one's place within the company of Christ's redeemed people.

There is a tendency in some Anglican quarters to be embarrassed by so robust an ecclesiology. So Graham Tomlin, in his fascinating book *The Widening Circle*, writes, 'Now the church is not the incarnate Son... Too close an identification of the church with Christ brings danger. The church is fallen in a way that Christ is not.'³ This definition of the church lacks the eschatological dimension that we find so richly in scripture. Of course, in its life on earth, the church is made up of sinners who get things wrong and make mistakes. That is entirely consistent with the fact that God is a God who chooses the weak. But this earthly church is nonetheless an expression of the true and eternal Church of which we are fully a part and which, in its fullness, is faultless as Christ is faultless.

Such a strong understanding of the church raises an important question. If the church is one with Christ, how is it constituted? Its heavenly existence may be clear, but how can we know where and how it is located here on earth? Again we turn to the scriptures, to two of the great commandments that Christ gives his church: 'Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit' (Matthew 28:19, NRSV) and 'Do this in remembrance of me' (1 Corinthians 11:24, NRSV). From the very first days, the church has admitted new members through baptism, for through washing in water we die with Christ in order to rise with him and so become part of the new creation. Again, from its very inception the church has expressed communion with Christ through the Eucharist, for through the ritual breaking of bread and drinking from the common cup, Christ has promised to be with his church until he returns in glory. In its inmost essence, the church on earth is sacramental. It is not the church that makes the sacraments. It is the sacraments that make the church.⁴

Some might argue that I am downplaying the role of the Bible in the life of the church, that we are a people of the word as much as a people of the sacraments. But this dichotomy is an entirely false one. To be a people of the book *is* to be a people of the sacraments. One points to the other. It was only when they broke bread that the disciples on the

road to Emmaus realised that their hearts had burnt within them as Christ had taught them from the scriptures.

We are ‘church’ because we share in Christ and in each other through the sacraments. We cannot decide that any particular group of people is ‘church’ just because we call them ‘church’, any more than we can decide that a dog is a cat just because we call it a cat. Whatever we call it, a dog is a dog because it has the DNA of a dog, and, in the same way, the church is the church because it has the DNA of the sacraments. If Messy Church is to be fully church, it has to find ways of becoming sacramental.

The sacraments and evangelism

Already, though, I hear a practical objection forming on many lips: ‘That sounds fine, but the trouble is, it doesn’t work.’ In an evangelistic context and in an unchurched culture, it seems to be a generally accepted fact that the sacraments are a barrier to evangelism. People argue that they are too staid and formulaic, that they have too many rules and restrictions, that they are complicated and hard to understand, that contemporary people just don’t ‘get’ them. Therefore, many churches who wish to develop the ministry of evangelism downplay or even abandon the sacraments. This is especially so in Messy Church, where many would suggest that the (supposedly) inherent formality of sacramental worship is entirely at odds with the ethos of the gathering.

There are two responses to this argument, the first theological (why we celebrate the sacraments) and the second practical (how we celebrate the sacraments). But before launching into either, let me tell a story. Stuart was 14 years old when I met him. He had come to the youth pilgrimage at Walsingham not for any devotional reason but because he fancied one of the girls in the group, whom he knew from school, and he had managed to persuade the soft-touch vicar to give him a place. He was a tough kid who had no time for church. But then, during a late-night eucharistic devotion, Stuart came to find me. He was in

floods of tears. 'Every time I look at that bread on that table, I just burst into tears, and I don't know why!' he said. I told him that he was crying because he had met with Jesus, the bread of life. He made his confession, went to find the soft-touch vicar and was later baptised and confirmed. A teenager was brought to faith through an encounter with Jesus in the sacraments.

Stuart became a Christian through staring at something physical, which in some way drew him out of himself and pointed him to Christ. A physical boy could relate to the physical—and that is why God gives us the gift of the sacraments. A sacrament is classically defined as an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace. Our gracious God relates to our physicality by using physical means to communicate to us his saving presence. Bread, wine, water, oil and touch become effective channels for divine grace to break into the world, bringing life and love and salvation. Through the sacraments, the redemptive power of the cross is made contemporary reality.

Once we accept this basic principle, the sacraments become not just an event but a lifestyle, not just one choice from the drop-down list of worship options but a blueprint for radical gospel lives. For example, in the Eucharist we see the dignity of the human person, for ordinary men and women are given the gift of bread and wine, which conveys the living, physical presence of Christ. So, to live eucharistically is to understand and acknowledge the dignity and preciousness of the human person, born or unborn. We cannot sincerely meet Jesus in the Eucharist without then seeking to meet him and serve him in the poor and the lonely, the victimised and the forgotten, the refugee and the stranger.

Again, in the Eucharist we see a vision of a flourishing human society, as rich and poor, male and female, black and white, powerful and powerless stand side by side to receive the same gift. So, to live eucharistically means to seek to build a world which reflects the heavenly kingdom that is thrown open to us in the Eucharist. That means challenging unjust structures, seeking reconciliation and right

relationship, addressing the causes of poverty and ensuring that the young have the best possible start in life. It is no coincidence that the Anglo-Catholic movement has always thrived in areas of great poverty and need, because implicit within the sacramental life is a powerful vision of human flourishing and loving interrelationship.

There can be no more radical, prophetic or life-transforming act than to regenerate human life in the water of baptism or to renew human life in the breaking of bread, and this means that rather than asking why we celebrate the sacraments, we need to ask ourselves some very different questions. How dare we deny people this gift? On what authority do we claim that the sacraments are a barrier to evangelism when in those sacraments we gaze upon and share in the very life of Jesus? Who are we to decide that people are too ill-informed or too immature or too ‘unspiritual’ to understand them? Only when bread was broken did the disciples on the road to Emmaus see Jesus. And that is our task also—to bring people to Jesus in the sacraments.

The question therefore changes again: how can we reimagine and celebrate the Eucharist such that an all-age group and an unchurched generation can find Jesus within it? The issue moves from the theological to the practical. It becomes an issue of imagination and liturgical dexterity rather than of principle—and that is where we turn next.

Celebrating the sacraments in Messy Church

The impact of Messy Church in the life of the local church over the past 13 years has been remarkable. However, there seem to be emerging two very distinct ways in which this resource is being used at a strategic level, and it is very important that the leaders of local churches make a clear decision about which route they are taking.

For many churches, Messy Church is pre-evangelistic. It is seen as a way to make contact with families they would otherwise struggle to

meet. The families may be drawn from schools, uniformed groups or baptisms, weddings and funerals, and the intention of Messy Church is to build relationships and grow the fringe of the church. However, Messy Church in this context is seen as part of a journey to more traditional membership of the church rather than representing the fullness of church life for its members.

In this context, the introduction of a sacramental dimension to Messy Church is not so essential, because the assumption is that people will grow into the sacramental life as and when they become part of a traditional congregation. However, at the same time, there may be reasons why such Messy Churches will choose to develop a sacramental side to their life. In Camden we had 'Messy Mass' at least once a term so that members could experience the Eucharist, become intrigued by it and develop some sense of what would await them if they moved on to Sunday Mass attendance (as, indeed, several of them did). We did not baptise because we did not envisage Messy Church to be people's primary unit of Christian belonging.

In many other contexts, however, Messy Church is seen as much more than a pre-evangelistic, all-age worship activity. It is a fresh expression; it is 'church' for those people attending. There is no intention of its becoming transitional or part of a journey to something fuller. In this setting, there is a greater challenge to the leadership of Messy Church because there is a profound need to engage at some level with the sacraments. How can church be church if its members are unbaptised? How can church be church if it never shares in the gift of the Eucharist? There is an incompleteness that must be addressed—or, to put it more positively, Jesus is offering these churches even greater riches.

Yes, but how?

Common objections to the use of the sacraments in Messy Church are the presumed formality and rigidity of liturgy, the incompatibility of 'traditional' worship with the informal feel of Messy Church, and the problem of receiving Holy Communion, which is often seen as a point of

division or even exclusion. With sufficient imagination and conviction, though, the sacraments are not just compatible with Messy Church; they enhance it enormously. Leaders will need to give careful attention to the following areas.

- **Theme:** Just as in a usual celebration, a Messy Eucharist needs a clear theme, which is explored in the craft activities. In the Eucharist it is best to have just one reading and to think carefully about how it is presented.
- **Setting:** Eucharistic worship when significant numbers of children are present needs to be both accessible and engaging, but also to point participants beyond themselves to the transcendence of heaven. It is therefore important to move from the activities area to a different and well-prepared setting, and to create a sense of gathering for a meal around a table. The good use of lighting matters; dimming the lights during the Eucharistic Prayer can focus people's attention. Robes can be beneficial in demonstrating to participants that something 'different' is happening and are also an invaluable teaching aid.
- **Music:** Good liturgy is a partnership between the person presiding and the musician. The choice of songs is vital, and there are also many musical resources for the liturgy that can help people to engage—for example, sung responses to the Eucharistic Prayer.
- **Style of presidency:** There is a real challenge to the president, who needs to make liturgy accessible but not dumbed down to the point of banality. The priest needs to have a deep trust in what s/he is doing and resist the temptation to gloss over things, over-explain or apologise. One option is to have a second person who stands at the lectern and gives short and simple explanations about each movement of the liturgy, leaving the priest free to focus on presiding.

- **Liturgy:** The key change in understanding in this area is to approach liturgy in terms of shape rather than words. In the Eucharist we meet Jesus in three ways—in scripture, in each other and in Communion—and this is what gives shape to the celebration. Within that structure, it is important to use as few liturgical texts as possible. *Common Worship* actually enables far more flexibility than is often presumed, and so allows immense scope for imagination. The *Common Worship* prayers for use when children are present are brisk and easy to follow.⁵ Minimal liturgical responses can be shown on a screen (and, indeed, are learnt surprisingly easily). Below is a draft liturgy that shows how all of this can be translated into practice. The main principle is to keep the liturgy moving along, though without unseemly rush. In this way the Eucharist can be celebrated quite happily within the timeframe of a normal Messy Church celebration. Optional sections in the draft liturgy are shown in italics.

Shape	Section	Liturgy	Notes
	Opening song		
Meeting Jesus in the word	Greeting	The Lord be with you. And also with you.	
	<i>Penitential rite</i>	<i>Sung, for example...</i>	<i>This is optional, and there is some argument for going straight from the greeting into the Gospel.</i>
	Gospel	Hear the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ according to... This is the Gospel of the Lord. Praise to you, O Christ.	There needs to be at least some direct quotation from the scripture, but otherwise the Gospel can be told as story, acted out or presented in an engaging way.
	Talk		Like any other Messy Church talk, but no more than seven minutes long.
	Intercessions	<i>Sung response, such as 'Lord, hear our prayer.'</i>	Intercessions will usually have been prepared during the craft activities and can be as imaginative as you like.

Shape	Section	Liturgy	Notes
Meeting Jesus in each other	Peace	The peace of the Lord be always with you. And also with you.	This can be shared in a variety of ways—a handshake or a high-five, or simply by joining hands as the words of the Peace are spoken.
	Offertory song		
Meeting Jesus in Communion	Eucharistic rite	One of the <i>Common Worship</i> prayers for use when children are present	There are many ways of engaging all ages in the action, such as a sung refrain through the prayer and use of lighting to create atmosphere. Gathering younger members around the altar can also engage them. It is important to create a sense of mystery.
	Communion rite	The Lord's Prayer; words of invitation	
	Communion	Songs should be sung or music played.	
	Dismissal and closing song	Go in peace to love and serve the Lord. In the name of Christ. Amen	

- **Holy Communion:** There should be nothing more natural than inviting people to share a meal with us, and yet the fact that some share in Communion while others do not is a common reason for not using the Eucharist evangelistically. There are a number of ways round this.
 - Think carefully through the words that follow the liturgical invitation to Communion, so that they are as inclusive as possible—for example, ‘All are welcome to receive Communion, but if you don’t normally receive, you may like to come forward for a blessing instead.’
 - Don’t be too worried if it goes wrong; generosity and hospitality are more important than pharisaical sticking to the rules.
 - Consider admitting children to Communion before confirmation. Some churches do this for children from the age of seven, others from baptism.
 - Resist the temptation to give sweets or raisins instead of bread, which is merely patronising.

Baptism and confirmation

It is only necessary to use baptism within Messy Church if the second strategic approach outlined above is being followed—that is, if Messy Church is people’s primary church.

In practical terms, it is fairly easy to include a baptism within the celebration. *Common Worship* makes provision for a rite of baptism in accessible language,⁶ incorporating, for example, a shorter prayer over the water. This rite can be used in Messy Church with very little need for adaptation. Boldness in the use of symbolism can hugely enhance a baptism in the context of Messy Church, and this is something that the texts in accessible language encourage. Large amounts of water to be poured, an invitation to parents and godparents to turn around during the promises, oil for anointing, a white garment and a candle all engage the senses and so are both compelling and didactic for an all-age audience. Full-immersion baptism should also be considered. Be bold!

There are examples of confirmation being used in Messy Church, and there is no reason why this should not be so. Just make sure the bishop is well briefed!

Conclusion

It could be argued that Messy Church is implicitly sacramental. People come together, explore the scriptures and share in a meal. Those who try it find that adding a eucharistic celebration from time to time is a natural development of what they are already doing. All it takes is plenty of imagination and a bit of liturgical creativity. The Holy Spirit will do the rest.

If this chapter has done nothing else, I hope that it has described something of the joy and wonder of the Eucharist. In the Eucharist, ordinary mortal men, women and children feed on the very bread of heaven, share in the risen life of Jesus and anticipate the heavenly banquet that Christ, through his death, has prepared for all who follow him. It is because this gift is so unutterably precious and so compellingly beautiful that we must find ways of sharing it with others. To share in the Eucharist is to meet Jesus, and that surely is the only goal of evangelism.

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

Being Messy, Being Church offers a series of thought-provoking essays exploring what Messy Church brings to the wider church, how these different forms of church community can coexist, and what this might mean for the future of the church. Essential reading for church leaders at national and local level.

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A timely book offering theological insight and asking probing questions into the creativity, mess and gift of an extraordinary phenomenon. A challenging and inspiring read for those leading, helping or simply wanting to understand more.

Most Revd Justin Welby, Archbishop of Canterbury



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