

LUCY MOORE and ANDREW ROBERTS



HOLY HABITS IN MESSY CHURCH

DISCIPLESHIP SESSIONS FOR CHURCHES

The Bible Reading Fellowship

15 The Chambers, Vineyard

Abingdon OX14 3FE

brf.org.uk

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With thanks to Jane Leadbetter and Ellie Bloxham for doggedly making so many weird objects and taking photos.

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Introduction

Andrew Roberts

Holy mess? Messy habits? The possibilities are many and, amid the fun, there is a recognition that Holy Habits and Messy Church are approaches to forming disciples of Jesus in ways that are both godly and down to earth. They experience holiness in hands covered in glue and paint. They are incarnational approaches (to use a theological word), continuing the Jesus tradition of seeking to be fully human in a divine way and striving for the kingdom to come on earth as it is in heaven. Crucially, they are both for ALL ages. In particular, they share a commitment to nurturing children, not as prototype disciples, not as people who will one day know enough to be called disciples, but who almost from the womb can be followers – and nurtured as followers – of Jesus.

They are both supportive of and anchored in the local church, whatever form that church takes. Both see gathering together and nurturing discipleship at home as important. Both encourage people to live out their faith day by day. They are ways of life.

Both Holy Habits and Messy Church emerge from a sense of gift. Neither are anybody's possession. They are gifts that God has given – that God is giving – to be opened and enjoyed and explored and shared. They're both shaped by everybody: one of the lovely gifts about both is that lots and lots of people of many different ages, cultures, nationalities and languages are contributing to the growth of both movements. There are no secret committees in concrete bunkers beneath big buildings masterminding schemes for how this shall all develop.

One of the gifts I still love to receive is Lego. We all know what people do with Lego kits: they empty out the pieces and look at the instruction booklet. They might follow the booklet once, but then they throw it away and begin to create all sorts of other wonderful things. That's precisely the spirit of both Messy Church and Holy Habits. Yes, there are guidelines and, yes, there is a certain amount of received wisdom about what might work well. But with both there is also a strong encouragement to be creative, imaginative and contextual.

Holy Habits is a way of life based upon Luke's model of the early church that we read of in Acts 2:42–47, a model that the biblical commentator C.K. Barrett argues is deliberately offered 'in order that we might imitate it' (*Acts 1–14*, T&T Clark, 2004, p. 160).

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

ACTS 2:42–47

In this picture, we see ten practices, or holy habits, that were hallmarks of the earliest Christian communities: biblical teaching, fellowship, breaking bread, prayer, sharing resources, serving, eating together, gladness and generosity, worship and making more disciples. According to Professor James Dunn, these hallmarks are present whenever we see 'enthusiastic spiritual renewal' (*The Acts of the Apostles*, Epworth, 1996, p. 34). They are certainly encouraged and happily often seen in Messy Churches.

In the text, Luke gives us some clues as to how these habits can be lived fruitfully. It's interesting to note how these clues are also keys to the fruitfulness of Messy Churches. He begins by saying 'they devoted themselves', and, unsurprisingly, both Holy Habits and Messy Church are proving to be fruitful when there is a high level of commitment to making disciples and living out this way of life.

Luke repeatedly uses the word 'all', and again we see fruit whenever as many people as possible – of all ages – are encouraged to be involved. (The Holy Habits resource booklets were first developed by a large number of people of all ages and backgrounds in the Birmingham Methodist Circuit, including ecumenical partners. The booklets published by BRF have even more contributors from even more traditions – around 200 people in total, including several children.)

Twice Luke uses the phrase 'day by day', reminding us that discipleship is for living in the whole of life. He notes that the Acts 2 community enjoyed 'the goodwill of all the people', challenging us to think how we can practise holy habits and be church in ways that bless the wider community.

And in the final verse, Luke says, 'The Lord added to their number', reminding us that this is God's work. With the passage located in the wake of the events of Pentecost, we are reminded that the life-giving breath of the Spirit is vital if we are to see growth and renewal, blessing and transformation.

Holy Habits is a way of life that we experience and practise to honour God and bless others, and it is to be lived day by day. As such, it is naturally evangelistic. Now there is a word that makes some nervous, but it literally means 'good news', so we should not be surprised if the Lord adds to the number of people who become disciples of Jesus when the Acts 2 picture is lived out in our times. After all, who would not want to be part of a community that is glad and generous, eats together, gives to any as they have need, serves, prays and has vibrant worship? That looks like Messy Church at its best.

Holy Habits is also a sacramental way of life: sacramental in the specific sense of the word, encouraging as it does the practices of baptism and Holy Communion. It is sacramental, too, in the more general sense of the word, living a life of embodied grace to be a sign of the kingdom.

I began by playing with the words 'holy and 'messy'. Commenting on the call of Jesus to make disciples (Matthew 28:19), Sean Stillman of Zac's Place in Swansea says, 'Building disciples is an unbelievably messy process and I think it was messy for Jesus and it continues to be so for us' (Norman Ivison, *Expressions: Making a difference*, Fresh Expressions, 2011, chapter 28). Sometimes in Messy Church, the mess will be the creative mess of glue, paint and junk modelling. Sometimes it will be the messiness of our lives or the lives of those we are called to serve. Sometimes we can be nervous of the word 'holy', because we think it speaks of an impossible perfection we can never attain. I increasingly think the struggle to be holy is the struggle to be fully human in a Christlike way. And that's one reason why God has gifted us one another in Messy Churches: to explore and practise holy habits when we gather together – and to encourage and support one another as we seek to live out this messy, holy way of life in the mission fields of our day-to-day lives.

For more on Holy Habits, go to holyhabits.org.uk.

Holy Habits by Andrew Roberts (Malcolm Down Publishing, 2017) is an in-depth exploration of the biblical background to Holy Habits, packed full of stories of everyday people living out this way of life.



Introduction

Lucy Moore

Messy Church is helping people of all ages enjoy being on a journey with Jesus together. Whether people arrive at church full of excitement about him or are only interested in what's for tea, Jesus welcomes us just as we are and longs for every person, young and old, seasoned church member and I'm-just-looking visitor, to walk closer to him. This book, based on ten habits of the early Jesus-followers from the period soon after Jesus' resurrection, as described in Acts 2:42–47, is one approach to Messy discipleship. It builds the idea of developing our beliefs, behaviours and attitudes into the very themes of eleven Messy Church sessions. In other words, one way of making and growing disciples in Messy Church is to use this material in your sessions. If you need to enrich the ideas offered here, the *Get Messy!* magazine sessions between May 2019 and April 2020 also feature the Holy Habits, using different Bible passages. (These are available to purchase from brfonline.org.uk/collections/get-messy.)

If you're new to Messy Church, do check out this exciting movement of God by reading all about it at messychurch.org.uk and in the Messy Church books before you launch in and use the sessions in this book. Many people think they know what Messy Church is, only to discover there's more to it than meets the eye. (Or indeed, ear, stomach or nose. Multisensory is our middle name.)

As befits Messy Church, some of the activities in this book are completely barking mad, and that's all part of the fun. When we get too solemn, it's time to close down. After all, **celebration** is one of our five values. What of the other values? **Creativity** continues to be key and, even if you only take part in half the activities in the book, you'll be stretching your imaginative muscles nicely. **Hospitality** means that, once again, we are setting out to be the most generous hosts and most humble guests we can be, expecting to learn about these habits from the very youngest and very oldest participants. Messy Church's attraction lies partly in the way we are **all ages together** – we are deliberately and intentionally intergenerational, as we believe it's the best way of growing as disciples for a long-term faith. So as we go through these sessions, let's keep looking for what God is teaching us through those who are

mightily different from us. And at the heart of everything is **Christ**, making our Messy Churches so much more than just a fun family time with food. Christ is walking among us, sitting beside us, laughing with us and listening to us. He is weeping, challenging, guiding, bracing and helping us become the holy priesthood he wants his whole church to become. As I was pulling together the material for this book, I kept realising afresh how the whole church needs to develop its understanding of these spiritual practices, not just Messy Churches.

Many churches are already using the Holy Habits approach in mainstream church life. You can read more about it at holyhabits.org.uk. In fact, during the writing of this book, we've had several requests for sessions to help Messy Churches match their theme to that of the Holy Habits happening in their Sunday church. Thank you to those churches who have trialled the sessions as a result.

A word about the selection of Bible passages. We've deliberately focused each session on a gospel passage about Jesus, to make the sessions as Christ-centred as possible and to give us every excuse for discovering what a wonderful God he is. This includes the first session, which although it explores the key passage in Acts 2 on which Holy Habits is based, in order to give a context to the habits as a whole, has a gospel theme of following Jesus the good shepherd. You might get to the end of the year and find yourself desperate to revisit the Old Testament.

So what have we provided here for each Holy Habit?

For each Holy Habit (Gladness and Generosity, Making More Disciples, Sharing Resources, Serving, Biblical Teaching, Eating Together, Worship, Prayer, Breaking Bread, Fellowship), you'll find a typical Messy Church layout, with guidance for the team to read so everyone can get their bearings with the passage. There are suggestions for making the most of the opportunities Messy Church gives for helping people grow in Christ together (ideas to get the team thinking, questions for the meal tables, ideas to take home). There are ten activities on the habit, a celebration suggestion and a meal suggestion. Photos and videos of most of the activities can be found at messychurch.org.uk/holyhabitsinmessychurch for that 'Oh, I see!' experience after being baffled by the printed instructions.

At the end of each session is a Messy Extra outline. Some churches are now holding Messy Extra groups for families who want to explore the things of faith further. So each Holy Habit has a very simple, robust outline for such a group to use with all ages present. You'll find a Bible passage that relates to the Holy Habit theme, with some discussion questions to use in your all-age setting. As Johannah Myers'

research in the USA demonstrated, children especially appreciate *doing* more than just *talking*, so a fun themed activity suggestion for the group is provided, suitable to do in a smaller group than a Messy Church. Don't be tempted to miss this out, as it represents the celebratory, relational, light-hearted and participatory side of Messy Church, and perhaps some of the adults will benefit from loosening up a bit and learning once more how to play – a valuable aspect of our discipleship. There's also a prayer idea to use in such a Messy Extra group.

The Messy Extras are all explorations of the ways the early Jesus-followers practised these habits, as described in Acts and in the epistles to the Corinthians. These Extras have dictated the order in which we've placed the sessions in this book, as they follow the order they appear in the Bible. If you're just using the Messy Church sessions, you can, of course, do the sessions in any order.

Lastly, if you run a Messy Vintage group (see messychurch.org.uk/messyvintage), there is a separate, shorter outline which includes just one of the main session activities and a simplified celebration, suitable for where the majority of people are older or space is more limited.

You could match your Messy Church sessions to the Holy Habits programme used by the rest of your church. You could intersperse these Holy Habits sessions with the 2019–20 *Get Messy!* magazine sessions, spending two months on each habit, making a note of which magazine sessions you leave aside so you can use them later. You could use the sessions as one-offs at special times of the year (for example, Prayer during Pentecost; Eating Together at Harvest; Breaking Bread just before Easter). You could have a weekend away and indulge in all the sessions in a very concentrated way. Or simply explore one a month for the best part of a year.

We'd love to hear of any lives transformed by God as you use these materials, or supplementary ideas you have that we can share more widely in our networks in the UK and overseas. Feel free to drop us a line at messychurch@brf.org.uk.

I really wish we could have found a way of introducing a football activity into one of the sessions, but it wasn't possible. I just wanted to call one activity 'Kicking the habit'. Perhaps you'll find a way...



Photos of activities and other PDF downloads for these activities can be found at messychurch.org.uk/holyhabitsinmessychurch.

1



The Jesus habit



[Jesus said,] ‘I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away – and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd.’

JOHN 10:11–16

#discipleship

Messy team theme

- How do you feel about exploring these holy habits?
- Which habit are you most looking forward to exploring?
- Which habit do you think will be most challenging?

How does this session help people grow in Christ?

This session can be left out completely if you simply want to explore the ten holy habits. But we include it as an overview of the whole idea that being a follower of Jesus means living differently – in fact, it means forming new habits and breaking away from old unhelpful ones. The image Jesus uses of sheep following a trustworthy shepherd might be helpful to people who have never thought about ‘discipleship’ before. So this session simply introduces the concept of following Jesus, a bit like sheep following a shepherd.

Mealtime card

- What’s the worst habit someone could have?
- What’s the funniest habit you’ve ever heard of?
- What are you most looking forward to about practising a holy habit?

Take-home idea

Take home a packet of copper sulphate. At home, dissolve the copper sulphate in a glass of water and hang a thread into it. Watch over the weeks as crystals form on the thread. Talk about the slow way this happens and the way we all practise holy habits to become slowly more and more like Jesus.

Question to start and end the session

So... what is following Jesus all about?

Activities

1 Sheep on a stick

You will need: halved bananas; melted white chocolate; melted dark chocolate; white and dark chocolate buttons or chocolate chips; long wooden skewers; greaseproof paper

Stick your chunk of banana on a skewer and dip it in the white chocolate. You might be able to make a textured coat by twirling the banana as the chocolate sets or by putting patterns into it using a second kebab skewer. Dip the tip into the dark chocolate to make a dark face. Stick on two eyes made from chocolate buttons and/or chips. Allow to set completely on the greaseproof paper.

Talk about how Jesus wants us to follow him and trust him, like sheep follow and trust a shepherd. What do you think that means in our lives?

2 Transfer

You will need: wide sticky tape; scissors; magazine pictures (perhaps of sheep, if you want to stick with the theme, but they could be of anything); a shallow dish of water

Cut a piece of sticky tape and stick it over your chosen picture. Cut out the shape of the transfer you want, with the picture or pattern within that shape. Put the shape in the water and go away for five minutes (resist the urge to piggle at it before five minutes are up or you'll damage your picture). Gently, with your thumbnail, scrape

away the paper pulp behind your picture, leaving the picture on the tape. Allow it to dry, then you can take it home and stick it to your window, plastic box, filing cabinet or any other shiny surface.

Talk about how when we follow Jesus, we try to become more and more like him. This transfer is a copy of the original picture, now in a new form. We're meant to be ourselves not 'exact copies of Jesus', but we want to copy the way he lives and deals with other people. If more people became more like Jesus, what do you think the world would be like?

3 String bowl

You will need: cling film; small cardboard bowls; PVA glue; paint brushes; thick string

Cover the bowl in two or three layers of cling film. Paint glue thickly all over the outside of the bowl. With the bowl upside down and starting in the centre of the base, coil around 50 cm of string into a tight spiral glued on to the base of the bowl. Then keep winding string around the bowl from there with lots of glue until you almost reach the rim. Cover it with more glue. Take home to dry for several days (hence using a cardboard bowl, not a church bowl that may never be seen again). When it's properly dry, gently peel off the clingfilm and release the stiff string bowl.

Talk about the way your new bowl is moulded on an older bowl. Who or what do you want to mould your habits in life? Social media? YouTube? People you'll never know? Or Jesus, the 'good shepherd'?

4 Mirror game

You will need: two chairs

Place the two chairs facing each other and invite two people to sit on them. Name them A and B. A starts by making some simple slow hand movements. B imagines that they are A's reflection in a mirror and tries to copy as exactly and in perfect synchronicity as they can. Swap over after a short time. Then let them confer secretly and decide who will lead and who will follow. Challenge any people watching to guess whether A or B is the 'leader' as they do some more actions.

Talk about the fact that it's very hard and takes a lot of concentration to follow the leader in every exact detail. How hard is it to follow Jesus, would you say? What does it mean to follow Jesus anyway?

5 Holy Habits pie

You will need: card; coloured pens; plates; rulers; a list of the ten holy habits or the names printed on stickers (more hassle but more fun)

On card, draw around the plate to make a circle and use the ruler to divide it up into ten sections. Label it 'Holy Habits pie' and label each pie slice with the name of a habit. Decorate it.

Talk about how you could take this home and keep it safe and try to colour in each slice as you explore them at Messy Church over the next year or so. (Make it clear it's not about colouring it all in at once, but as a marker that you've explored a particular habit.) You could offer a prize for anyone who brings it back filled in at the end of the year.

6 Holy Habits memory game

You will need: pairs of cards with the ten holy habits and symbols on (download online)



Play Pelmanism (the game where you put all the cards face down spread across a table and turn up two at a time, trying to find the matching pairs).

Talk about whether you can remember all ten holy habits.

7 Spot the habit

You will need: printouts of Acts 2:42–47; cards with a holy habit on each (download online)



Challenge people to find each habit in the passage: it's a description of what the first Jesus-followers did and how they followed Jesus in their everyday lives.

Talk about which habit you found most interesting? Do you think it's possible to have these habits today? Who do you know who has any of them already?

8 Who is this Jesus?

You will need: outline of a person on a large sheet of paper; pens

Around the outside of the outline, draw or write things you can remember that Jesus did (such as actions, miracles, healings, acts of kindness, cosmic achievements). On the inside, draw or write things that he was (adjectives, names, 'job descriptions').

Talk about why people have followed Jesus for 2,000 years – and still do.

9 Building blocks

You will need: any sort of construction materials, such as soaked dried peas and toothpicks, spaghetti and marshmallows, Lego bricks, toy bricks

Invite people to build as strong a building as they can: something that is resilient when shaken or pushed or when heavy loads are placed on it.

Talk about what makes a structure strong. What makes a person's life 'strong'? How might building holy habits into your life help you when you feel wobbly, under pressure or weighed down? How long does it take to build a resilient structure? How long does it take to develop a habit?

10 Treasure hunt

You will need: a selection of ten containers that resemble treasure chests as much as possible (though you could just use envelopes); cards that can fit into your containers; a prize (such as a suitable Bible or gospel or a Messy minibook – *Family Question Time, Family Prayer Time or Family Jesus Time*); pens

Write the letters from H O L Y H A B I T S on separate cards and put one in each chest. Hide the chests around your space. Send people on a quest to find the letters that

together make up two words that lead to a treasure. Give a prize to the quickest person.

Talk about what ‘holy habits’ we might mean. How can habits be good or bad? In what way could holy habits lead to any sort of treasure? What might this treasure be?

Celebration

(You might like to think in advance about the pastoral implications for this celebration for people with a destructive habit, such as a drug addiction.)

Talk about a bad habit you once had and have (perhaps!) managed to stop. Ask what a ‘habit’ is.

What bad habits can people think of? Why is it so hard to stop once you start?

But what if *good* habits were just as hard to stop once you start? What if you just couldn’t help doing holy things once you catch the habit? Wouldn’t that be great?

Here at Messy Church, over the next few months, we’re going to explore ten ‘holy habits’ that people who follow Jesus have found helpful in getting to know Jesus better.

They’re not about ‘being good’; they’re about getting as close as we can to Jesus, just like sheep want to be as close as they can be to the shepherd who looks after them.

So who can remember any of the holy habits we’re going to discover together?

The first people to follow Jesus had much harder lives than we do. If they were caught worshipping Jesus, they could be thrown in prison – even killed (as some Christians are today in some countries). The first Jesus-followers needed to help each other be strong and keep on following Jesus, even when it was hard, even when it was dangerous. And do you know what made it easier? They were *together*. They helped each other. They knew they were never alone. *Together* they prayed, read God’s word and worshipped God. *Together* they served their community and were generous to each other. They had meals together and broke bread together. They even shared their possessions with each other so nobody was in need.

I wonder how we can help each other catch these holy habits and follow our good shepherd even more closely? Perhaps just being *together* at Messy Church is a really good start. Has anyone got any other ideas?

Prayer

Have a large sheet of paper with 'I want to follow Jesus more closely' written on it. Invite everyone who would like to follow Jesus more closely to sign their name or draw a picture of themselves beneath the words. Thank God that you are all together on this adventure and ask God for help to follow Jesus more closely, like sheep following a wonderful shepherd.

Song suggestions

- 'We're on this road' – Fischy Music
- 'Celebrate' – Fischy Music
- 'The Lord's my shepherd' – Stuart Townend

Meal suggestion

Shepherd's pie

Messy Extra

Acts 2:42–47:

What did the first Jesus-followers do?

Read the passage together.

- What do you find most interesting?
- What word or phrase stands out for you?
- How is your church or group like this already?
- Is there anything you would be really excited about trying out yourselves?
- What difference will this story make this week in the way you choose to worship Jesus?

Activity

Using Lego or other construction equipment, and the internet for ideas and images, build the sort of first-century house that the early followers of Jesus in Corinth, Rome or similar cities might have met in. Does it give you any insights into how their meetings together might have felt?

Prayer

Use the construction materials again. Build a prayer sculpture by adding one piece at a time to a joint structure in the centre of the group with a prayer for someone in need, then somewhere that needs Jesus' light, then your local church, etc.



Holy Habits meets Messy Church!

Holy mess? Messy habits? In the midst of the fun, there is a recognition that Holy Habits and Messy Church are approaches to forming disciples of Jesus in ways that are both godly and down to earth. Each is supportive of and anchored in the local church. Each values gathering together and nurturing discipleship at home. Each encourages people to live out their faith day by day. They are ways of life.

The Holy Habits approach explores Luke's model of church found in Acts 2:42–47, identifies ten habits and encourages the development of a way of life formed by them.

This session material has been created to help churches explore these habits in a Messy Church context and live them out in whole-life, missional discipleship.

There are eleven Messy Church session outlines, one for each of the ten Holy Habits and an overview session, together with theological and practical context for the approach, Messy Extras and simplified versions of the material for use in Messy Vintage groups.



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