



Messy



Discipleship



Edited by
Lucy Moore

**Messy Church perspectives
on growing faith**

The Bible Reading Fellowship

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Introduction

Lucy Moore



Lucy Moore is the founder of Messy Church. She promotes Messy Church nationally and internationally through training and speaking events, and is the author of a number of books for BRF.

The last Messy Discipleship book was published in 2013 – *Making Disciples in Messy Church* by Paul Moore. 2013! It feels like a lifetime ago. So much has changed since then: governments, step-change politics, awareness around climate change and single-use plastics, the Black Lives Matter movement, to name but a few examples. There is also a growing understanding of ‘church’ as something which we live out in our lives 24/7, at home, work, school or leisure activities. In the church, opinion is arguably more polarised than back in 2013 around questions of inclusion and expensive church-growth strategies, while church attendance figures in the west continue to decline in most denominations. Then, of course, in 2020, Covid-19 stampeded across everyone’s lives, disturbing, disrupting, destroying, like an opened crate of velociraptors from *Jurassic Park*. Nothing will be the same in the UK. This savage rewilding has opened up spaces in the landscape of society and of church that are still at the stage of being comparatively trampled and empty, as I write. One fear is that in the church world, we will rush to replant what we want to fill these spaces rather than having the discipline and faith to watch and wait for the Holy Spirit to give a more diverse, perhaps less controlled, range of organisms the chance to take root.

What doesn’t seem to have changed since 2013 in the church world are the two points over which overworked Messy Church practitioners

bang their heads against the nearest wall: the first being that the biblical principle of being an all-age church is still valued by very few churches. The perfect service for the vast majority is still a nostalgic dream of ‘Send the kids out to Sunday School while we adults (and one or two “nice” children, sitting “nicely”) get on with proper church. We do not need to change the way we do church.’ And churches are emptying, with families with children driving away from their local church to the one in the city where they have large, professionally run children’s and youth groups. Chris Barnett’s chapter on the all-age value of Messy Church is a timely reminder that there is still so much to do to bring disciples *together* across all divides, and that real discipleship means walking the walk with all sorts of disciples *who are different from us*.

The other head-banging point is that Messy Church is still often done ‘to get people to come to proper church on a Sunday morning at 10.30 in a pew’. Only today, Matt Finch from the Methodist Church wrote to me: ‘We are celebrating the numbers of Messy Churches that have sprung up, but we are wanting to support their development into ecclesial communities in their own right. At the moment there is too much of an expectation for people thriving in Messy settings to one day move to the “established” setting and sit quietly.’ Claire Dalpra rightly celebrates the outreach Messy Churches. And it is certainly better to do an occasional Messy event than no sort of mission at all. But there is a fear that never moving beyond this model is self-limiting, self-satisfied and ultimately self-defeating. It will make little in the way of mature disciples because it expects little transformation. The chapters in this book on creativity, celebration, hospitality and being Christ-centred give inspiration that may well instil a holy dissatisfaction with anything less than the best we can offer our communities.

What’s changed since 2013 for Messy Church specifically? Two international conferences have taken place, bringing together Messy leaders from many of the 30 countries in which it happens and growing lasting friendships between people across thousands of miles. The third conference in 2022 is being planned, not by three BRF team members, as was the first one in 2016, but by an international, multid denominational

team aged 13 upwards: we're on the way to becoming more intentionally 'mutual'. Messy Church has grown in different ways in different countries, with varied contextual governance, including indigenous languages for the name, such as *Kliederkerk* in the Netherlands and *Kirche Kunterbunt* in Germany. The structure for the support of Messy Church 'centrally' at BRF has changed from three full-time staff members (with BRF admin, publishing and web support) to an even smaller central team and a reimagined support structure for the many UK volunteers. Since 2013 the Messy world has been immeasurably enriched by the arrival of the Holy Habits approach to living the Christian life.

In local churches for a while, Covid-19 devastated much of what makes Messy Church worth doing: the closeness, friendship, food, sharing, community, unconditional welcome, participation and freedom from authoritarianism that are so attractive to households outside the church. But it also drove us into new ways of being hospitable, creative, finding celebration in the midst of anxiety, being Christ-centred and appreciative of the gifts of old and young. The first steps were made towards young Messy leaders developing their own international leadership community with support from the network. The network made a regular time each week to gather online in the Wednesday Facebook Live sessions, forming a different sort of togetherness. We created versions of the resources to be 'Messianic Church at home'; shared out 'Messianic Church in a bag' by the thousands. Messy leaders joined in the Messy Adventure for Ascension Day, travelling the world via Messy Church videos; invented a combo of Messy Church and Minecraft for online Bible study; created study groups based on Holy Habits for team members; did pastoral care by text and phone; and presented a million and one Messy sessions online. The creativity in evidence in Messy Churches large and small, the value that Sandy Brodine explores in her chapter, is living proof of the Holy Spirit at work, even in lockdown.

Another set of significant changes is that of the everyday lives of the people within the movement. Any one month brings us up against the reality of the messiness of life for the people who are the movers and shakers of Messy Church, let alone the families who are members:

babies are born, loved ones die, critical illness takes over out of the blue, house moves disrupt, redundancy rattles certainties, retirement looms, a new calling shifts the bedrock of a life. The network reflects the incredibly transitional, ever-changing nature of family life, where a single year can transform a household unit into something unrecognisable, with the addition of a few teenage hormones or a change of job, school or relationship. The network is forever adapting, changing and, in fact, living. Is life something to celebrate or to endure? The light-touch and easily dismantled and reformed structure of Messy Church means the network can stay alive, like a hermit crab swapping shells as it changes shape.

And what hasn't changed in the world of Messy Church since 2013 is the lack of a quick-fix, flick-the-switch answer to making disciples. It remains... messy. And yet. *And yet* there are more and more guiding lights to help us take even more than the Messy team and more than the Messy movement on the journey. The problem is that those lights illuminate some paths that are so difficult that not many feel able to set out on them. Who's prepared to abandon their Sunday congregation in order to invest entirely in their Messy Church? Who has the courage to be a vulnerable and pastoral friend or surrogate family member, week in, week out? Who can make do with no recognition, encouragement or affirmation from their denominational gatekeepers? Who has time to host smaller weekly gatherings online or face to face, to build up individuals and be built up by them? There are plenty of neat theories about how a Messy Church should develop: the plain reality is that, in comparison with some forms of church that have full-time, trained, professional leaders, Messy Church is run mostly by lay people with many other commitments – including demanding commitments to inherited church. As a Messy Church leader myself, being told by experts that I must push on to the next step, move people on, add extra meetings to my week, get people on to courses, demonstrate something concrete that can be measured, leaves me – depending on my state of resilience that day – snorting at the absurdity, weeping in a slough of inadequacy or raging at the heartlessness that tries to push me and my lovely, messy,

unpredictable, shifting, enquiring, edgy congregation into a tidy box where we can be counted.

In this book, we had hoped to bring you the conclusions of an exciting research project with the Church of England Deepening Discipleship in Messy Church, but Covid-19 altered the timeframe. To whet the appetite, I'll just say that we are exploring together what impact on discipleship there is if a Messy team intentionally and reflectively tries to grow disciples through one of six approaches designed to benefit either the team members or the families who belong to the Messy Church. The early results are very encouraging. But it feels as if God may be trying to say something about the essential untidy nature of life and that God's kingdom is one in which disruption is going to happen: we can either give up as the cataclysm changes the landscape around us or use the Messy values and the emerging skills of reflective practice to discover ways forward. Success isn't measured by producing a book on discipleship; success is about navigating a route through the chaos together. Like Psalm 23, what matters is that the journey is walked *together* through the valley of the shadow of death, rather than counting how many people sit down at the banquet of the king.

What has this overview got to do with discipleship? Well, the longer I spend marvelling at the goings-on in the world of Messy Church, the more I'm convinced that discipleship has less to do with a single glamorous or feel-good experience and much more to do with obedience, attitude, under-the-surface 'heart' stuff, perseverance, resilience, dogged determination, single-minded (bloody-minded, even) unstoppableness in a journey towards, with and from Jesus. ('From' because it all starts with him.) As a network, we're stumbling together in roughly the same direction throughout the years, picking up new friends on the way, listening to Jesus together, pointing out to each other where we think he's directing us, being shaped into a movement through which Jesus can grow his kingdom: that journey in itself is discipleship. Like any group of hikers on a walk, discipleship comes down to not giving up, even when there are steep mountains, discomfort, blisters, confusion, darkness and mistakes in navigation. And when your companions

drive you bananas with frustration (and you realise you've been driving them equally bananas, but they've hidden it better), *even then*, you keep on believing in your purpose, your destination, the means of travel and your company. If you're not committed, you'll drop out, because what's the point of all the grief if you don't believe the journey's leading anywhere, that these are worthwhile companions, that your guide is with you every step of the way or that this is the best route?

And what's been happening over the last decade or two is a proving of the pudding that Messy Church *as a movement* is modelling a little of what discipleship is all about. It's becoming (and that 'becoming' is in itself significant, isn't it?) more confident (some would say arrogant). It's about being small, light of foot and decentralised. It's about rejoicing in the local and specific, valuing the tiny moments, celebrating the love of the amateur, being vulnerable together, laughing a lot, crying a lot, building friendship rather than rules and holding lightly rather than tightly, all in faith that our role is simply to create the welcoming space and that the Holy Spirit will do the work. In a way, it's being a metaphor for individual discipleship. It depends on community, togetherness, household, *oikos*. It has the stickability, resilience and adaptability that faces crises and, rather than giving up when it's all too hard, falls back on the strength of Christ and the strength of others, finding a way through and maybe becoming stronger through the experience, like Paul and the early church pioneers:

And we boast in the hope of the glory of God. Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us.

ROMANS 5:2-5

Character, hope and love in abundance: there is plenty of each of these in the Messy movement. And it's a movement that many of us are deeply proud and continually humbled to belong to.

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Creativity

Sandy Brodine



Sandy Brodine is a minister of the word in the Banyule Network of Uniting Church, Australia. She is responsible for four emerging faith communities, including two Messy Churches. She has a passion for creative worship and for helping new disciples grow imaginatively and strongly in faith. She lives with her husband, daughter and two dogs in Mitcham, Victoria.

To understand why creativity is so important to growing a robust faith, we need look no further than Jesus and the way he taught his disciples. Rather than a dusty, dry, ‘fill in the worksheet and give me the right answers’ approach, Jesus took his disciples with him on the road. He showed them how he engaged with people and helped them to understand who he was. He sent them out in small groups on their own to try out their new skills. And he told them stories: perplexing, odd, complicated stories – stories that could be understood in more than one way.

How effective was this creative discipleship strategy of Jesus? Well, the disciples scratched their heads and asked lots of questions. They were often perplexed. But Jesus had captured their imaginations – and he gave them things to try out, long before they could be considered competently ready. They failed regularly. And in this ‘playing’ at being disciples, they learned. So when Jesus returned to the Father, this motley band of former fishermen and tax collectors were as ready as they could be to disciple and form the faith of others.

Those who choose to follow Jesus, to become disciples in every age, need to find ways to wrestle with these odd and perplexing stories. The reason for this is that following Jesus is not just a simple, one-step process of believing; it is all about being formed in the likeness of Jesus. Andrew Roberts, in his book *Holy Habits*, sets out the goals of discipleship in a simple and straightforward way. He points out that God’s mission ‘in a nutshell is about the Good News of the Kingdom of God’. Disciples, therefore, are those who are charged with the work of bringing about the kingdom, that is, with transforming the world: ‘Transformed into a place where no child is hungry, where no woman is abused. A place where people live in peace. A place of laughter and love, of generosity and grace. A place where God’s creation is treated with care and respect and God himself is honoured and worshipped.’⁸⁷ In order to bring about such transformation, a lifelong journey of faith formation, of growing to be more Christlike, is necessary. In order to do the work of Christ, disciples need to be formed deeply in the habits of prayer and Bible reading, hospitality and generosity. We need to be formed and informed by the holy scriptures, and creativity and imagination are central to this process of disciple-making.

Creativity, telling stories, play, exploring, wondering, making mistakes, trying again – all of these things are key elements of the way Jesus disciplined his followers. So, of course, they are the keys to helping others to get to know Jesus and to follow him. It’s no great surprise that these are the main elements that go into building a creative set of Messy Church activities to help disciples of all ages and stages grow in their journeys of following Jesus.

The inclusion of creativity as one of the core values of Messy Church, therefore, ought hardly to be surprising. Creativity and encouraging a theological imagination have been a central part of discipleship formation throughout Christian history. Paintings by early Christians in the catacombs underneath Rome show Christians wrestling with the questions of who Jesus is and what it means to follow him. Indeed, artists have been helping people to wonder about these questions for thousands of years. Likewise, musicians, writers, poets, playwrights, architects, church designers and many others have used their creative talents to help other people get to know Jesus, to encourage wondering and to help people think deeply about what it means to follow Jesus.

What of theologians and biblical scholars, then? Is creativity a core part of thinking theologically, or of studying the Bible? When speaking about how he reads the biblical text, Rowan Williams says: ‘My aim in reading is not to find instructions, but to open myself to “God’s world” – to the landscape of God’s action and the rhythms of life lived in God’s presence.’⁸⁸ Being open to the text involves bringing all of the creative and wondering powers of one’s mind to the text – being open to the possibility that we might discover something new and surprising, or indeed that the text might change us into something new.

A note of caution, however: this ‘performative view’ of the task of biblical scholarship and of theology, as Nicholas Lash describes it, is not about creatively changing the text, which is not a work of fiction but contains elements of the truth about God. As Lash puts it:

The New Testament texts do not simply give symbolic narrative expression to certain fundamental and persuasive features of the human drama... They also express their authors’ confidence in one man in whom the mystery of divine action is seen to have been embodied and disclosed.⁸⁹

The creative performance of scripture – the act of engaging with it, of stepping inside it and inhabiting it so that it may change us – requires

some critical reading and thinking skills, and some depth of scholarship. As Lash points out, in order to perform Shakespeare or play a work of music by Beethoven, some sort of deeper knowledge is required. This is the fine line those of us who develop activities for Messy Church must walk, as we attempt to create activities and experiences to help disciples to grapple with the Bible and their faith in our Messy Churches: helping all people who are forming as disciples to respond creatively to the text and question it robustly, while at the same time maintaining the integrity of the truth to which the text itself points, Jesus Christ.

Employing the creative-enquiry approaches of science in Messy Church

Creativity is not just important in the spheres of theology and spiritual formation. It would have been impossible for many, if not all, of the developments of modern science to occur without the creative impulse. Albert Einstein famously said, 'I am enough of an artist to draw freely upon my imagination. Imagination is more important than knowledge. Knowledge is limited. Imagination encircles the world.' The development of Messy Science has been an attempt to encourage Messy Churches to pick up the creative skills used in scientific enquiry, to help disciples develop a robust, inquisitive faith.

In the Banyule Network of Uniting Churches, where the two Messy Churches I lead reside, we are fortunate to have not one but three professors of various scientific disciplines who have been keen to work with us at including the creative skills scientists employ into our Messy Science sessions. Of his work as a professor of zoology, Mike Clarke says:

A scientist's goal is to strive to get a truer and truer understanding of how the world really works. Replacing one idea, hypothesis or theory with an even better one, as we inch slowly closer to the truth about how the world works. Finding new ways to

test our hunches (hypotheses) requires *great creativity!* You don't get scientific breakthroughs and revolutions by simply doing what has always been done before. As a scientist you are constantly searching for creative new ways to view a problem, in the hope that it might lead to new insights into how the world really works.⁹⁰

We have been blessed to be able to develop Messy Science sessions along with professional scientists who take both their faith and their work as scientists seriously. Mike and others have encouraged us to use science experiments not just as object lessons, but as ways to encourage children and adults to enquire deeply about the world around them. This in turn creates an environment where it is safe for disciples to ask questions of their faith in a robust and resilient manner.

When it comes to teaching children about the nature of science and faith, I try to highlight five things, depending on age:

- a) the extraordinary universe God has created is wonderful, complex and knowable.
- b) great creativity is needed by scientists to understand the extraordinary universe God has created.
- c) you can be a scientist and at the same time be a Christian.
- d) science addresses HOW questions, and faith addresses WHY questions. While BOTH are really important, answering the HOW question does not answer the WHY question.⁹¹

I have seen this approach at work in the life of my own daughter, who has a deeply enquiring mind. About 18 months ago, prior to one of our Messy Science sessions, my daughter, then aged seven, informed me that she could no longer believe in God, because 'of the Big Bang'. If the scientific explanation she had been taught at school was true, then God could not be, she reasoned. We had discussed this, and I helped her to think about the different kinds of questions science and faith wrestled with. I encouraged her to ask questions and to talk to people she respected at church and school about it. Just recently, a year and

a half later, after hearing stories at Messy Church and engaging with people she trusts, she informed me that she does believe in God, and explained how she had come to this conclusion. Who knows what other hurdles she will face in her faith development, but certainly this creative-thinking approach has helped her to come to an answer which is satisfying to her now nine-year-old mind.

Educational theory and Messy Church

Important tools for Messy Churches can be found among critical thinking and enquiry-based learning models. Many Messy Church practitioners will be familiar with the Godly Play method, developed by Jerome Berryman, whose story-based approach and wondering questions draw heavily on the work of Maria Montessori. Early childhood models of enquiry-based play and sensory play are also helpful tools to have in mind when developing Messy Church activities. Again, these encourage wondering and imaginative engagements with elements of the story or perhaps with spiritual disciplines, such as prayer.

Using a model like Bloom's Taxonomy⁹² can help Messy Church leaders to think about whether they are creating tasks which will simply develop a lower-order skill, such as 'remembering' the story or names of characters in a story. Instead, we want to create activities that will help disciples to apply their knowledge of the story to their lives or to use even higher-order thinking skills, like analysing, evaluating and creating, in order to, in Rowan Williams' words, step inside a story and inhabit it. We want people to ask the 'Why?' questions of faith.

Another educational theory useful for Messy Church is Gardner's Theory of Multiple Intelligences,⁹³ which suggests that every learner learns in different ways. As we develop our Messy Church programme, I try to ensure there is a range of activities which allow participants to engage using the full range of skills, including kinaesthetic (touch or movement based), visual, auditory, verbal-linguistic, musical-rhythmic, interpersonal, intrapersonal, naturalistic (nature based) and

existential (spiritual). Hopefully across the range of crafts and activities offered at Messy Church, each person will find a creative way to engage with the story that will fire their imaginations and help them grow as disciples of Jesus.

Other educational models, such as Edward de Bono's Six Thinking Hats,⁹⁴ will also help Messy Church leaders think about ways that disciples can engage thoughtfully and critically with the biblical narrative.

You don't need a degree in education to make use of these theories. There are many video clips online which will give you a simple introduction to some of them, so that you can develop a range of creative ways for new disciples of every age to deeply engage with the biblical text and to grow.

Finally, it is worth ensuring that there are activities for people in different emotional states: something quiet that can be done on one's own for the introvert who needs some space or for the person who likes to process on their own. You might like to offer storybooks, preferably on the theme of the day, for families who need to encourage some quiet time for a particular child. Create sensory-appropriate activities for children who need those, alongside boisterous and noisy gross-motor activities for people who prefer to engage in that way.

What kinds of creative activities will help to grow disciples of all ages at Messy Church?

Include open-ended, 'wondering' table questions

Many of us include a question or 'something to think about' to go on the table. When devising the questions, try to include ones that encourage wondering or open discussion around the table, rather than simplistic or 'right' answers which show someone has remembered facts about a story.



Enabling all ages to grow in faith



Anna Chaplaincy
Living Faith
Messy Church
Parenting for Faith

The Bible Reading Fellowship (BRF) is a Christian charity that resources individuals and churches. Our vision is to enable people of all ages to grow in faith and understanding of the Bible and to see more people equipped to exercise their gifts in leadership and ministry.

To find out more about our work, visit

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Described as being ‘deeply serious about discipleship’, Messy Church has much to share, as well as much still to learn.

As the fastest-growing fresh expression of church in the UK, Messy Church has learnt a thing or two about discipleship since its beginnings in 2004.

This collection of perspectives, edited by Messy Church founder Lucy Moore, brings academic analysis and practitioner wisdom to bear on a key question for today’s church, capturing the latest thinking and learning from the Messy Church context. Individual chapters examine each of the core Messy Church values and how these work in practice to promote discipleship.

Part I: How Messy Churches are enabling discipleship **Claire Dalpra**

Part II: Discipleship through the lens of the Messy Church values

Christ-centred	Tom Donoghue
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