



Messy Togetherness

Being intergenerational
in Messy Church

**MARTYN PAYNE
& CHRIS BARNETT**



**EDITED BY
AIKE KENNETT-BROWN**

**REVISED AND
UPDATED EDITION**

‘Ministry leaders worldwide desire to facilitate intergenerational faith formation in their ministries, but the question often arising from that desire is: “Where do we begin?” Martin Payne, Chris Barnett and Aike Kennett-Brown help faith communities define and uphold intergenerational values while unleashing a plethora of fresh creativity and resources for making “messy togetherness” a transformative reality.’

Dr Valerie M. Grissom, author of *All Ages Becoming*, chair of the InterGenerate Team and Presbyterian pastor

‘This book is a gem! Building on the previous edition and incorporating new learning around intergenerational church, *Messy Togetherness* offers wisdom and theology, born out of experience, which every church community should take note of. Read the book and join the journey!’

The Revd Mary Hawes, children’s spirituality consultant, former Church of England National Children and Youth Adviser

‘An enlightening exploration of why and how being “all age” is the necessary default for all Messy Churches. While intergenerational church is still countercultural in many settings, this book offers updated research and helpful teaching to enable Messy Churches – and all gathered congregations – to consider what it means to truly be an intergenerational church.’

Rachel Gotobed, family ministries outreach mission partner, The Salvation Army United Kingdom and Ireland Territory

‘Whether you’ve only heard about this whole Messy Church thing or you’ve been part of one for a decade, this book is for you. It’s chock full of stories, insights, and practical ideas. What are you waiting for? Read this book and join the Messy revolution!’

David M. Csinos, associate professor of practical theology at Atlantic School of Theology, founder of Faith Forward, and author of *A Gospel for All Ages*

‘*Messy Togetherness* gives a wonderful overview of the value of intergenerationality. A must-have book for anyone wishing to grow faith and discipleship in their Messy Church.’

Sandy Brodine, education and strategy coordinator for the Younger Generations Team, Victoria and Tasmania, Uniting Church in Australia



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Foreword

‘Messy Church is intentionally and passionately intergenerational!’ This line is spoken in every ‘Get Started with Messy Church’ training that Messy Church USA hosts. I know, because I’ve said it myself many, many times! ‘We’re passionate about bringing the generations together,’ we say again on the very next slide. After all, bringing all ages together is one of the core values of Messy Church.

One of the things that makes Messy Church, well, Messy Church is this emphasis on being intergenerational. But I wonder how often we Messy leaders think about *why* we’re so invested in Messy togetherness?

From 2017 to 2019, as I worked on my doctoral project thesis, I started with the question, ‘How do we form disciples?’ And as someone passionate about Messy Church, my next questions was ‘Can Messy Church teach us something about discipleship?’ Martyn’s recently published *Messy Togetherness* helped spark my journey:

If we want to see our Christian faith caught and nurtured today, those with faith need to be alongside those who are learning faith. The young need to be alongside the old so that they can hear and learn from those with experience of trusting God in all the ups and downs of life. The old need to be alongside the young, who can bring the gift of a lively spirituality and an eager sense of adventure.

With its biblical foundations and review of academic research, *Messy Togetherness* helped me articulate the value of intergenerational faith formation and my growing passion for apprenticeship as a model for discipleship. The book helped put depth to what my gut

instinct told me about why all ages together was important. Even more, it demonstrated how Messy Church's emphasis on all ages had something to teach the wider church about how we grow in faith better together.

In the last decade, there has been a growing number of faith leaders around the world advocating for the church – Messy and otherwise – to embrace intergenerationality. Messy Church has much to offer in this discussion! With 20 years of practice in being intergenerational and with Messy Churches now around the world, we offer a model of church that inherently embraces the messy work of bringing generations together.

I am so pleased that *Messy Togetherness* is being reissued with Martyn's original wisdom expanded to include the contributions of new research from within Messy Church and from the intergenerational movement happening in western Christian culture.

But of course, it's never enough to just say we embrace all ages together if we don't put this value into practice. Chris Barnett, a leading voice in intergenerational faith formation, has added a brilliant chapter with practical ways of helping any local Messy Church become more intentional in their practice of being intergenerational.

What a gift *Messy Togetherness* is for us as Messy leaders – and what a gift to the church around the world! I'm thankful for the work of Martyn Payne, and now Aike Kennett-Brown and Chris Barnett. May we all embrace the joy (and the mess) of bringing all ages together to worship and explore faith, to grow in Christ and deepen our love for God and our neighbours.

Dr Johannah G. Myers
Program Director, Messy Church USA

Introduction

Messy Church is the child in the midst of inherited church, playing, wondering, disturbing and questioning everything.

Since the first appearance of Messy Church over two decades ago in the UK, it seems that everything has been thrown up in the air. I mean this in a good way, because so much of what we have accepted as normal in the way we do church, go about our evangelism, make disciples and teach the faith does need to be re-examined in our day. Messy Church has allowed us to do this in a non-threatening way, since this fresh expression of church has grown up within the established structures and denominations of church, thus giving congregations the opportunity to compare and contrast what works and what needs to be reimagined when it comes to sharing and living out the gospel of Jesus Christ in the 21st century.

Discipleship, teaching and learning, children's and youth work, the sacraments and even church itself have all come under the Messy microscope, allowing us to ask playful but sometimes painful questions about the status quo. Messy Church is not, however, about throwing everything out and starting again. It's simply about taking a fresh look at what we have been doing and gently wondering whether some of our church methodology is still fit for purpose. As part of this investigation, one of the key areas in which Messy Church has pioneered is the question of what it means to be church all together, all the time – in a messy togetherness where all generations learn with and from each other on a journey of discipleship.

This book focuses on the 'all-age' value of Messy Church. Why do more and more people advocate the idea that the generations should develop their faith together, and what does the Bible have

to say about it? How does this fit with our inherited model of age-related groups for learning and discipleship? Is it really practical and possible to have an experience of church in which the youngest to the oldest share the same meeting space, service theme and time to worship? Messy Church is claiming that this can and does happen.

My aim in this book is to put the intergenerational claim itself under the microscope. In Part One I explore why we do it, and in Part Two I look at how being an intergenerational church can work out in practice, focusing particularly on the Messy Church model. In addition, the book includes three outlines for Messy Church sessions that focus on the theme of sharing faith when the whole body of Christ is together, drawing on stories from the Old and New Testaments.

Throughout the chapters ahead, you will find many references to Messy Churches I have visited. For three years, I had the privilege of being a listener on behalf of the Messy Church movement. This involved joining in with Messy congregations across the UK, and it meant that I heard first-hand the stories of Messy Churches who are daring to explore what Messy togetherness means. My listening has been invaluable, enabling me to learn from some amazing Messy Church teams and leaders, and then go away and reflect more deeply on how Messy Church can better fulfil its all-age aspiration.

My visits have also, I am assured, been an encouragement to Messy Church teams. Those who work tirelessly and faithfully with children and families have often done so with little recognition on the margins of many of our inherited churches. To be able to join with these Messy saints and both pass on ideas and go away inspired with fresh insights has been a blessing to me as much as, I hope, it has been for them. The idea that church is not just desirable but better when all ages are together has, as you may imagine, not been received with universal enthusiasm. Of course, Messy Church proponents are not saying that this is the only way that church should ever be done. We do need like-minded groups to help our faith grow, and those groups are often age-related. However, to miss out on

the significance and worth of doing faith intergenerationally does a huge disservice to a biblical understanding of how faith is passed on and how faith ‘sticks’ for each one of us. For this reason, the Messy togetherness ‘banner’ needs to be flown especially high for a time, at least in order to redress the imbalance in our approach to sharing and nurturing faith in our churches and communities.

Let me finish with a short story from Lucy Moore, the founder of Messy Church. It’s a parable, and as such it exaggerates to make its point and argue the case for Messy togetherness. I hope it makes you smile, as it did me, but that it also opens up the question of the value of Messy togetherness, without which something is definitely missing in our experience of our Christian faith.

Once upon a time, a person – we’ll call him Malcolm – had a huge, safe, beautiful house with a lovely garden. Malcolm decided to have a family to fill the house. But he decided he would choose exactly who would go in his family.

Malcolm was a man, so he decided there would only be men in his family.

Malcolm had black hair, so he decided he would just have men with black hair in his family.

Malcolm liked playing ping-pong, so he decided there would only be men with black hair who liked playing ping-pong in his family.

Malcolm was rich, so he decided only men with black hair who liked playing ping-pong and were rich would be in his family.

Malcolm was British, so he decided only men with black hair who liked playing ping-pong and were rich and British would be in the family.

Malcolm liked cauliflower-flavoured crisps, so he decided that only men with black hair who liked playing ping-pong, were rich and

British, and liked cauliflower-flavoured crisps would be in the family.

Malcolm was 38 years old, so... well, you can guess the rest!

So there they were, the very special, very happy, very exclusive family of 38-year-old British rich men with black hair, a ping-pong table in the living-room and plenty of strange crisps in the kitchen. But when Malcolm looked round at his family of male, black-haired, ping-pong-playing, rich, British, strange-crisp-eating 38-year-olds, he knew instinctively that something wasn't right.

'Something is not right!' he said to his family. 'What are we going to do with the other packets of crisps in the multipack? How will we all fit around the ping-pong table at once? What will happen when one of our family's hair turns grey... or falls out?'

The black-haired ping-pong players looked at each other in horror. 'And,' continued Malcolm, 'what about all the people who would enjoy being part of this family, who would love to learn to play ping-pong and who could enjoy the things that our money can buy? What about the fun we would have if different people joined us – people who are 28 or 8 or 98? People who are women or children? People who would love being in this huge, safe, beautiful house with its lovely garden? People who might eat up the other flavours of crisps?'

The family looked at each other. And they talked in little groups. And they decided... well, I wonder what you think they decided. Do you think they decided to let everyone else into the family, even though those people were different from them? Or do you think they decided to stay safe and cosy as they were? I wonder how hard it was to make that decision.

Here's to choosing Messy togetherness and the blessings of being intergenerational church.



Part 1

Messy togetherness and why we do it



01 All together now: it's working

THE BACKGROUND TO ALL-AGE MESSY CHURCH

Of course they never arrive on time. But how could they? Gathering the Messy Church family together is never easy.

There's Jordan, who comes with his nan. They're always the first. And Liz, who brings her own two plus three of the neighbour's children; she's a childminder. It takes her a while to sort everyone out, as well as park and unload the buggies. Then there's grandad Stan. He brings the whole family – daughter Jess with Peter and Alice, as well as his son's family. Quite a dynasty! They're always the first to get stuck into the activities, barely stopping to be registered sometimes.

There's a new family here today. They only live round the corner and heard about us from Brenda, who helps at the toddler group. She's there too, of course, with her Lilly and Sean, as well as big brother John this time – to help, he says. Aesha is here again with her family. They've not missed a single Messy Church in two years and are virtually part of the team now. She always stays to help clear up. The Jones sisters are here most months; both are single and in their 40s. They love coming. They say it's like being part of a big family and they always have a go at everything.

Dave, Brian and Gary are regulars on the team. They don't usually get involved with the activities, but give them a practical job and you can be sure it will be done. Grandma Wendy is already out in the kitchen. She likes to be helpful. Oh, and there's Helen, who used to work at the school over the road. She knows most of the families, which is always a bonus for first-timers.

I suppose it takes at least 40 minutes, on a good day, but eventually the Messy community is gathered. New friendships are being made and others deepened; there's a buzz of conversation at the tables, with news being shared alongside chat about the Bible story. A young child is crying over by the soft play area, but there are plenty of people around to come and comfort him. And so by the time the celebration time arrives, we are all together. We feel at home again; it's a safe place; it's a holy space. Our Messy community is laughing, learning and loving each other into the kingdom of God. Our intergenerational Messy Church is becoming a community, with children in the midst, who help us all to explore, to create, to discover and to question together. And Jesus is with us.

Every time our all-age family comes together like this, it's like a new beginning. It's something worth celebrating. And what's next? Well, we sit down and eat together, of course.

A SURPRISING NEW WAY OF BEING CHURCH

So another Messy Church gets underway, and those of you involved with running one of the many thousands of Messy Churches, either as leaders or as team members, will no doubt recognise my short semi-biographical sketch of what it's like at one of these fresh expressions of church for the 21st century. What's surprising, though, is that something like this is happening daily and in many different sorts of communities up and down the UK and around the world. Messy Church has gripped the imagination of Christians from a wide variety

of denominations and traditions, so that it has become the largest church growth phenomenon in the recent history of the western church. But perhaps even more surprising is just how simple, down-to-earth and unassuming this Messy revival is.

Messy Church offers an uncomplicated formula for reimagining church as a safe meeting place for those with faith and those for whom faith is almost the last thing on their minds. It's a shape of church that is not defined by what works for those who already believe, but it instead starts where people are. Messy Church is a way for Christians to show practical love and welcome to the wider community on their doorstep and to share what God means to them, not from a position of superiority but on a level plain of Messy togetherness. With its creative mix of crafts and activities, storytelling and song, conversation and a shared meal, Messy Church has made faith-sharing possible for thousands of ordinary Christians who have never felt qualified to be evangelists in our inherited understanding of that word. Messy Church has put a smile back on what it means 'to come to church', so that it has become an experience of shared laughter and friendship, where people meet with Jesus as they meet with those who already love and follow him.

THE ALL-AGE DIMENSION

There's one more surprising thing about Messy Church. Although we have always known that doing things in community is a good thing, for some reason much of church history, particularly since the Reformation, has been marked by a segregated model of faith-sharing and discipleship. We have inherited a tradition of telling others about Christ in age-related and homogeneous social groupings. We have behaved as if true spiritual awakening can come only with age or alongside people who are like us.

Of course, it may well be easier to do it this way, but that doesn't make it right. As any teacher will tell you, it would be so much easier

if all the students in front of them were starting in exactly the same place and with the same enthusiasm to learn; but that's not the real world. It is also not true when it comes to matters of faith. When sharing the good news of God's love to us in Jesus, a young child can be every bit as much alive to the Spirit of God as someone with a much longer experience of life. There are no age restrictions when it comes to 'tasting and seeing that the Lord is good'. It stands to reason, then, that the old have as much to learn from the young in the kingdom of God as the child has to learn from the adult.

TWO-WAY LEARNING

Many of you reading this will have had a long experience of working with children's groups in churches. Until recent years, the majority of programmes designed for supporting this ministry have assumed that it's the grown-ups who have something to share with the children. While there is truth in that, there has been a growing awareness, especially as research into children's spirituality has become more widely known, that the children can also be givers in this process, not just receivers. Consequently, children's ministry has very gradually moved from delivering and presenting material to children to one that explores and discovers *with* them.

These insights should never have taken us by surprise. Jesus himself comments on the reality of the faith of 'these little ones' in his sayings about children, but, unfortunately, these sayings have been largely relegated to the footnotes of much of our theological thinking.

This rediscovery of the truth of God at work in everyone, at whatever age, has been vital to the DNA of Messy Church. Messy Church is unashamedly all-age. It's not just a children's activity or a special event only for families with preschool children; rather, it seeks to rediscover the intergenerational way in which faith is shared from child to adult as much as from adult to child.

Messy Church takes this insight even further. It's not just that the children can help adults to see more of God but that the strangers we welcome into Messy Church can help us on our spiritual journey as much as we hope to help them. This further dimension might be hard to take for those of us who have been brought up with an 'us and them' approach to the gospel and the way we share it. However, if we revisit our Bibles prepared to unlearn as well as relearn, we will discover that Jesus found faith in unexpected people and places, just as the first Christians were compelled eventually to recognise God at work outside their Jewish boundaries. God is far bigger than the convenient boxes we want to confine God to.

MESSY TOGETHERNESS

In this context, Messy Church becomes, at its best, a melting pot of glorious messy togetherness. Children are in the midst, both to open our eyes to the wonder of the world and to keep our feet firmly on the ground in the realities of life. Strangers are in the midst, opening our vision to the way other people see things, with their honest questions about the challenges they face in their lives. Teenagers are in the midst, full of restless discontentment, questioning our inherited cultural norms and giving us fresh eyes to see the pressing issues of our day. Adults at all stages of life are in the midst, with their messy experiences and their messy journeys of faith, which can give us new perspectives on who we are in God.

This is a rich togetherness for faith development. This is a rich formula for Messy discipleship. This is a new way of being church which is not a new way at all, really. It is exactly how faith was always passed down from generation to generation, not by separating the generations off but by being together in the same space, sharing stories, experiences and life together.

Messy togetherness is arguably one of the most important strengths and gifts that Messy Church has for the church at large. Where the generational connections have become broken, we have seen faith falter. No wonder there's such a huge difference today between the growing churches of the majority world and the traditional churches of the west. I want to explore this exciting, challenging and significant value of Messy Church, arguing urgently that we must not lose this dimension but should strive with all our energy to make sure we stay intergenerational in every aspect of our togetherness.

THE PURPOSE OF THIS BOOK

The importance of this Messy Church all-age value is still very much contested. There are those who will argue strongly that separation and segregation remain important for many aspects of our Christian mission and ministry. I want to look at those arguments and investigate their validity. During my time working for BRF Ministries, and within its Messy Church team in particular, I had the opportunity to visit and be part of Messy togetherness in a huge variety of Messy Churches around the UK. Some Messy churches have embraced the all-age value brilliantly, while others struggle to do so. I recognise the huge temptation to give up on being intentionally all-age, and I hope to offer some ways forward for Messy Churches who are struggling to set up activities, run a celebration or provide the meal in a truly inclusive way for everyone present.

The BRF Ministries Messy Church team is passionate about the all-age dimension. We sometimes joke about having the words 'all-age' tattooed on our foreheads! We believe that this aspect of Messy Church is particularly prophetic for the church in the 21st century, and we are not alone. For this reason, we do not want to compromise on what we believe the Spirit is saying to us as a church through this renewed awareness of the value of intentional togetherness.

In addition, to put my money where my mouth is, this book includes three Messy Church sessions that draw on Bible stories highlighting how special it is when all God's people, as the psalmist reminds us, 'live together in unity' (Psalm 133:1, NIV). Incidentally, the writer goes on to say that such togetherness is 'like precious oil... running down on Aaron's beard, down on the collar of his robe' (v. 2), or 'the dew of Hermon... falling on Mount Zion' (v. 3). This sounds very messy to me! But at the same time it is declared to be a blessing for everyone. So messiness and blessing do go together, and our messy togetherness in Messy Church is certainly one way God is blessing the world at this time.

FOR REFLECTION

- What has been your experience of Messy Church, if any?
- How have you experienced both separateness and togetherness on your journey of faith?
- How do you assess the effectiveness of passing on the faith at your own church?



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Why do more and more people advocate the idea that the generations should explore faith together, and what does the Bible have to say about this? How does this fit with our inherited model of age-related groups for learning and discipleship? And is it really practical and possible to have an experience of church where the youngest to the oldest share the same meeting space, service theme and time to worship?

Edited by Aike Kennett-Brown, in *Messy Togetherness* Martyn Payne discusses Messy Church as an intergenerational expression of church and the benefits of this to the church community. He explores current thinking about faith development and gives a biblical rationale for the all-age approach, offering practical advice and sharing stories and ideas from across the Messy Church network. Chris Barnett provides a brand-new chapter on being intentionally intergenerational.

Also included are three complete outlines for Messy Church sessions, based on stories from the Old Testament, the gospels and the epistles.

messychurch.brf.org.uk



Martyn Payne worked with BRF Ministries and Messy Church for 15 years before his retirement at the end of 2017. For the past four years he has been the volunteer prayer advocate for BRF Ministries.



Chris Barnett brings to the intergenerational space a wealth of experience, a heart for connecting and a commitment to facilitating learning together. A curator and sharer of resources, Chris connects those involved in local churches, regional/national leadership and academia.

