



# Ecumenical Messy Church

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## 1 Introduction

I am thrilled by the number of ecumenical or interdenominational Messy Churches starting up. To be honest, I'm thrilled when churches of the same denomination find the grace to work together and offer a joint Messy Church! Not just because we are the body of Christ, and different churches are like different body parts complementing each other, but also because of the messy testimony it shouts out to the local community. A joint venture like a Messy Church says a huge amount about the fact that these Christians are more in love with Christ and more passionate about serving their community than they are interested in competing for bums on seats or money in the collection bag. Our local communities may not know or care about denominations, but they do recognise the countercultural nature of selfless service with no hidden agenda, as the stories in this resource reveal.

Messy Churches are happening across all sorts of denominations: Salvation Army, Pentecostal, Anglican, Baptist, Methodist, Roman Catholic, Free Church, Church of Scotland, Scottish Episcopal, Seventh Day Adventist, Church in Wales, New Frontiers, United Reformed Church, Assemblies of God and Uniting Church to name the ones we are aware of at the moment. This huge spectrum of church traditions and beliefs does not mean that a joint Messy Church is some sort of wishy-washy lowest common denominator; rather it is radical—it is to do with the root of our shared faith in God. Messy Church as a movement strips back the church to its bare necessities (loving God and loving our neighbour in community through Jesus Christ), and only then paints its own local Messy Church with the colours of its local context, be those denominational colours or community colours. Different Messy Churches have far more in common than they have to separate them. They are an ideal meeting place for people from churches of all denominations that have a heart for mission, families and growth. And, as you'll read, a variety of organisations have been instrumental in helping churches to hear about and begin a Messy Church—BRF, of course, but also Fresh Expressions, Hope 08, the Christian Resources Exhibition (CRE) and different Churches Together groups—organisations that are working collaboratively not competitively.

So I was delighted when a gift from Churches Together in Britain and Ireland to BRF's Messy Church ministry made it possible to bring together the experiences of ecumenical Messy Churches from across the UK into this resource. I hope that it will provide food for thought for other groups on similar journeys of discovery.

As you'll see, there is no one correct way of starting and running an ecumenical Messy Church. Perhaps these stories may give you encouragement to find the unique way forward that suits your unique group of churches best.

This resource is a compilation of advice, reflections and experiences from people who are running ecumenical Messy Churches. Most of the thoughts are in the form of responses to a questionnaire sent out by BRF during 2010, while further thoughts came from face-to-face interviews and via email. Its aim is to allow other ecumenical groups thinking about starting a Messy Church to read what similar groups have experienced and to learn from good practice.

## 2 Acknowledgments

I'm very grateful to Churches Together in Britain and Ireland whose support has made this resource possible, and to the Messy Church teams who were generous with their time and advice, and who have been so honest. Particular thanks go to the following Messy Church leaders and their teams: Graham Miles from Aylsham; Helen Carter, Irene Stallard and Frances Pritchard from Billingshurst; Maureen Coath from Chard; Ian Walters, Julie Smith and Steve Weatherley-Barton from Gosberton; Peter Hayes from Halwill Junction; Jan Greenough, Marion Haynes, Kate Jones and Beryl Tillin from North Abingdon; Emma Dean and Helen Mason from Petersfield; Nicola Bruce from Prestonpans; Belinda Davies and Sue Hart from Salisbury; Syl Hunt from Seascale; June Wilson with Sue and Joyce from Willington; and Morag Langley from Wotton-under-Edge.

# Responses to the Questionnaire

## 3 Starting an Ecumenical Messy Church

### 1. What do you now wish you'd known before you started?

'How long it would all take!'

'How tired I would feel!'

'Nothing specific to the "joint" nature of it. I think it may help that Peachcroft isn't a denominational partner, but is already ecumenical in outlook—there are no entrenched positions to defend! But the beauty of the Messy template is that it doesn't copy anyone's liturgy, etc.'

'The importance of detailed preparations and having plenty of helpers.'

### 2. What advice on starting up would you offer to a joint group?

'One person or church needs a clear vision and then shares this with the wider group. Get the church leaders on board at an early stage; they may be nervous. Be ready to persist as it will take time. Take care in giving leadership away to someone who may not be good at team work.'

'I think you need a couple of people or even three from different churches who really have a vision for Messy Church and can work together to inspire their own church members... Once people have tasted Messy Church I think it is easier. We did visit a local Messy Church to get a taster before we started.'

'We were in the position of having worked together for two years on holiday clubs, which Gill and myself organised, so a lot of our team already knew each other and had worked together before—half the battle really.'

'Allow six months of planning and prep before you start. Delegate an organised person to head up the craft team each month; find a good cook. Make sure the team communicates what is going on, and encourage those that do help. It is a lot of work, but worth it.'

'Pray.'

'Read the books.'

'Talk to people who have had experience of it.'

'Ensure good and regular communication between leaders.'

'Be prepared to talk about the ups and the downs.'

'It takes time to establish community—between visitors and among the leaders.'

'Have faith!'

'Pray about it; communicate; find helpers; sort out finance.'

'Keep food simple. Be prepared to be led by God. Enjoy!'

### 3. What factors went into the decision to start a joint Messy Church?

Three groups said there were already good 'dormant' relationships between the churches. One group said that one person was determined to make it work jointly. ('It was largely my vision that we should always try to work together on mission initiatives if we possibly could.') Another group said that four people were determined to make it work jointly! Two groups said that there was a shared theological conviction that projects should be ecumenical or combined if at all possible. (One of these replied, 'Yes with regard to Hope 08 group; ? with regard to congregations.') Four groups said there was a lack of facilities in any one church. Four groups said



there was a lack of personnel in any one church. Two groups said there was an existing, effective ecumenical/combined/cluster group. Other responses included:

‘Having run two holiday clubs as a joint project, we wanted to follow up in some way, and at least two or three of the churches were thinking along the same lines.’

‘Reps from three churches went to Messy Fiesta and felt inspired. As we are in a village, we thought this could be an ecumenical event we could all be involved with. After meeting, we asked the other church to be involved. All the core team have a heart for families and children in the village.’ (Messy Fiestas are training days to introduce people to Messy Church.)

#### **4. What factors do you consider important in the successful starting up of your joint Messy Church?**

‘Shared agreement to do this together.’

‘Praying together and respecting each other’s views.’

‘Enthusiasm of core team, support from church leaders and volunteers, input from support organisation Splash! and a willingness to take risks and try new things.’

‘Plenty of volunteers between the churches, and contacts.’

‘Enthusiasm on the part of the leaders.’

‘Support from the minister and the treasurers.’

‘Prayer support from both churches.’

‘Willingness of the team to work incredibly hard.’

‘Desire to engage with families and to build positive God-sent communities.’

#### **5. How did you identify the need for a Messy Church in your area?**

‘More instinctive than researched, but there were a lot of “unchurched” and fringe families.’

‘My first connection with Messy Church was at a house group when we saw the *Fresh Expressions* DVD. Was inspired. Attended CRE at Westpoint, Exeter, and heard Lucy [Moore] speak. Came back enthused, and shared with Gill Francis from the Methodist church who was thinking along the same lines. My pastor bought me a copy of the first Messy Church book, and from there on we prayed a lot and everything came together.’

‘Some of us had a desire to reach out through something like an after-school club, but have had limited resources and time in which to do this. Seeing Messy Church as a “church for the unchurched” appealed to us. We like the fact that it’s not just for children, but whole families do come. It fills a need that was not being met by any of the churches in a regular way.’

‘Having run Easter workshops together with Life Church before to a good response, we wanted to do more.’

‘Two of us from different churches met (at a BRF event in Dorchester Abbey) through a mutual friend, and discovered that we both wanted to start a Messy Church, but did not have enough people in either church to make it work. Both churches have very few children attending services, though a large throughput in both buildings via toddler groups, playgroups and uniformed organisations. We wanted to make a non-threatening opening for people to approach church.’

‘Prayer and lack of engagement with families.’

#### **6. How did you share this idea with the group of churches?**

‘At United Churches business meetings [in Halwill Junction, West Devon]. Several of us attended the Christian Resources Exhibition in Exeter and heard Lucy [Moore] speak. This was a catalyst to action.’



‘Shared the idea first with Chard Churches Together council and received their backing—so this really came from a group of church leaders.’

‘God must have put this desire on each of our hearts as we were all there together at the meeting. Each rep shared the vision with their own church.’

‘After seeing the *Fresh Expressions* DVD, shared with Helen from Life Church who was also enthusiastic.’

‘First we gathered our other two leaders and met to discuss plans. Then we each gave a presentation to our own church councils. With their approval, All Saints [Methodist Church] also gave a presentation to the congregation. The Peachcroft leaders approached individuals at their church; they felt to suggest it to the whole congregation would have a detrimental effect as they already run a café on a Saturday morning and that struggles to get helpers some weeks. Many of the prayer support team come from the elderly end of the Peachcroft congregation. We used information from the Messy Church website and leaflets to devise our own PowerPoint introduction to Messy Church. We then invited all interested people to a meeting to share the Messy Church vision.’

‘Individual governances, for example Parochial Church Council.’

‘This is the story of how it all began for us [Willington Messy Church]. The three churches involved started meeting once a month to pray together for Willington and surrounding areas, especially for the young. From that came Hope 08 and the talks by J. John that we attended together. Hope 08 meets once a month to work for the community of Willington and from this came Messy Church, which we love so much.’

‘God works in mysterious ways! At Christmas we went into the schools for the first time, but the weather caused problems and one school in particular was closed. The morning we were due to go in, the school opened—amazing! We went in not knowing what to expect. We had asked for children from Year 2 to join us but, as it happened, we took whoever came to join us. It was crazy but wonderful at the same time. Whatever age you ask for, be prepared for more. Talk about initiation into something! That was our first school. The second school was the Roman Catholic one and they loved it so much we had a write-up in their weekly newsletter. The third school was the Church of England one, where it again went down very well. We followed that one with our normal Messy Church for Christmas, and even though the snow was deep we still had children turn up to enjoy Messy Church! Also, coffee and a chat with adults who come along is very worthwhile. We found that children love picnics!’

## 4 Planning an Ecumenical Messy Church

### 7. How many meetings did it take to plan?

‘A lot—can’t really remember.’

‘Probably one or two with Helen.’

‘Quite a lot and real frustrations around as the one person given responsibility was too busy and had a last-minute method of working, which meant that people turned up not knowing what was going to happen or were only asked last minute.’

‘Seven between July and January!’

‘Five.’

‘Numerous—at least one full year in advance, if not more.’

### 8. What did you try to achieve at each planning meeting?

‘We don’t do planning meetings!’

‘We tried to achieve clear thinking, setting out goals and defining responsibilities.’





'Started out with getting some idea of who was prepared to help and in what way. Divided into groups—craft and activities, worship, catering and just general admin.'

'Getting to know each other, venue, problems to overcome, money, times, how to resource it. Quite a lot to think about—it seemed a huge task, with no guarantee anyone would come.'

'Visiting other Messy Churches. Attending one of the BRF Messy Church training days. Seeking the advice of the Children's Worker in the area (Anne Offler). Planning. Focus.'

'We quickly decided that Messy Church had four main elements: welcoming, setting up and clearing up; activities; worship; food. Since there were four of us we each took responsibility for general planning and collecting volunteers for "our" section. In fact, we first buttonholed people and press-ganged volunteers generally, and then asked them what they would like to be involved with; this produced a long list of people, many of whom were willing to do more than one thing. Note: each of the four "teams" has members from both churches (plus one or two personal friends from other churches and occasionally with no church affiliation).

'We weren't particularly strategic in our planning meetings—we just made plans and decisions as we went along. At the first meeting we established calendar dates and topics for our first year's activities, and agreed on how we would design, circulate and retrieve our volunteer forms. We also worked out the timetable for the morning (which has remained constant).

'At the second meeting we talked about publicity and worked out how and where to pitch our effort. We also planned the food and made lists of equipment we needed to buy. We spent a lot of time worrying about CRB checks before deciding that since all the children had parents with them, they weren't necessary.

'The later meetings included planning the activities in detail as well as more of the above, finalising a million things that needed to be done, etc.

'We were helped a great deal by the strange ecumenical situation in Abingdon, which means (to cut a very long story short) that the two churches are currently sharing a minister. We also are both blessed with wonderful positive-minded treasurers who backed us to the hilt. This meant that we were able to make decisions about funding simply and quickly.'

## **9. What discoveries about running Messy Church jointly did you make in the planning/starting stage?**

'It is NOT EASY! If we had done this alone it would have been up and running sooner. However, sticking with the plan has meant that now we are organised there is a great feel to the event.'

'How much time it all takes... that we all needed to develop a range of skills, from presenting, computer skills, where to get hold of things such as flyers and banners; most of all that we needed to have faith that God was in it and that it would work!'

'Volunteers very happy to turn up if everything all laid out for them and they don't have to source any materials or think...'

'I don't think there were any discoveries peculiar to the fact that we were operating across two churches. To begin with, some of the Peachcroft people were unfamiliar with the buildings/resources of the host church. To our delight, we keep finding that Peachcroft have resources at their church which they make available.'

'How good it was to work together and what fun we could have. Also how much we had in common.'

## **10. What problems with running a Messy Church jointly did you encounter in the planning/starting stage?**

'It is difficult if a member of another church is not coming up to scratch.'



'Mostly that we all have different things going on anyway in our churches—all very busy people so it is hard to find time that suits everybody to meet. We met at first at the Methodist church because the Baptist church was being renovated, but the kitchen facilities were rather small at the Methodist church and this caused a few problems. At first, we considered moving from one church to another but finally settled on meeting at the Baptist church as we have the best catering facilities and also chairs in our worship space which can be moved if we need more space. (Methodists have fixed pews.)'

'Issues with venue, how to finance it, who could do what.'

'Vicar and church leader wanted meetings.'

'No special problems. We always knew which church building we would use (the one without carpet in the church hall!). We were concerned that there might be a feeling at Peachcroft that it doesn't "belong" to them, but found that they do support it.'

'Finance. Also how some church members reacted. They wanted to safeguard their own church and could not understand Messy Church in its own right.'

## 5 Running an Ecumenical Messy Church

### 11. How do you communicate across the team?

'Regular meetings, use of email and text messages, prayer, conversations.'

'Email.'

'The four leaders communicate by email among ourselves, and meet once before each Messy Church (to plan) and once afterwards (to debrief). Each of us has a list of "our" volunteers (with a lot of movement between the groups) and we email them to check their availability each time. After our first year we held an extra meeting to see what our teams thought and to decide whether to continue. We also produced an *Update* newsletter for the teams and for the two churches (available on the websites). We think this will help encourage people and make them feel in touch.'

### 12. How do you plan a session?

'One person with a team leads the catering. We have help from Splash! with the craft and the celebration. The church leaders now take turns to "host" the celebration, by way of welcome and close. Different people take turns to be involved in the celebration.'

'The leaders meet for general planning a week or so before each session; activities and worship have their own additional planning meetings to fine-tune the detail.'

'Through Hope 08 group and delegation using each other's gifts.'

### 13. What are the issues around carrying out each session?

'We try to share the roles where possible, such as to have different people leading the worship or doing a sketch or puppets. We try to have structure but variety.'

'Allocation of roles. Good preparation. Willingness to "muck in"!''

'These seem to run fairly smoothly: people have adopted "their" jobs and know what to do.'

### 14. Tell us about sustaining the team and the vision

'I think we could do this better, with the wider team. It is difficult to get people together to encourage and share the vision with. The people that help are probably the people that are most involved with their own churches too.'

'Prayer meetings and social activities.'



'We're working on this. The *Update* newsletter may be a good way to do it. We did try to have a bring-and-share meal for all the volunteers, and also a debrief meeting after a year, but there was a fairly low attendance at both events.'

### **15. How do you share the vision with the inherited churches involved?**

'Each rep communicates with their own church.'

'We produced the first *Update* newsletter to encourage our helpers; we now see it as a tool to share the vision with both congregations. We may circulate it with a slip attached asking if people would like to be involved.'

'Christian unity services. Church governance meetings. Newsletters.'

### **16. How do you share ownership across the whole group of churches?**

'Financially we contribute £100 each, once a term. One person from each church is involved in the core team. The volunteers are fairly evenly spread from each church.'

'Kate [Jones] and Marion [Haynes] spoke to a group of children's leaders from the Abingdon churches, answered questions and sold some of the Lucy Moore books.'

'Keep informed and involved. Some older ladies like to provide food.'

'Finance from the Anglican and Roman Catholic churches to cover costs at the Methodist church.'

### **17. Other significant elements about running an ecumenical Messy Church**

'Something we struggle with is having enough people to prepare the craft in advance. People are happy to help on the afternoon, not necessarily every month, and not keen to do more, for instance, preparation in advance.'

'Rewards far outweigh the challenges. Have now started Messy Church in local primary schools. Three of these schools are now connected with their church. We still have a fourth school to access.'

'We have a catering team who are very ably led by a lady called Jane Osborne, and she contacts her team and asks them to cook, or help out in the kitchen, or come and wash up. Gill and I leave that to her. I have had wonderful support from just one man with setting up and putting away, but I am trying to recruit more help on that side. We have tended to leave it to individual churches to share the vision with their own congregations. Personally, I took advantage of Messy Church month in July and asked for a spot in the Sunday morning service to update our congregation and ask for continued prayer and financial support. I also make a point of reporting back to our church meeting. I am our Chard Churches Together rep, so I also often report to full council on Messy Church. Gill and I often do a lot of planning ourselves, with the help of Laura from Forefront, and we communicate by email with ideas if we can't get together. This year we have set all the dates and decided on themes, so now our planning is just to decide on details.' (See page 24 for details of Forefront Community Church.)

'As previously stated the planning is all done by Helen and me. At the moment we are using Messy Church books 1 and 2 and working our way through the themes. I source all the craft materials and decide what will and won't work for our usual children attending. I usually make a prototype for each craft or activity unless really self-explanatory. Helen types up our running order and what activities and crafts we will have on offer, and coordinates with the kitchen staff as to what we are eating. Helen also reminds volunteers that they will be needed and liaises with the Petersfield Area Churches Together (PACT) webmaster who emails out the weekend before we meet an invitation to all those on our mailing list, including what the theme is going to be and what the meal will be. We also





use this invitation to inform our visitors of any special arrangements for the session. For example, on water-play days I suggest all those children likely to get soaked may need a change of clothes.

'On the day, Helen and I meet at the church at 2.00pm to set up. Usually there is a nice man there as well to carry tables down the stairs for us, and move chairs in the church so there is room to play, and set up a DVD to watch. Once the tables are up I set out each craft or activity with the resources I have sourced. We have our own box of craft essentials such as glue and scissors that is kept in a local store which Helen has organised. Helen puts up notices and puts out toys to play with in the lobby area and church. The chefs arrive at whatever time necessary to cook the meal for 5.15pm. Other volunteers drift in—the tea and biscuits lady about 3.00pm and hopefully all the others needed before our session starts at 4.00pm. We try and have the same two people on the door each session so that we can welcome people by name. Helen and I try not to man a table as we like to circulate and chat to our visitors. The talking vicar/church leader also strolls in later—again hopefully before they need to talk at 5.00pm. Everyone (volunteers) helps to clear the tables of craft and set tables for the meal. We lay out all the craft in the lobby area as we are clearing the tables for collection after the meal—we're so good now that we can group all the same family members' bits together! One of us always stands on the door at the end of the session to ensure everyone has a parent before they go out of the door, to remind them to take all their craft, to hand out the take-away sheet, to stop children taking the wrong bits home—especially when we have cooked as they have a tendency to pick the one that looks best rather than their own creation—and to hand out flyers with the dates for the next couple of sessions on. We have a few dedicated washer-uppers who come in at 5.30pm just to help with the final kitchen clean-up, which is great as the chefs don't want to cook and wash. We all go home quite shattered about 6.00pm.

'When we initially set up Messy Church we did not take the idea to PACT meetings; we just went ahead with the idea to see the response. After three months, when it became obvious there was a need being met, we took our idea and feedback to PACT and told them that this is what we were doing on their behalf. We asked for prayers and support, as well as cakes! We report to PACT every couple of months but that is about it.'

### **18. What three things would you most like another group to learn from your experience so far?**

'One: you don't need planning meetings—too complicated if everyone wants their say. Two: you can empower a team by preparing for them and allowing them to come earlier to try out! Three: when working across the churches the team leaders need to have a clear purpose to what they are doing and to be able to give a good account to the other churches.'

'One: a team needs to be prepared to work hard in order for it to be successful. Two: a good relationship with the local school(s) helps as they can advertise, through flyer distribution and a leader/rep talking about Messy Church in assembly. Three: it is exhausting and sometimes you wonder whether it's worth it—but when unchurched children come up to you, at the school gate or out and about, and ask, "When's Messy Church?", or come in with cakes they've made at home to bring in and share, or they enthusiastically join in with a drama or song, or you have a deeper conversation with someone than you might otherwise have had, then you know it's worth all the hard work.'

'One: pray together. Two: plan together. Three: be patient with each other—you all have the same objective but may come at it from different backgrounds.'

'One: it will take time. Don't expect to share this one meeting and have it all running a month later. It may take six months. Two: stick with the Messy Church "brand". It is tried and tested; don't fall into the trap of calling it something else or tinkering about with it—either do it or do something else. There will be plenty of time in the future to make any changes necessary.



Three: the two published books provide an excellent resource and will help you get started and give you masses of material for many years to come.'

'One: don't be afraid! Pray about it and go for it. Two: community takes time, but it's exciting when it begins to form. Three: be prepared to be honest among your leadership team in order to tackle problems.'

'One: together teams make God's dreams work. Two: the joys outweigh the challenges. Three: the importance of planning and preparation—keep it simple.'

### **19. What are the best things the joint Messy Church brings to the community it serves?**

'We are a church in our own right, and some people can now proudly say, yes, they attend a local church.'

'The relationships that are being built amongst those attending are good and strong—lots of support.'

'The guests that come regularly feel that they belong to Messy Church and look forward to coming.'

'The opportunity to do a variety of crafty things that all ages can do together and wouldn't do at home, and to eat together.'

'That we are able to share God's love in a very simple way with those with no Christian knowledge or background.'

'A chance for non-churchgoers to hear about Jesus and the love of God.'

'A chance for several mums (and dads) to come together with their kids after school and not have to worry about cooking tea. (They really appreciate that).'

'We are building bridges, making friends, and it's all very non-threatening.'

'An opportunity for families to worship together.'

'A really great, fun time.'

'A "door" into the Christian community.'

'The beginning of a sense of ownership from some of the "unchurched" congregation. People not scared about crossing the threshold of a church.'

'Family time—building relationships between parents and children. A taste of Jesus.'

'A "joint" Messy Church means that we are offering neutral "faith in Jesus" rather than a denominational label—a good witness to the visitors who just see us as Christians rather than Methodists, etc.'

'Fun and connection with families.'

'Takes God into the community, schools and Community Resource Centre.'

'Stronger links with other churches.'

### **20. What are the best things Messy Church has brought to the joint team?**

'Friendship with other Christians.'

'A lot of laughter!'

'Altered expectations of people who are part of the team—more understanding that different is just that!'

'Depth of relationship and friendship between people from other churches.'

'We have all had to step out in faith and try new things.'

'We have all been surprised and encouraged by the number of people that come each month.'



'Friendship and unity.'

'Support for each other—we have had people going through some rough times, but the prayer support across the different churches for the team has been great.'

'Opportunities to work together in other ways—for example, we hope to run Life Exhibition together in 2012.'

'A real sense of working together.'

'We are getting to know each other.'

'We couldn't do it on our own.'

'Seeing answers to prayer.'

'People from different congregations working together.'

'Building of deep friendships.'

'Personal growth in faith.'

'Deeper relationships.'

'Increased confidence in mission.'

**21. If you could choose to stop being a joint venture and carry on running your Messy Church from a single church, would you do so?**

'No—we don't have the volunteer base and it works so well as a PACT venture. In a small market town this style of church wouldn't work if not carried out as a joint venture.'

'No—it's good to have something that we all work at together, and having the book as a tool to use helps give us a framework.'

'No. Only if we had to, but we need the extra hands the other churches bring, and families from the other churches can come along freely as it is not associated with one denomination.'

'No. We wouldn't have the manpower. And we like being "Christians together", not just one church.'

'No—because together we can do so much more.'

# Case Studies

## 6 Salisbury Messy Church: Finding a space under the tree

I met Sue Hart at Salisbury Methodist Church, where she is employed as a family worker. This is one of three venues where people from this church, from St Thomas's Church (Anglican) and from Salisbury United Reformed Church hold their joint Messy Church. Together with Belinda Davies, the curate from St Thomas's, who joined us later, we had a lunchtime tour of the three venues. 'Space' was one of the themes that leapt out from our conversation.

### Churches Together

Salisbury Churches Together covers the whole city, so it is natural for the churches in different localities to have their own joint programmes, independent of the larger ecumenical grouping. This is the case in Salisbury city centre. The original initiative for the three churches to work more closely together dates back to 2004, and was catalysed by the Anglican–Methodist Covenant of 2003 and a change of Methodist minister. The leaders of St Thomas's and Salisbury Methodist Church started meeting together regularly and experimenting with a number of joint activities. They were later joined by Salisbury URC when a new minister arrived at that church. The appointment of Sue as family worker at Salisbury Methodist Church and Belinda as the curate responsible for work with young families at St Thomas's led to a joint summer holiday club in 2008 and then workshops at Christmas and Easter. When the partnership grew to include Salisbury URC, it too became involved in this children's work, and the success of the 2010 summer holiday club was the impetus for starting a monthly Messy Church in October 2010.

Without the gradual growing together of the churches over a number of years, with shared worship at the major Christian festivals, joint social events and Lent study programmes, there would not have been the trust and commitment to enter into a joint Messy Church. Central to the three churches working together is the close relationship between the staff and regular communication between the leadership teams. A recent ten-week discipleship course has created enthusiasm among the congregations to explore more joint activities, particularly those which relate to prayer and discipleship.

They are hoping to start a joint prayer group which will, among other things, support the joint Messy Church. 'Prayer is the absolute key, for and with people,' says Sue.

### Messy Church in the three churches

Salisbury Messy Church runs on the first Thursday of every month at 4.00pm and rotates around each of the three churches month by month. In the early days, the whole Messy Church team met once a month for planning, but now only meets once a quarter. These days, a very small group meets once a month to chew things over. Each church has invested £600 since 2010.

The team has needed to be flexible about use of space, and has needed to accept the unpredictable as well! At the Methodist church, arguably the most obvious venue with its large hall space, kitchen and easy access to the worship area, they have altered their use of the different rooms to emphasise that the whole of Messy Church is worship, not just the part that happens in the 'holy' place. They are still experimenting to find the optimum use of space there. The URC is on two floors with a central staircase and has its own issues around use of space.

St Thomas's Church takes your breath away as you enter from the west end into a cathedral-like environment with a fantastic colourful Doom mural, graphically depicting the last judgment, around the main arch. This was painted in the 15th century, not executed by Messy Church (but it could have been). In this venue, apparently inhospitable with its fixed pews and very churchy atmosphere, Messy Church flows out of necessity from a side chapel where the coffee bar is (for the



welcome), into the choir (for the celebration), down into the transept (for craft) and back into the side chapel (for food). The food was originally shared at the hall opposite, but they ran out of space. Despite this seemingly impossible venue, this is where Messy Church functions best out of the three church buildings and the place which, at the start, seemed to attract the largest number of families. No one quite knows why! Perhaps the flow is the key to its success and, in fact, a very suitable way to use the ancient building. Certainly in my own cathedral in Portsmouth, services often flow from one part of the building to another very successfully.

It is very important to the team to be a shared Messy Church, which is why they rotate around the different churches. They don't yet know the impact this has on the families; they plan to measure it and only have a general sense at the moment that there tend to be fewest at the URC and most at St Thomas's. Belinda says, 'The different venues help give a wider vision, not a message of "we want you to join us".'

### **Paid workers**

This is an issue for Sue as she has had to change an attitude among some that the paid workers will do everything. 'People assume you'll make it happen and drive everything.' At the start Sue was responsible for pulling everything together, but now the team has moved towards a model where people head up discrete areas. For example, someone from the URC has taken over the craft area, as a result of the team growing in confidence. 'Withdrawing deliberately means that someone else has to step in, and in this case she does a better job than I did.' Also, Sue used to take the resources and materials back to the Methodist church every month, but it was very exhausting to unload them all and load them up again. Now they are simply taken by the next church in line to host Messy Church. St Thomas's is on the point of appointing a salaried young families' worker. Belinda hopes this person will encourage more church members to join the Messy Church team, as she perceives that, despite St Thomas's providing the treasurer for Messy Church, this church doesn't yet 'own' Messy Church completely.

### **Church identity and mission**

Sue thinks it is possible to have diversity within unity and maintain integrity rather than being bland. 'At Messy Church we're not creating a new church; it's a joining of all of us. That doesn't need to water down who we are. Within Messy Church we reflect on our own traditions.' And she attributes the ease with which they can discuss questions like baptism to the good, trusting relationship the three churches have with one another. 'The most exciting thing for me,' she continues, 'is having this sense of dialogue between churches. It comes of looking outward and making connections. People find church difficult because of the barriers we set up. It means our theology in Messy Church is focused on God's love for us and for the world, not on doing something in the "right way". The more we move away from this, the more people will feel accepted.' So the ecumenical nature of this Messy Church is a witness to those currently outside the church. Mission takes priority over denominational rules. Sue says, 'I have a sense that God is full of love, and my life would be a bit rubbish without that, and I just want to share that. I want people to know how valuable and special they are and their children are. It's incarnational ministry, something about justice. Jesus said, "Go and love your neighbour, right wrongs, even things up a bit." Pointing things out can be your role, pointing out the gold inside people.'

We talked about sacraments. Belinda mused that she is keen to widen the concept of what is considered to be a sacrament: 'Something like seed planting can be sacramental—something that opens a window to God, points to something beyond itself, recognises that God is already there.' We pondered on family as a sacrament, and the way that many mums face a huge question when their baby is born of 'who am I now?' Messy Church can address this crisis of identity by showing how family life is as much a vocation as any calling within the Church.

One of the clergy team recounts a visit to Messy Church where 'three little old ladies knitting with a child' were observed. This snapshot captures the value of Messy Church as a space where





intergenerational relationships can be nurtured, and where something very special is created.

Sue recalled when ‘Cecil, one of the helpers, took a huge roll of paper and painted a park scene on it and invited people to draw on where they were in the park. One mum was there with two little boys. “I’d really like to be under the tree,” she said wistfully, “but I can’t. There’s just no space in my life right now to sit under the tree.”’ Sue smiled. ‘Expressing that is very valuable—that’s where we start with God: how do I get under the tree?’

### Ready to learn

It can be hard to foresee what training to give the team about attitude and behaviour. It never occurred to Sue that there would be different attitudes in the team to breastfeeding during Messy Church until an issue arose, which then led to a clear statement that mums are welcome to breastfeed their children. ‘There will be things you just don’t predict,’ said Sue.

Other learning happens on the job. For example, the team all used to wear badges, which basically meant that if you had on a badge you were representing Messy Church. But then the team thought, ‘Are we doing this together or are we doing it for you?’ Now only a very few central leaders wear a badge and everyone else is part of the congregation.

### Advice

- ‘You need the support of all the ministers.’
- ‘Don’t worry about it too much; don’t feel you need to have a specific agenda—it’ll change. See how it goes.’
- ‘Value people rather than focusing on getting something done. Church isn’t a commercial venture. It includes using and valuing people society might think aren’t up to the job.’
- ‘Communicate with people. It might not be important to you but it’s important for some people to know what’s going on.’

Perhaps the strengths we can reflect on from this example of interdenominational mission include the way this Messy Church team is very responsive to change and quick to adapt to and learn from changing circumstances. They are light on structure and strong on opportunities to grow relationships from which the driving force of their venture comes. Their wider church leadership teams have an active interest in and commitment to the work. The determination to enjoy Messy Church in each of the church buildings in turn speaks volumes about their joint ownership and shared vision. As the work develops it will be fascinating to see how different gifts from the wider churches are brought into play over time.

## 7 Seascale Messy Church: ‘Whatever You Can Do Together—Do Together!’

Does this sound familiar: dwindling numbers of children in the Sunday school, no new families entering church, crime rate increasing in the community...?

### Background

Seascale is a small and attractive seaside resort in West Cumbria. It became increasingly popular with the Victorians once the railway arrived in the 1850s. About a mile north of the village is British Nuclear Fuels Ltd’s (BNFL) Sellafield nuclear processing site, with its tall cooling towers a dominant feature on the otherwise beautiful landscape of sandy beaches and countryside. The current village population is around 1800, and three churches serve the people: St Cuthbert’s Church (Anglican), Seascale Methodist Church and St Joseph’s Church (Roman Catholic). The village has its own website, [www.seascale.org.uk](http://www.seascale.org.uk), which updates everyone on events in the region.

In June 2010 Derrick Bird, 52, shot dead his twin brother and then the family solicitor before driving through rural West Cumbria, firing seemingly at random at people in towns, villages and on



country roads and then killing himself. He killed twelve people, three of them in the village of Seascale, and injured a further eleven. On the first anniversary of this tragedy a memorial service for the victims was incorporated into Seascale Community Day. Projects such as Messy Church and the Shackles Off youth project (see page 17) are helping the hurting community to be united in many ways. This is a village with a strong sense of purpose.

### **Previous history of working together**

There is a long and positive history of Seascale churches working together: Walk Cumbria 07 (walking the Pennine Way, visiting villages), Hope 08, Lent lunches together, joint harvest suppers, Holy Week and Pentecost services, open-air services, village fun days and so on.

### **Starting small**

In 2009 the three churches planned and piloted a Christingle service between them, focusing on Jesus' words from Matthew 19:14: 'Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these.' This brought them three main families to keep in touch with. In the same year the Mothers' Union produced some Messy Church information, which was received by the churches, and Messy Church articles were written in the Mothers' Union national magazine. Also, Syl Hunt, a member of Seascale Methodist Church, attended a Messy Church showcase at the Keswick Convention in Cumbria.

St Cuthbert's and Seascale Methodist Church decided to expand on their long history of joint ventures by starting a Messy Church together. The three main families plus other households in Seascale were invited to complete a questionnaire, giving them an opportunity to voice their opinions about the best day and time to start a fresh expression of church. The clear response was once a month on a Saturday, 11.00am–12.30pm.

The first Seascale Messy Church took place in March 2010. The venue during 2010 was St Cuthbert's church hall, a typical church hall space but with a small kitchen. Messy Church resources and materials are stored in a cupboard in the hall and are accessible when needed. It was not possible to use the Methodist church on Saturday mornings as they hold long-established coffee mornings at this time.

The team became very excited when between 40 and 70 people of all ages attended the first 'Messy Church @ Seascale'. In January 2011 the church hall water pipes burst. Because of the time clash with the Methodist church's coffee mornings, St Joseph's was offered as a venue. While St Cuthbert's repaired their hall, three Messy Church sessions took place at St Joseph's. Numbers attending Messy Church increased, even though St Joseph's was tricky to access. (St Cuthbert's church hall and Seascale Methodist Church are in prominent places along the village's main road.)

Memorable moments have included the reaction to the prodigal son pigswill activity, the stinky smells of the Egyptian 'mystique', recycling on the beach, the floating tea lights enhanced by reflections on the aluminium foil, and a mum commenting at a Messy Church on the beach, 'It's wicked!' Messy Church @ Seascale now plan to hold an annual beach Messy Church.

### **Who are Messy Church @ Seascale?**

Messy Church @ Seascale has a core team of six people, including Syl Hunt, the main coordinator, and Rev Philip Peacock, both from Seascale Methodist Church, and Rev John Woolcock from St Cuthbert's. There are 25 members on the wider team, which includes three teenagers. Both churches invite helpers for each session by placing sign-up lists at the back of church. Syl and the two ministers comment on how keen their parishioners are to help, worrying that they may have been forgotten in the allocation of jobs each month! Syl is a good communicator and organises a banner and posters to advertise Messy Church. The core team meets a week after each Messy Church session to review the previous session and plan the next. They use both Messy Church books to plan themed programmes, but have also planned an extra two sessions of their own on the 'I am' sayings of Jesus. The ministers alternate to deliver the celebration time, and Syl is on



standby if needed. Rev Peacock admits that Saturday is really his day off, but he commits to being at Messy Church because of its importance to the community.

The new Messy Church congregation consists of some grandchildren of committed Christians, local school children and their families, and some ex-Sunday school families, but mostly families with no church link at all. (The local school visits St Cuthbert's for some services.) A few families from villages further away are now coming to Messy Church too. The existing Sunday congregations comment on how much they miss the children and young people but do offer their practical involvement at Messy Church.

### Local support

The local businesses get involved by donating food or craft items when needed. Messy Church @ Seascale has a cash-and-carry card, and the cash-and-carry has donated sweets for prizes, which has been much appreciated. A small, local printing firm, which produces the church notices, has printed posters to advertise Messy Church as well as some leaflets that were given out at a village day. One family that owns an ice-cream business donated a huge tub of ice cream to Messy Church rather than selling it to them, because the grandchildren thoroughly enjoyed going along with their grandad.

Messy Church @ Seascale is self-funding with donations from the families who come, but is backed up by both churches if needed. They also receive gifts of food from the congregations of both churches for most of the meetings. The congregations get quite perturbed if they aren't asked to provide food as they love to contribute and feel part of Messy Church.

### Advice

- 'Be good communicators and involve everyone.' This advice sounds simple enough but someone has to consistently work at it. Syl Hunt coordinates Messy Church with love and humour, and the core team are unimpressed with numbers but totally involved with the people, caring, involving and loving each one of them. Syl says, 'We found it useful to start with a trial of a few sessions (three in all). After these we paused and looked back, considering what had happened and if there was anything that we could improve on. We also got in touch with another church that did something similar and visited it to see how it was run. We also, at Christmas time, did an informal Christingle service to test the waters. Not many families came but those who did found it enjoyable. We also sent out a questionnaire to all the groups, local primary schools and parents to see if there was a need and when would the best time be.'
- 'Try to enjoy every moment and laugh together. Try to work together as a team and don't dominate one another. Look for the blessings and pray together. At one of our planning meetings we had communion together and this increased the sense of togetherness with each other. One of the things we have delighted in has been Angel Delight! We seem to have a lot of it and at every planning meeting when discussing the menu the Angel Delight gets mentioned! At our recent get-together on a Sunday, for the Messy Church team, we had a lovely sunny day, but one of the best things was when a huge bowl of guess what came out and everyone laughed and we all enjoyed eating it! We even had our very own "angel", with his harp (one of our helpers who is learning to play the harp and brought it along to play for us!).'
- 'Whatever you can do together—do together!'

Seascale Messy Church reminds us how much grace is needed when churches work ecumenically; we take our hats off to those generous congregations prepared to pull together for the sake of families, even though those families may never come to 'Sunday church', and even if they did, it might not be to their own Sunday church. The personal commitment and laughter-filled relationships of Syl, her team and the ministers in the church are hugely significant and give the Spirit massive scope for growing the kingdom through their joyful work together. And the



growing commitment shown by the community demonstrates the evangelistic power of this cooperation to transform the place where this Messy Church is happening.

### **Shackles Off**

Shackles Off is a Seascale Churches Together youth project that began two years ago when there was an increase in youths congregating in the village. The premises of a small shop are used as a drop-in, and the rent is paid by the community: a house-to-house mail drop invited 100 households to respond by giving £1 a week. This ecumenical project involving all three Seascale churches is supported by church volunteers, who offer weekday social projects to the 80+ young people in its Facebook group. On Sundays, Bible study is offered, and this year a group is going to Soul Survivor. Shackles Off has won an award for designing anti-drug and alcohol posters, and the crime in Seascale has halved. This excellent statistic has helped the churches go for funding, and recently a youth worker has been employed.

## **8 Gosberton Messy Church: ‘A joint venture between all local churches and the community working together!’**

The South Lincolnshire villages of Gosberton, Quadring and Gosberton Clough sit in the Fens between Boston and Spalding amid flat fields of vegetables, long drainage dykes and straight roads beneath a vast domed sky. This is a part of the world in which I feel very much at home. So it was with great glee that I met Ian Walters, Julie Smith and Steve Weatherley-Barton, the trinity of hugely different and hugely complementary people who make up the Gosberton Messy Church leadership team. Ian is an Anglican vicar, Julie is an Anglican layperson (and dog-agility expert extraordinaire!) and Steve is a Baptist minister. The Messy Church itself includes people from the Methodist, Baptist, Anglican, URC and Catholic denominations, as well as those who have no church affiliation except to this Messy Church. ‘Messy Church is working!’ was almost the first thing Ian said to me.

### **The history of the churches working together in this patch**

Given that there are three Anglican, one Baptist and three Methodist churches in the district, there is plenty of scope for an entrenched ‘if it’s not in my church I’m not going’ mentality, but instead there is now a great deal of goodwill for the churches to work together.

Steve said it was a joy to come to this area and see churches happy to work together. Ian is a very ecumenical person who used to be Chair of Churches Together in Grantham. Julie has only been a Christian for four years and is more interested in Christianity than in denominational differences.

The team explained to me how, especially in rural communities, people know each other very well and there is a tradition of ‘going to the church they go to’. However, increased mobility has brought about change and people seem more willing to come together for worship, as they did at the recent midnight Christmas communion when all the local ministers celebrated communion together.

Ian comments, ‘At a recent joint service, people said, “Isn’t it good when we come together?” but Sunday by Sunday we know it’s not going to happen. The history of the different denominations is very complicated. But people on the periphery of the churches, who haven’t been regular churchgoers for a generation or two—they don’t see the distinction between denominations, so today it’s much easier and much more logical to work together where you can. I would hope in Messy Church we don’t have a distinct ethos of any denomination. People who come don’t care. What we’re doing is introducing families to the concept of church, a journey of faith, seed planting. Some have the impression that there are deep distinctions and are impressed when Christians can come together.’





Steve says, 'When churches are drawn together by the sense of a job to be done, there is a breaking down of walls. Christian labels and prejudices seem irrelevant in the face of human need. The Church as an institution lags behind what's really happening in church. What God's doing is far more important than any prejudices.' Ian agrees: 'Maybe now we're entering a different time after years of splits and different denominations. This takes us back to what church is, what the Early Church was maybe like.'

### **How Gosberton Messy Church started**

Julie went to Encompass, a Messy Church-style event at her previous church in Bedfordshire, and attended Messy Fiesta soon afterwards. The team then took their time, put their heads together, and Julie started putting her verger's fees towards the costs in a dedicated account. This bought all the craft materials they needed and, with donations, they have made ends meet each month so far. They all agree that if there was a shortfall in cash, the churches would all be happy to chip in.

The national profile of Messy Church was seen as a help. Ian says, 'It actually does demonstrate to your church folk that you can do something that succeeds. In villages to hand them something and say, "It's working!" is really good.' Although some church people have issues with the name 'Messy Church', finding it perhaps disrespectful or even offensive, in this case the name was seen as positive. 'Here is church and here are people getting together and having fun together and talking about Jesus together.'

It was obvious that neither the Baptist nor the Methodist churches could do this on their own, and although the Anglican churches might have been able to, they were more interested in joining together with the other churches on principle.

The team decided on Quadring church hall as the venue, as it seemed to lend itself most obviously to Messy Church, with its parking, space, stage, carpeted area and bar. Perhaps most importantly it is where seasonal workshops for children across the villages are already held. Another key reason for choosing Quadring was that there isn't actually a church building in the village—just the Anglican church hall in the middle—so it was definitely neutral territory.

The three local primary schools received the concept gladly, welcoming assemblies to advertise Messy Church and giving out leaflets.

### **The present state**

At present, after five Messy Churches, the Quadring families are very supportive of Messy Church, and families from other villages are starting to come.

Ian saw a girl arrive at Messy Church recently who said to him, 'My dad knows you!' 'Where is your dad?' he replied. 'Sitting outside in the car. He's too shy to come in. I'll go and get him.' She did so; the dad came in, recognised Ian and had a whale of a time, joining in everything. He just needed an excuse. 'Parents can come and talk to each other,' continued Ian. Julie added, 'They're hearing and seeing and gradually joining in the celebration. Now we work in conjunction with the parents to control the excitement of the children, and as a result the parents are joining in, helping out, owning it.'

Steve notices that people will chat to him about Messy Church when he's out dog-walking. Julie thinks, 'People are getting to know us as people; we seem more human.'

It is seen as significant that Julie, a very bubbly, 'life and soul of the party' layperson, is 'in charge', rather than a particular minister. 'It's noted that it's a person without a dog-collar at the front,' grins Steve. The ordained team members deliberately don't wear their dog collars to Messy Church. 'It demonstrates that the church is a community of people,' says Ian, 'not the traditional view of the vicar as the person who presses all the buttons. We all have gifts and church allows us to share them together.'

There is a report posted on the parish church website after each Messy Church: [www.gosberton.org/parish-church/messy-church/messy-church-report.php](http://www.gosberton.org/parish-church/messy-church/messy-church-report.php).





## Planning

The core team invite the whole team to all planning meetings and about three-quarters come. No one has yet insisted that it should be more 'denominational'. (I got the impression that if they ever did, they would get very short shrift!)

## Plans for the future

The team intend to publish a newsletter to build a community feel, and have plans for expansion: 'Our dream is to have one [Messy Church] in each village,' they agreed, 'but we're starting by getting it established in one location.' This has had the effect of giving the team confidence that Messy Church does work. Later they intend to get volunteers from each village to be involved in their own village Messiness.

I asked what would happen if anyone asked for baptism. The team pondered and decided that they would probably recommend that the candidate went and chatted to the different ministers to find out about the different denominations, but that it hadn't yet arisen as an issue.

## Advice

- 'We'd be enthusiastic to tell people how it's working for us, to invite them to come and see what we do.'
- 'Do explore it as an ecumenical project.'
- 'It's an advantage to tell people that it's a joint venture.'
- 'Talk to others, look at the DVD as a group and see if you could work together as a group.'
- 'It would be better appreciated if it's not seen as a competition between the churches. Messy Church is a platform to encourage local Christians to work together.'
- 'Its success will depend on the understanding between churches and existing relationships.'
- 'I would ask, "Are you happy to be seen as 'the Church' without denominational labels?" We may never gain anything directly from Messy Church but we can get excited if another church gains something from it.'

Is there anything you wish you'd known, I asked. The team looked at each other almost guiltily and shrugged. 'It's all gone smoothly, organically. We didn't rush it. We're still testing times and days...' But then Steve brightened up as he remembered something: 'I wish I'd known one tube of glitter would cover the entire hall.'

Ian smiled. 'I was so apprehensive about the whole thing. Is anyone going to come? Then suddenly the door opens... So don't get strung up; trust in God; pray about it; believe God will send people—they will come in. Have faith, step forward and do it. You learn through doing.'

Julie added, 'It's hard work, but everyone's enjoying it! It's been worth it, seeing the faces, the way they come in, building our own little community, spreading the word among them, sending them away with a message about our faith and having fun doing it!'

The team has a strong sense of being blessed by God. They described the session looking at Noah, when they were concerned they didn't have enough visuals for the story. 'We were literally just beginning to talk about the rainbow in the story, when someone shouted, "Look!" and we looked out of the window and saw a huge, vivid double rainbow stretched over the Fens, and half the hall made a run for the door to go outside and see it. That is what particularly added to the special moment—it was very emotional for us all and very faith-building!'

Without wanting to overanalyse, I think the significant factors in this example include the generosity of spirit shown by the leaders, their determination to refuse to be competitive, and their God-given personalities which go together to make a diverse but unified team. They have a deeply held belief in the value of working together on principle, and a deep faith that God will grow his kingdom through their joint work, and that there is no need to worry about empire-building in the individual churches. They perceive this to be a witness in itself in the community. Gosberton, we salute you!

# Anecdotes

## 9 Petersfield Messy Church

'I'm always amazed at the people who come to Messy Church! They are not the ones I'd normally think of in a church setting!!'

'At the school gate after our last one I overheard one of the mums talking about "the very nice man in the collar who actually was very normal", which made me smile!'

'At the joint holiday club that PACT has run we had a number of parents fill in Messy Church as the church they attend—so our parents had the ownership before we did in many circumstances.'

## 10 North Abingdon Messy Church

'Saturday 29 January was Messy Church's first birthday, with certificates celebrating individual children, gift bags, painting (faces and pictures), making instruments for noisy celebrations and birthday cakes with candles. We talked about how we are praised for the things we do well, and how we praise God for what he does—for creating the world and for loving us.'

'Numbers seem to have settled at about 50 visitors—around 20 adults and 30 children—and though there are some families who have been to every Messy Church since we started, there are always some new faces too. We know of only a few families who have links with other churches; most of them are the people we hoped to reach, who have no other church contact.'

'We always keep our faith messages (in the worship and in the related activities) very simple indeed, partly because our core visitors are extremely young (pre-school and primary ages), with short attention spans, but also because some adults need introducing to faith in a fairly broad-brush way at first. Our helpers on the craft tables always try to explain the link between the activity and the theme of the session, and are ready to talk about their own faith whenever the opportunity arises. The "old hands" seem to have settled into the pattern, and lead the way from the hall into church and back to lunch—for hot dogs or jacket potatoes and ice cream or cake. (One mum said, "I can't believe you don't charge for all this...")'

'When Beryl went to collect the balloons for Messy Church they weren't quite ready, so she spent a while chatting to the shop assistant, who asked if they were for a birthday. Beryl explained that they were for Messy Church's first birthday, and the lady wondered how a church could have a birthday party. They went on to have a very positive chat about the Town Centre Chaplaincy and how churches welcome people.'

'A "community" moment: a new family arrived through the "wrong" door. (Memo—we need to put the back door on a chain to feed people past the welcome desk.) Beryl was about to take them to sign in when Maria (a mum with five children) got there first and showed them the way—clearly she feels that she "belongs".'

'One of the toddler group leaders from Peachcroft (who has not attended church at all) came for the first time. On leaving she said what a good time she'd had—even more so than the children!'

'An aerobics teacher had included mention of Messy Church in her announcements at the end of her class; one of her young mums came along for the first time.'

'Sherrie, who comes every time, brought a new neighbour who has just moved in. The neighbour thought it was a great opportunity to meet people. She was thrilled to see her son, who is usually shy and hesitant about joining in at pre-school, happily sitting and chatting away at an activity table.'

'We owe a huge debt of thanks to the team of about 25 helpers who make it all happen every two months, and also to the prayer team who support us so faithfully.'



## 11 Emails

### **Email from Jane Leadbetter, responsible for keeping the Messy Church Directory up to date**

'Good news! Over 800 online Messy Church registrations to date! List shows average of nearly one a day this month. Lots more just asking for slight amendments; only one to close but will be restarting soon as an ecumenical Messy Church.'

### **Email from Nicola Bruce, Prestonpans, East Lothian**

'We have a big summer holiday club in Prestonpans which runs ecumenically, involving all local churches in partnership with Scripture Union. I wanted to help the local churches with follow-up opportunities, particularly in the Church of Scotland as that's my job! We thought about a few options, and following the success of Macmerry Messy Church nearby as a way of helping families access an opportunity to worship together, we thought we would give that a go. We tried it on a number of Sunday mornings before the usual service as we do in Macmerry, with breakfast, and although a few families came who had a great experience, they were already church families. We have come back to the prayer drawing board and have decided it's the right thing at the wrong time and with too small a vision. If it ain't working... do it bigger!

'The wonder of the summer club is all the churches mucking in together with God to serve families in the community, so coming back to that ethos, and not worrying about who is working for who, we have spoken with other local churches, and I hope we will run our first ecumenical Messy Church probably in October with a harvest theme, in the afternoon and in the church venue that hosts the main stage of the holiday club.

'We'll see what God has for us there and let you know how it goes!'

### **Email from Graham Miles, Aylsham, Norfolk**

'Just thought you might like to hear about my latest venture.

'About five years ago the Methodist church closed in Marsham, which is next door to Aylsham where we already have a thriving Messy Church. When the church closed I encouraged the congregation at Aylsham to continue to support outreach into Marsham. This was mainly achieved through a youth and families worker who has built up a relationship with Marsham Primary School (total pupils average 25) through an after-school club and by running a weekly mothers' and toddlers' group in the village hall.

'Recently we decided that the time was right to attempt a Messy Church in Marsham. This was planned in collaboration with the Anglican church. As we have about four years' worth of Messy Church resources at Aylsham, we recycled craft and worship material used in Aylsham last Saturday, using a theme of mothers as Sunday was Mothering Sunday. Everything went well with a few families attending, which has encouraged us to plan another Messy Church using recycled materials. It also heralds in a new era in Marsham as the two churches work together. The initial intention is to hold a Messy Church every three months or so.

'I just thought I would share this with you as a piece of encouragement to people considering setting up a second Messy Church away from where their main Messy Church is held.'

### **Email from Morag Langley, Wotton-under-Edge, Gloucestershire**

'One of the lovely things to have come out of our venture into Messy Church is that it has already become interdenominational, with Wotton Baptist Church giving prayer support, team members and invitations to the families who worship there. We are hoping to extend this to other churches in Wotton.'



## 12 Appendix

The following is a list of information about the Messy Churches that filled in the questionnaire.

### **United Churches Messy Church, Halwill Junction, West Devon**

United Churches Messy Church is in a remote rural setting, is registered on the Directory and started in October 2009. It meets in Halwill Baptist Church every other month on a Friday at 6.15pm. The main leaders come from local Baptist, Methodist and Anglican churches, and the team comes from all three churches. It is prayed for by all three churches. It is paid for by all three churches, plus donations of food from those attending.

Churches involved:

1. Halwill Baptist Church
2. Madworthy and Eworthy Methodist Churches
3. Church of St Peter and St James (Anglican)
4. (Chilla Methodist Church and the West Devon Methodist Circuit will be aware)

About 30 people come each time, including the team. All of these have some form of church affiliation already.

The relationship between the churches before Messy Church was planned involved regular, effective working together on many projects and was amicable, but each church got on with their own projects independently.

The relationship between the churches has changed as a result of doing Messy Church together. The members are getting on with this despite hesitation from a particular church minister.

### **Willington Messy Church, County Durham**

Willington Messy Church is in a rural setting in County Durham. It started in March 2010, although it is not registered on the Directory. It meets bi-monthly at Lydia Street Methodist Church and in local primary schools. It takes place on Friday afternoon, 3.30–5.00pm, when in the church, but any day and time to suit the schools when in their buildings.

The main leaders and the team come from the Methodist church, the Anglican church and the Roman Catholic church. The Messy Church is prayed for by the All Churches and Ecumenical Prayer Group, and paid for by the Hope 08 group and a grant from Ask Jef 2.

Churches involved:

1. Willington Methodist Church
2. St Stephen's Church (Anglican)
3. Our Lady and St Thomas (Roman Catholic)

About 50 people come each time, including the team, and about 60% have no church affiliation other than Messy Church.

The relationship between the churches before Messy Church was planned was amicable, but each church got on with its own projects independently prior to 2008 when the Hope 08 group was formed. The relationship has changed as a result of doing Messy Church; Messy Church has endorsed the three churches working together more fully. Willington Messy Church really developed from the Ecumenical Prayer Group and the forming of the Hope 08 group.

### **North Abingdon Messy Church, Oxfordshire**

North Abingdon Messy Church meets at All Saints Methodist Church in Abingdon, a market town in Oxfordshire. It is registered on the Directory and started in February 2010. It meets six times a year on Saturdays, 10.30am–12.30pm. The leaders come from both All Saints and Peachcroft Christian Centre, as does the team, with more people from All Saints because Peachcroft also has a café running on Saturday mornings.





People from both churches pray for it. In terms of finance, Peachcroft pay for the food and drink and All Saints pay for craft materials. About 80 people come, including a team of about 25, and about 50–70% of these have no other church affiliation.

The Messy Church features on the two church websites: [www.allsaintsabingdon.org.uk/regular-activities/messy-church/](http://www.allsaintsabingdon.org.uk/regular-activities/messy-church/) and [www.peachcroftcc.org/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=1058&Itemid=92](http://www.peachcroftcc.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=1058&Itemid=92).

Churches involved:

1. Peachcroft Christian Centre (an ecumenical church: Anglican, Baptist, Methodist and URC)
2. All Saints Methodist Church

Before Messy Church was planned, the relationship between the two churches could be defined by suspicion and wariness. As the team says, 'We both belonged to the Church in Abingdon and had attended Lent talks in each other's churches. But the congregations are very different (one is more evangelical in style, the other more traditional) and had, so we thought, little in common.

'It is hard to say if the relationship has changed as a result of doing Messy Church. I think everyone is pleased that we're doing it! And the people involved in the team are certainly making connections. Since we currently share a minister, we are more aware of each other's churches, although we're not sure we've had much effect on the rest of the congregations. Many people who are not actually involved are encouraged and encouraging, but we think this will rely on good communication. We hope our occasional newsletter, *Messy Church Update*, will help.'

### **Petersfield Messy Church, Hampshire**

With its Hampshire market town location, Petersfield Messy Church is registered on the Directory and started at Pentecost 2008. It meets monthly at Petersfield Methodist Church on the third Tuesday of the month, at 3.30pm. The main leaders come from St Peter's Church, St Mary Magdalen, Petersfield Methodist Church and Life Church. The team comes from St Peter's, Life Church, St Laurence Catholic Church and St Mary Magdalen. It is prayed for by Petersfield Area Churches Together (PACT) and virtually paid for by itself, with Life Church holding the money. Between 50 and 150 people come each time, including the team, with more than 50% having no other church affiliation.

Churches involved:

1. St Peter's Church (Anglican)
2. Life Church
3. St Laurence Catholic Church
4. Petersfield Methodist Church
5. St Mary Magdalen (Anglican)
6. Petersfield United Reformed Church

The relationship between the churches before Messy Church was planned involved regular, effective working together on many projects. It was amicable, but each church got on with their own projects independently.

### **Billingshurst Messy Church, East Sussex**

With a market town setting in East Sussex, Billingshurst Messy Church meets on the second Wednesday of the month at 3.30pm in the village hall. It started in February 2010 and is registered on the Directory. Its website is [www.stmarysbillingshurst.org/messychurch.htm](http://www.stmarysbillingshurst.org/messychurch.htm).

The main leaders and team members come from all the churches involved and the Splash! group. It is prayed for by all the churches and paid for by all of them. About 80 to 90 people come each time, with about 75% having no other church affiliation.

Churches involved:

1. Trinity United Reformed Church
2. St Mary's Church (Anglican)





3. Billingshurst Family Church (New Frontiers)
4. St Gabriel's Church (Roman Catholic)

Before this Messy Church was planned, the relationship between the churches involved regular, effective working together on some projects.

The team says, 'This relationship changed as a result of doing Messy Church; there are now stronger links of communication and friendship and very good relationships between the core team. There is good support from all the church leaders.'

### **Chard Messy Church, Somerset**

The setting is a small, rural town. Chard Messy Church is registered on the Directory and has been running since October 2009. It meets in Chard Baptist Church monthly (but not during December, July or August) on Thursdays, 4.00–6.00pm. The main leaders come from Chard Baptist Church, Chard Methodist Church and Forefront Community Church, and the team mostly come from these churches too, with occasional help from St John the Evangelist, Tatworth. Catering is provided by the Church of the Good Shepherd and the Church of the English Martyrs. It is prayed for by all the churches and paid for by a grant from National Family Learning week, as well as donations from individual churches and from Chard Churches Together. It is now fairly much self-funded from donations on the day.

Roughly 40 people come, including the team, of which 20% or thereabouts have no other church affiliation.

Churches involved:

1. Chard Baptist Church
2. Chard Methodist Church
3. Forefront Community Church (independent)
4. Church of the Good Shepherd (Anglican)
5. Church of the English Martyrs (Roman Catholic)
6. St John the Evangelist, Tatworth (Anglican)

The relationship between the churches before Messy Church was planned involved 'regular, effective working together on many projects: we had run two holiday clubs together before and Chard Churches Together has a council meeting bi-monthly. We are involved with schools work.' The relationship was also described as 'amicable, but each church got on with their own projects independently'.

The team's perception is now: 'I think our relationships have grown stronger and there is an even greater willingness to work together. We are also in the process of setting up Street Pastors in Chard.'

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