



BY STEPHANIE
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Embracing the MESS

In theory, ministry is rather straightforward: Share Jesus' love and his gospel message with all people.

In reality, as anyone who's been involved with it can attest, ministry is quite messy!

That's because life, faith, and relationships all are messy. And learning—at least the most effective kind of learning—also is a messy process.

Thanks to a new way of doing church, more congregations are embracing these marvelous messes to reach people who might not normally step foot inside a Sunday service.

How an innovative, cross-generational approach to church is making the gospel accessible to more families

THE MAKING OF MESSY CHURCH

In 2004, an Anglican congregation in England wanted to address the fact that few children were attending worship. Its leaders, including a woman named Lucy Moore, experimented with some all-ages activities, and the concept was a hit. Messy Church became an arm of Bible Reading Fellowship, a UK-based charity for which Moore worked at the time. When she published her first *Messy Church* book in 2006, the inclusive movement took off.

A decade later, four Americans traveled to England for the first international Messy Church conference. During a meeting with Moore, they began the process of establishing Messy Church USA as a nonprofit. Congregations belonging to a wide range of denominations now offer Messy Church. Regional coordinators throughout America help new "plants" get rooted and trained. Each month, more than half a million worshippers gather at more than 4,000 registered Messy Churches in 30 countries.

WHY "MESSY"?

Part of the inspiration for the Messy Church name comes from Pete Ward's book *Liquid Church*. He describes faith families as fluid, as opposed to walled structures with insiders and outsiders: "The boundaries have started to become more fuzzy and less well defined."

With its liquid edges, Messy Church is geared toward people of all ages and backgrounds, churched or unchurched. It especially emphasizes reaching individuals and families who wouldn't attend otherwise, whether they're busy with sports on Sundays or are uncomfortable with traditional worship, whatever the reason.

Leaders point out that Messy Church isn't a craft club or a children's program—or any type of "program," for that matter. It's actual church, though it looks different from most worship services.

In a nutshell, Messy Church is a regular opportunity for intergenerational worship, learning, and fellowship. The purpose is to explore God's love in a welcoming, accessible way through fun, faith, and food.

"It's church for everyone," says Justin Welby, Archbishop of Canterbury. "It's a circle of all ages meeting together to engage in who God is in a way that works for them."

BUILDING BLOCKS

At the heart of Messy Church are these five core values:

- **Christ-Centered** The goal of every gathering is to share the gospel and grow God's kingdom.



• **Intergenerational** Everyone meets together, without the “age silos” common at most churches. People learn *with* one another and *from* one another, leading to deeper, lasting faith.

• **Celebration** This doesn’t necessarily mean jumping up and down, though that sometimes happens. According to Messy Church USA executive director Roberta Egli, celebration “involves sharing the abundant life Jesus offers as well as the ups and downs of our messy lives.”

• **Creativity** Worshipers use all five senses to experience and explore God’s Word.

• **Hospitality** Some type of meal or food sharing is always involved so people can enjoy conversation around tables.

Messy Church uses a once-a-month format, usually meeting midweek or on Saturday. A typical two-hour gathering includes a welcoming activity based on a Scripture theme and then four or five games, crafts, and science experiments. Instead of being expected to sit quietly and listen, kids interact with the lesson through their senses—touching “pig slop,” building a temple out of cardboard boxes, tasting resurrection buns, and so on.

Next comes celebration time, with songs, prayers, and more reinforcement of the Scripture lesson. Following that is a meal so people can continue connecting and forming relationships. The cross-generational gatherings and the focus on hospitality set Messy Church apart from other experiential curriculum, say regional coordinators.

Another hallmark of Messy Church is that it’s led by laypeople and volunteers, not paid staff members. Teams have access to online training and resources, support from regional coordinators, and *Get Messy!* magazine, which contains monthly session plans.



THE APPEAL OF MESSY CHURCH

The format and content appeal to outreach-minded congregations and all types of families. In the Pacific Northwest, known as the “None Zone” for the high percentage of people belonging to no religious group, Egli wanted her church to make an impact for Jesus in its neighborhood. By Googling “family ministries,” she learned of Messy Church and then used it to reach her target demographic of preschool parents and grandparents. After about 18 months, attendance at Egli’s Messy Church doubled from 25 to 50. Though the numbers ebb and flow, she says, relationships and disciples grow steadily.

Janeen Hill, the regional Messy Church coordinator for Colorado, was drawn to Messy Church because it’s “a way to share Jesus’ love with people who don’t come or aren’t able to come to traditional Sunday morning worship.” It’s also an opportunity to meet small-town neighbors, she says, adding that personal invitation has been their most effective recruiting tool. Hill has adapted some Messy Church programming for her rural setting; for example, last summer she incorporated a lesson about Jesus the good Shepherd into local county fair events.

Jillian Mayer, a regional Messy Church coordinator in Illinois, has watched Messy Church “fill a need in our community.” Three years in, a separate congregation has emerged as people discover that “Messy Church is a safe place to come together to learn.”

Parents—especially those with younger children—appreciate that kids can be active and get dirty at Messy Church. Moms, dads, and grandparents also are equipped to serve as spiritual leaders in the home. Because families experience the entire session together and receive take-home resources, parents feel more confident about having faith conversations and answering children’s questions.

Attendees also comment on the inviting, approachable nature of Messy Church. People who’ve had negative experiences with church but want their children to grow up with a faith background find Messy Church an ideal opportunity for easing back into a faith community.

For kids, the activities are a huge draw. “Children love Messy Church because it allows them to grow

in their relationship with God through creative spiritual expressions,” says Sandee Prouty-Cole, a regional Messy Church coordinator in South Dakota. “It’s a type of spirituality that children can relate to through their uninhibited creative imaginations.”

Children also value the intergenerational friendships that develop naturally at Messy Church. “People I don’t even know know who I am,” says Zachary, age 10.

THE CHALLENGES OF MESSY CHURCH

Because Messy Church can be labor-intensive, a solid team of volunteers is key, especially for preparing and serving food. Space is needed for all the activities and for meals. Supply costs vary, depending on what items are readily available or donated. Some churches use grant money to begin the endeavor.

Before registering with Messy Church USA and receiving training, congregations are asked to make sure they’re proceeding for the right reasons—chiefly, making disciples of Jesus through faith formation. Not-so-good reasons include wanting to try “the latest thing” and wanting to schedule regular social time or activities.

Another challenge involves perceptions of Messy Church. People sometimes need reminders that it’s church, not just a children’s activity or a strategy to eventually fill pews on Sunday mornings. Members who attend traditional services may wonder when the Messy Church folks will start attending or even joining the “real” church, Egli says, but that’s not the point.

“Messy Church is church and isn’t intended to be a stepping stone into ‘real’ or ‘regular’ church,” say Marty Drake and Leyla Wagner, regional Messy Church coordinators for California and the West Coast. “Our families will tell you they belong to our church and attend the Messy Church service.”

Johannah Myers, a regional Messy Church coordinator in South Carolina, says Messy Church may look and sound different from a typical church, but “we don’t pretend to be anything other than church.” Most importantly, a gospel focus is always front and center. “Whether you’re coming to our Messy Church fall festival for the candy or to the Messy Easter egg hunt for the eggs,” says Myers, “you’ll also hear a message about God. All our activities reinforce that message.”

KEY TAKEAWAYS FROM MESSY CHURCH

Although Messy Church is relatively new, its success illustrates and reinforces some age-old ministry truths.

• **Adapt to change.** No matter the program or curriculum you use, be flexible. Mix up the presentation and style, as needed, to meet changing circumstances and needs. “Messy Church is a new way of delivering God’s Word without changing God’s Word,” according to Drake and Wagner. “It’s just a way we’re changing with the times and bringing new energy to the churches in our region.”

• **Be community-minded.** What happens within the church walls matters, but people outside those walls also need to hear the gospel. Myers says her congregation has become a better neighbor since starting Messy Church. “We’ve always had a good relationship with our local schools, but we’ve intentionally worked harder at fostering those relationships,” she says. “We’ve gotten to know our neighbors, and we’ve opened our building to two after-school ministries. I don’t think we would’ve done this before we started Messy Church.”

• **Cultivate intergenerational bonds.** Faith is a relational process, and relationship with Jesus deepens as people share their faith journey with others of all ages. “The power of Messy Church involves creating the lasting relationships that are so vital to developing faith and making it ‘stick,’” says Mayer. “A traditional church setting just doesn’t foster these intergenerational relationships the same way.”

She tells of Tony, her father-in-law, sitting near an unrelated preschooler at Messy Church, molding clay creations side by side. At the next session, they interacted again. A few months later, when Tony attended his granddaughter’s T-ball game, the preschooler from Messy Church recognized him and called his name across the field. “Three years later,” Mayer says, “the child refers to my father-in-law as one of his best friends.”

• **Dine together.** Although food involves work, the pull is powerful, especially as family mealtimes become rarer. “When we gather around the table for a meal together, relationships are built,” Myers says. “At the table, we can truly show how everyone is welcome.”

Whether you launch a Messy Church or merely maintain a messy ministry, remember to revel in the chaos and unpredictability. The Holy Spirit works through you to make an impact even when lessons and activities aren’t perfect. In fact, mess-ups often provide the most memorable results!

The whole point is that people of all ages and backgrounds get to know Jesus—and that they’re welcomed, accepted, and loved unconditionally in the process.

As one Messy Church attendee discovered, “I can worship wherever I am, just as I am: messy.” **cm**



STEPHANIE MARTIN, a writer and editor in Colorado, recently spent two very messy years teaching preschool Sunday school.