

A VOYAGE OF DISCOVERY

Deepening discipleship in Messy Churches and beyond

The Church of England Evangelism and Discipleship
Team, facilitated by The Bible Reading Fellowship and
Church Army's Research Unit

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MAPPING JOURNEYS OF FAITH IN UNCERTAIN TIMES?

What a voyage of discovery it's been so far. There is a real sense of coming into harbour now, after travelling through some brutal tempests. We'll unload the hold of all the goods we've picked up and polished to a shine on the journey here, spread them out along the jetty and encourage passers-by to help themselves to what they need, like the homeowner in the parable in Matthew 13:52. Some of the treasure, like his, is old and familiar. Some results from this research may serve as a reminder of what you already know. Some treasures are new and perhaps challenging.

It's a ship built for the open seas, not for a safe haven, so we won't be at anchor long before we're off again in search of new prizes, but here we are, still wobbly on our sea legs and looking in amazement at what we've discovered, not from piracy but from the generosity of so many.

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All images in this document are of participants and resources from this research project.

PREPARING TO LAUNCH

This voyage of discovery is not the first of its kind. In 2019, the Playfully Serious report was launched. This foundational piece of research from Church Army's Research Unit shone a light on Messy Churches as places that can and do make disciples. The Archbishops' Council of the Church of England and the Evangelism & Discipleship Team were fascinated by these insights and offered Church Army's Research Unit the opportunity to work with seconded members of the Messy Church team at the Bible Reading Fellowship to explore the question: **'How can Messy Church best make disciples?'**

Three dioceses were approached to join: Bristol, Durham and Hereford. They brought together Messy Church leaders to see what would happen if each church tried one of six different approaches to intentional disciple-making. These six were chosen from a number of approaches to intergenerational discipleship that Messy Church had been considering over several years but had never before had the opportunity to put into action in a measurable way.

Each diocese chose one approach which focused on the families who come to Messy Church, and one approach that focused on the Messy Church team members. Here we tell the tale of these six approaches, with further resource materials messychurch.org.uk/deepening-discipleship to enable you to try them.

Our journey was not without storms. Any Messy Church is a fragile vessel. Dependent as most are on volunteer spare time lay workers, it only takes illness, bereavements or a key person moving away to rock the boat, sometimes with sad consequences. The 2020 pandemic was much more than a gentle breeze; some of the Messy Churches were simply unable to carry on to the end of the project. Some found difficulty in putting the theory into practice. Others 'got it' too late for the timeframe of this project. But even with these setbacks, there is still plenty of treasure to enthrall the most cynical bounty hunter.

What was the overall learning from this research? What were the six approaches? What was discovered through each one about the lifelong journey of following Jesus?

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OUR VOYAGE OF DISCOVERY SO FAR: OVERALL LEARNING

This research has felt like the start of a much longer journey, where we'll be sharing stories for some time to come. The type of research we've used cautions us against moving from specific findings to general conclusions too hastily. Insights generated from the experience of local leaders are particular to each context.

However, there are plenty of gems uncovered so far which we want to celebrate and share.

If we want Messy Churches to be churches that make disciples and grow deeper in discipleship, there are some clear actions to take:

- **Decide to be a community of reflective practice.** Make space for reflection in every aspect of Messy Church. This isn't about adding more activity, but about a shift in attitude that increasingly values the space for listening and reflection, and affirms it when it happens. We found that reflective practice is enhanced by focused facilitation and conversations across different Messy Churches.
- **Decide to notice God at work.** Get into the habit of spotting what God's doing and sharing what you notice with each other. Doing this brings about a change of culture that underpins the new practice.
- **Decide to be church all month.** Make space to be Messy Church in different, perhaps smaller ways in those weeks between the main gatherings. These may be opportunities to gather together with the purpose of coming closer to Jesus and to each other, but may also be about developing an attitude of mind that says, 'I am Messy Church when I'm running, at the toddler group, faced with a big decision, outside the school gates, walking the dog, at work, or whatever makes up the other 30½ days of my month'.
- **Decide to value quality as well as quantity.** This is important for all aspects of Messy Church. Big numbers are important, but value also the significance of the small or single, not only for their own sake, but for that one person's potential to make a big difference.
- **Decide to give up something** – even something you enjoy - to prioritise Messy Church and make it a deeper, richer experience.
- **Decide to journey together.** This voyage uncovered that there is something profound and effective about togetherness. This might be adults being together with children, or teams being alongside each other, affirming the good or revealing unsuspected highlights to each other. Decide to be deliberately intergenerational, and to be hospitable to others who are different. Decide to find somebody to be accountable to, who will ask the hard but helpful questions. Decide to journey with other Messy Churches, not alone.
- **Decide to enjoy it.** Notice what is life-giving, what makes people smile, what lightens their eyes, and follow that light.
- More than anything, **Decide to be disciples and to make disciples.** Do it deliberately. Make it your aim. Make and be apprentices. Because we are Church. That simple act of deciding to be on a lifelong journey with others to follow Jesus and to make other disciples is the one action that will lead to greater depth.
- Oh. And cake. **Eat lots of cake.**

WHERE NEXT? HOW WILL YOU TAKE ACTION?

If you're a Messy Church leader...

- When did you last ask your team what you're aiming to do through your Messy Church?
- What questions do you consistently ask your team to help you notice where God is at work?
- Read through the following six approaches and prayerfully discuss with your team which you will use to deepen discipleship.

If you're a church minister or PCC / leadership team...

- What reflective practices do you find helpful? Could you share these with your Messy Church team?
- Are there any areas of your church life where busyness has replaced space for encountering Jesus?

If you have strategic regional responsibility...

- What one linguistic change could you resolve to make, to affirm the mission of the whole people of God in your area, not just that of ordained people?
- Given the importance of an 'alongsider' who encourages teams and helps them feel connected and accountable, is there any way of providing a team of people to walk alongside your Messy Church teams?



1. EXPLORING: MESSY BASICS

An approach for families

Aim: to create a space where questions about faith are explored with all ages together

In practice: the Messy Church teams hosted sessions introducing the basics of the Christian faith to families using Messy Basics [course material](#). Sessions gave space for faith conversations around a theme e.g. Who is God? Teams adapted material for their contexts, arranging sessions separately from their Messy Church, or they used the material as the theme and activities within their usual Messy Church session.

This approach is particularly suited to Messy Churches where there are attendees who feel ready for the 'next step' on their discipleship journeys.

The older ones didn't go off and play; they were happy to stay in the discussion.

What we have learnt about discipleship:

GROWING IN FAITH INTERGENERATIONALLY IS KEY

- **Attendees are very open to faith.** Leaders should expect all sorts of topics and questions to come up, including tricky ones!
 - Children and adults ask penetrating **faith questions**. Messy Basics gave people opportunities and 'permission' to discuss difficult or painful topics. One leader reflected, 'Perhaps we don't do this enough at Messy Church.'
 - The big advantage of this approach is the **adult engagement** that you might not get at some Messy Church gatherings (especially if parents tend to chat or fiddle on phones during the celebration time).
 - A sense of **togetherness** develops through the course; intergenerational friendships are formed and strengthened as adult attendees,
- adult leaders and children **learn from each other**. Leave plenty of time for families to interact informally. Don't fill the time with too much formal content.
- **Being intergenerational isn't easy** - you need to value everyone's conversations. Messy Churches found that people of any age, young or old, can give an 'off the cuff' statement that can prompt thoughts and spark conversations.
 - Have something that attendees can **take home**. Discipleship doesn't finish when we leave the church building. Discipleship is as much about what you do when you're not at the gathered Messy Church as when you are.

I didn't know [families] were going home and continuing discussions – I wish I'd known that before! I only got that in the feedback. I was really excited and encouraged by that.

We were talking about God and it made it feel as if God was listening to us. We could talk about what we know, but other people knew other things to me so we could learn even more. (child participant)

What we have learnt about doing this approach:

- **The team needs to be 'ready'**: take the time as a team to ask strategic, preparatory questions before starting this approach, to be clear about what you are aiming for. As one leader recalled: '...that was one of things we had to work through right at the beginning. What are we actually doing here? What is this for? ... So in my head this was a Messy Church version of Alpha or Emmaus or a chance for Messy people to explore those basics...'
- **Attendees need to be 'ready'** to explore discipleship. One leader who tried Messy Basics, which didn't work as hoped, realised, 'I was trying to lead them where they didn't want to go.'
- Consider holding a Messy Basics course in a **setting** that will help create the environment or atmosphere you are aiming for.
- **Adapt the material** to your context and families. Even though this approach has more of a 'course' feel to it than the other five approaches, remember Messy Church families often enjoy being active and creative as they discuss and think.
- The presence of under 5s challenges leaders

to think specifically about **young children's spirituality**. Messy Church members may want to remain altogether, unless there is a really good reason to provide a crèche. Like a family talking together at home, inevitably there will be a coming and going between conversations and wandering off to play. Rather than a distraction from deepening discipleship, this makes a welcoming environment in which children and adults will learn at their own pace and where the feeling of being wanted is an important part of the voyage.

- Doing Messy Basics as an **additional gathering** may have been more costly in time and energy, but it proved more effective. What might team members need to stop, in order to **make space for this extra commitment**? That said, don't be too shy of having a go; Messy Churches who tried this approach said they would do it again.
- Consider **personally inviting a smaller group** to form your Messy Basics group (8-10 people). Attendance may be more consistent, and a smaller group might also find it easier to make friends.

Our voyage: St Christopher's, Brislington

The Messy Church at St Christopher's has gathered monthly on a Saturday morning since 2010, with 70-100 attending. Introducing Messy Basics felt like a natural next step.

The team hoped it would lead to 'people of all ages deepening their faith, exploring how that faith is worked out in daily life, and encouraging others to do the same'. Families were invited to sign up during Messy Church; others – who they thought were ready for this – were personally invited.

Eight sessions were adapted from the course material to be held monthly on a Sunday afternoon. The team of ten welcomed eight adults and fourteen children. They were encouraged by the sense of anticipation summed up in one parent's comment, 'We've been waiting for this.'

Six sessions took place before lockdown - exploring first 'Who Is God?' and 'Who is Jesus?', followed by grace and mercy. 'Some of us found the most moving part was being given permission to discuss some sad things. For others, the best bit was eating the chocolate cake.'

They also tackled themes of forgiveness and salvation. *'We discovered that Jesus doesn't just come to forgive us - perhaps more importantly to give us salvation, life to the full. One of us was greatly encouraged by the notion that we would never die. To mark all of this, we put all of our leaves together to make a giant salvation tree.'*

Rev'd Andy Schuman reflected, *'It was very useful to have a smaller quieter setting to do some more focused discipleship, and I think certainly the parents got a lot more out of it – and we even built a focused parents-only Bible study into our last session.'*

Not that it was all easy: *'For normal Messy Church, its leaders plan it and I just turn up. It's our biggest congregation. It's the one congregation I see God at work the most. For this, I had to be fully involved this time. In terms of capacity, it is a big ask.'*

'It was very much the right time for us to do this and it is still very much on the table going forward. It did take a lot of work though!'



CALL TO ACTION FOR MESSY BASICS:

If you're a Messy Church leader...

- How many times a year could your team helpfully reflect together about what your aims are in doing either Messy Church itself or an offshoot like Messy Basics?
- What could you provide to inspire households to continue life-changing conversations at home?

If you're a church minister or PCC / leadership team...

- Our Messy Churches found attendees to be remarkably open to talking about faith. How might you make time to enjoy sharing your love of Jesus with them?
- The intergenerational aspect of this approach proved important. How are you bringing people of all ages together to grow their faith? Could you do this in new ways?

If you have strategic regional responsibility...

- What resources are shared around your churches that help all ages explore the basics of the Christian faith together?
- How does your diocese/district measure the value of smaller, 'deeper' gatherings as well as numerical measurements?



2. EXPLORING: SOCIAL ACTION

An approach for families

Aim: for people to grow closer to Jesus as they serve others.

In practice: the teams intentionally introduced and developed a strong thread of social action locally and globally into the Messy Church gatherings. As part of this approach, some also added extra occasional events and opportunities related to their social action themes. Each Messy Church developed bespoke causes and activities informed by a combination of local need and families' interests.

This approach is particularly suited to Messy Churches who already express their faith through helping people in their community.

It invites you to talk about deep themes ... [not just] what a Bible story means, which could be held at arm's length ... we're talking about the real grit of life with real people with real needs.

It's not about Messy Church in a building but as members are out in the community and online.

What we have learnt about discipleship:

FRAMING SOCIAL ACTION AS A FAITH ACTIVITY IS A WAY OF GROWING MORE LIKE JESUS

- Building social action explicitly into your Messy Church offers practical and tangible **connections between faith and daily life**.
- This approach has a 'join with us' attitude rather than one that needs people to 'believe first'. It resonates with discipleship as **apprenticeship** - walking alongside people on the journey at every step.
- Exploring social action promoted people to **ask questions** about life and faith, as well as sharing their difficult personal situations and asking for prayer. Messy Churches found that facilitating **opportunities for prayer** was an important aspect of this approach.
- Perhaps most significantly, this approach leads very naturally into the Messy Church value of being **Christ-centred**. Caring 'for the most vulnerable, it's such an important thing - to be like Jesus and walking in his footsteps'.
- Engaging in social action fostered **community** and a sense of shared experience, connecting Messy Church families and leaders with new people, places and ideas outside their everyday lives. It 'offered opportunities to build shared memory-making. So families can talk about Messy Church out of hours.'

I think for all of us it's about longevity of relationships. Those relationships won't stop with the end of this research.

It's had a profound effect on a few of the parents ... Some have received social help for themselves ... They've helped others and they've realised how generous people are.

What we have learnt about doing this approach:

- Spend time **planning and preparing** as a team, considering why social action is an important aspect of faith and discipleship before launching into action.
- Rather than imposing a particular social action topic on your team, identify the **existing strengths and passions** within your team, and thread them into your Messy Church.
- Consider your context when deciding whether to focus on **local needs or wider causes**. Some Messy Churches found that identifying need further away was a good introduction to talking about needs closer to home, especially if personal need is an awkward subject to raise. Equally, starting local can act as a secure platform to then look more widely.
- Engaging with social action issues has been **empowering** for attendees as it encourages them to know they can make a difference in the world. Messy Churches also found that social action encourages generosity.
- Messy Church should be **more than just the main gathering**. The building of relationships one-to-one or in smaller groups is really important. Doorstep conversations can also be significant - it's a different type of conversation to those you might have in a Messy Church gathering. The pandemic led Messy Churches to focus on responding to local needs, which in turn led to a greater sense of connectedness and community.
- Caring for a local community with its endless needs, can leave one asking, 'Are we doing enough?'; the temptation to keep increasing busyness can be countered by regular team reflection and prayer around the question, 'What can we do better?'

There is a logic - it makes sense to participants that social action links to faith.

Our voyage: Leominster Messy Church

There has been a monthly Messy Church congregation at Leominster for the last ten years. Attendance fluctuates around 40-60, with the team encouraged lately by six baptisms, one child confirmation and two agape meals.

Building on this momentum, they joined this research hoping to see even *'greater participation ... as families catch on and join in, or at least be inspired or challenged by what they see people doing and that this will nudge them along their faith journey'*.

Ideas included: promoting toilet twinning, packing shoeboxes for Teams4u, a food bank collection, cooking for Calais refugees, a holiday grub club and organising a visit to their nearest recycling processing centre.

Messy Church gatherings were organised around social action themes. They tried a 'swimming' prayer as part of the celebration time, where they asked people to lie on a flooded 'sea' blue sheet and pray about climate change. Only the children could be persuaded to join in, but adults seemed

very receptive - especially as it was the week after the international climate strike.

'By doing the reflections after each session, we've got much more of an idea of where the families are at. Loads of mums (who are not otherwise involved in church) were saying, "Yeah we're praying all the time".'

Their Messy Church in Lent worked well as a time to make junk crosses out of recycled materials and introduce 40 acts of kindness. After lockdown, the team offered a variety of ways to stay connected: Facebook Live, daily videos for Holy Week and 50 x 'Messy Church in a bag' with an invitation to Zoom meetings (around nine families engaging). Through food bank work run by local churches, a further opportunity arose for leader Kathy Bland to deliver 200 school holiday food bags to local families.

One mum reflected, *'there are lots more we could be doing in the world, looking after each other, other countries, and the planet ... everything. I've seen some parents say, "I haven't thought about that before" and it's made them think.'*



CALL TO ACTION FOR SOCIAL ACTION:

If you're a Messy Church leader...

- Could you build in social action as part of the regular rhythm of your Messy Church?
- What 'Godly passions' do your team members have that could be a starting point for gathering people, just as social action was a pre-existing passion for the leaders in this research?

If you're a church minister or PCC / leadership team...

- We found many people to be open to prayer. Could you support your community to perhaps pray through a prayer tree, board or installation in your church porch, or setting up a prayer chain network through WhatsApp or similar?
- What spaces for leadership can you create and encourage fringe people and younger leaders into, in different parts of your church and community life?

If you have strategic regional responsibility...

- Would your local churches be aware of the wider links your diocese/region has with social action projects you support, perhaps overseas or nationally?
- Are there any current and immediate local needs that your churches could be encouraged to respond to? How could you communicate the way that responding to need is one way of growing closer to Jesus?



3. EXPLORING: MESSY EXTRAS

An approach for families

Aim: to add an extra gathering into the month, providing an informal space for Messy Church people of all ages to come together to grow in friendship and faith.

In practice: the teams prayerfully selected ideas for smaller social events from the [list of suggestions](#) that were best suited to their contexts. The families invited to these extra gatherings were asked to input their ideas for subsequent events they would enjoy doing together as families.

This approach is particularly suited to Messy Churches who meet less frequently or want to deepen relationships with families coming to their Messy Church.

You have to get out of your comfort zone occasionally, take a few risks, and do a bit of imagining and just see where it leads.

What we have learnt about discipleship:

A MESSY EXTRA GIVES A GROWING SENSE OF BELONGING

- Messy Extra was about **coming closer to God and closer to each other together**. The events fostered a greater **sense of togetherness**, where relationships were formed and strengthened.
- Most families who engaged were core Messy Church families. Messy Extras were planned as **discipleship groups for young families** – much like discipleship groups or cell groups are created for adults when they have been coming to Sunday morning services for a while.
- The smaller Messy Extras were the **next 'step' on** from a normal Messy Church gathering as opposed to the first 'thing' families came to. For the smaller Messy Extras, think and pray about which families you think it would be good to personally invite.
- Larger occasional events worked differently, becoming spaces to invite new people into. Families committed to Messy Extra were able to plan these larger events and invite their wider friends and family. This led to **belonging and shared ownership**.
- If concerned that the bustle of a large Messy Church gathering leaves little space for reflection or conversation, adding a smaller Messy Extra creates a win-win situation, balancing the exciting energy of the Messy Church with the intimacy of a smaller Extra. The **symbiosis** of the two types of gathering – and the way they act as complementary 'threshold places' – shines out.

Let God in rather than fill the space.

I probably know more about families from Messy Church than I do about those who attend 10 am. Messy Extra gave me the opportunity to have those conversations.

What we have learnt about doing this approach:

- Messy Churches hoped this approach would help develop a **greater sense of community**. In the first few months, the **extra effort** put into Messy Extra events was appreciated by attendees, who noticed these were special occasions.
- This approach felt infused with **joy and laughter**. There was a sense of 'just being with folks and just enjoying their company'. As church is not always a place associated with laughter, this helped challenge preconceptions about church, preparing the way for changing minds about the things of faith.
- The **islands activity** worked well in some contexts and not in others. When it worked best, it was a tool for the team to talk with their families about which discipleship island they wanted to sail to next. That would give them the next theme which they would **plan together**. Then families would arrive at the next Messy Extra excited to see their plans executed. This gave a sense of belonging. It's the 'difference between coming as a guest... and [it being] something you're part of'.
- Messy Extra gave leaders time and space to **get to know families**. It worked well for engaging with a smaller group of families in more depth.
- Messy Extra also allowed for **occasional larger events**. It was relatively easy for attenders to invite new people to bigger Messy Extra events – wider family members got to experience **church as a party**.
- One Messy Church held a film night for 100 in partnership with the local school. A Messy Extra event may complement and enhance an existing and effective Open the Book ministry or strengthen the **relationship with a local school**.
- The title of this approach may be unhelpful if people see the word 'extra' and assume it is extra work. It was more about **extra blessing**. 'Blessings in leadership and in everything ... this is a fantastic opportunity to go deeper and journey with families.'
- Messy Extra need not require lots of planning, being directive or having a large team. Use what you have to hand, e.g. board games, so no leader has additional preparation. If a blank canvas scares you, use easy-to-do ideas in the Messy Church books and magazines. Choose activities that **create space for conversation**.

Our conversations are about God as well as doughnuts, coming closer to Christ as family though it looks as though we're having lots of fun, but while we're having fun, we're becoming closer to God.

People need to not be too scared that it's going to be hard work.

Our voyage: St Albans, Windy Nook

Coming into this research, the Messy Church at Windy Nook in Gateshead met 4-6 times a year with an average of 80 attending each time. With *'no time to lift our heads during Messy Church'*, the team adopted the Messy Extras approach to give more opportunity for faith conversations and to develop the sense of belonging.

They began holding Messy Extras (on the months between their main Messy Church gatherings) on a Sunday afternoon. Ideas included board game afternoons, outdoor sports and picnics as they tried to get a feel from parents as to what felt 'right'.

Numbers were kept deliberately small compared with the usual Messy Church. After the first few Messy Extras, the team reflected, *'We had time to talk ... to have conversations on a different level with those attending – both children and adults alike.'*

Lay leader Lynn Coulson texted families each month and posted invites on Facebook but, in terms of workload, the team appreciated having less preparation. The team simply turned up to spend time chatting with families over games they

already had to hand. One dad spent most of one session setting up Mouse Trap. Revd Danie Lindley reflected, *'Where in ordinary church would you get the chance to talk to [a dad] like that?'*

Lynn's husband Ken commented that Messy Extra *'...has turned something that seemed impossible into a possibility – Messy Church one month and an extra the next ... We needed something else and so the timing [of this research] was perfect.'*

Out of conversations at Messy Extra, one family asked if their children could be baptised. With support from their diocesan Messy Church coordinator, the team planned a special baptism service. Three more families came forward, so nine children were baptised in February 2020. Drawing on BRF Messy Splash resources, the team designed the celebration in such a way that it had a party atmosphere but did not lose a sense of the sacred.



CALL TO ACTION FOR MESSY EXTRAS:

If you're a Messy Church leader...

- Can you decide at the outset whether you're aiming the Extra at a smaller group of people to take them 'deeper', or as a threshold event for people for whom even Messy Church is currently too 'deep'?
- What one action can you take to 'make space to let God in' during your Messy Extra?

If you're a church minister or PCC / leadership team...

- Are there people from other parts of your church's ministry who would benefit from being invited to your Messy Extra?
- What does your church need to do to prepare in case this becomes a space where people want to be baptised?

If you have strategic regional responsibility...

- How might you translate the key insight about 'making space for God' in missional activities into your diocesan or other strategy?
- Which churches under your oversight would you describe as 'party churches', i.e. churches which are great at celebrating with real joy? Do they know you appreciate this side of their ministry?

4. EXPLORING: MATURING TEAMS

An approach for teams

Aim: for each member of the team to be walking confidently with Jesus as they lead the Messy Church, so that they are able to lead more effectively and purposefully.

In practice: the leaders deliberately made the Messy Church planning meetings, and other team times, more reflective. Discipleship discussions took precedence over practical considerations.

This approach is particularly suited to Messy Church teams who are just starting out or restarting and want to focus or refocus on discipleship.

Have the courage to ... do it properly ... intentionally, formally.

What we have learnt about discipleship:

MATURING TEAMS LEADS TO A GROWING CONFIDENCE IN TALKING ABOUT JESUS

- Growing the Messy Church team and empowering them to plan activities to fit with the biblical theme has the potential to enable a **deepening of faith for leaders**.
- It can be hard for Christians unused to articulating their faith to talk together about where God is at work. Using tools that encourage the team to reflect on their own growth, as well as what God is doing in the lives of families, helps to **increase confidence** in talking about faith.
- Messenger or WhatsApp groups proved easy ways for the Messy Church team and parents, carers and guardians to interact with each other and plan together **all month round**, outside the main gatherings. Keeping in touch digitally turned very quickly into a chat, with prayers and support for people. *'They are putting their entire life on there now*

... We've had a death. We've had debt ... all sorts of things over this time ... It's just good to see what God is doing amongst these people.'

- Whether team members help with leading the celebration or story-related crafts, this approach has helped teams use the stories as a springboard to talk to others about their faith.
- A **larger** team can make it easy to share ideas, but inevitably discipleship of a larger team will be a slower process.

I'm just thrilled! Getting the mums onto the team even though they don't come to [Sunday] church to come and help us, in our experience it has worked. They are now able to talk about faith. I think that's just stunning because this is a new move on their journey, it's a brave move.

What we have learnt about doing this approach:

- Having to reflect and evaluate the Messy Church gatherings encourages leaders to be **extra-conscious** of what is happening and how they are communicating the biblical theme of the session. They considered why they do what they do and developed a **clearer vision** of what they hoped people would take home from the Messy Church gatherings.
- The practice of noticing extended to leaders being more conscious of each other on their team and of how parents or carers were doing.
- Teams found making more time to reflect and plan has been an **unexpected joy**.
- The **Islands activity** worked very well for this approach. The language and imagery provided a useful, accessible way for teams to reflect.
- Maturing your team takes time but is beneficial to see **closer relationships** form between Messy Church team members.
- Structure **feedback moments** soon enough after the gathering while the team have a clear memory of it.
- Maturing teams is **not about adding on extra work** but simply doing what you're doing reflectively and becoming a learning community as you do it.
- One Messy Church reflected that maturing their team had a **very big impact** in the life of their Messy Church. Everyone feels more empowered, especially the new leaders. Giving input and being part of the planning has really changed things.

The wrap-up meeting, the reflection, that almost straight away started to make a difference ... to the way it felt in the actual Messy Church.

Our voyage: Leebotwood Messy Church

Leebotwood is a small village in the rural English county of Shropshire. For the last three years, a team of volunteers have run monthly Messy Church gatherings on a Tuesday afternoon in the village hall, with around 21 adults and 18 children attending.

The team, led by Kay Askew, were attracted to this approach as a chance to honour and affirm one other. They hoped it would give them greater confidence in sharing their faith in language families would understand. They hoped that recognising where God was at work in their lives would enable families to do the same.

Working with the Islands activity, the team chose four islands as a focus for the whole research period: Togetherness, Caring for the earth, Listening, and Making life better for others. They committed to meeting each month directly after their Messy Church, making note of reflections before praying together. Helper Revd Caro Wright commented, 'We're all there and it's fresh in our minds, which helped with the whole project.'

During the start of the pandemic, everything stopped to allow leaders to shield. Some of the team were able to gather later in the year by socially

distancing in a team member's garden. Reflecting on their research journey, they commented, *'We have been more aware of what we are doing. We think we have raised awareness of why we are doing a particular task. We have put Jesus into the middle so that rather than craft with a bit of Jesus, it has become more about Jesus with a bit of craft.'*

'The journey has brought us closer to one another. We have got to know one another more deeply. We have also become closer to our families.'

Reflecting on where they discerned God in their discipleship, they identified occasions when they all noticed deeper spiritual engagement by the children. These included: the acting out of a baptism, prayers on the rug with candles, and overhearing the children chatting to one another about Jesus, expressing his presence amongst them.

'We have made an effort to "nail our colours to the mast" – this is about Jesus.'



CALL TO ACTION FOR MATURING TEAMS:

If you're a Messy Church leader...

- How easy would it be to have a short feedback time for the team built into the end of every Messy Church session?
- What one change could you make to your next planning meeting to help your team be more reflective and intentional?

If you're a church minister or PCC /leadership team...

- Which leadership groups in your church could be encouraged and equipped to add reflective practice to their meetings?
- How do you invite and offer feedback after your Sunday services?

If you have strategic regional responsibility...

- As you visit Messy Churches, how could you encourage the teams to be (even) more reflective? Is there a practice, book or website you have found useful that you could share with them?
- This approach builds relationships, refreshes teams and brings them energy and joy; how could this be applied to other areas of the church's life? Diocesan Synod? Deanery Synods? Bishops' Council meetings? Staff meetings?

5. EXPLORING: PEER MENTORING

An approach for teams

Aim: to introduce a safe, relational process of mentoring individuals within the team or with Messy Church members who are ready to take a next step into leadership responsibilities so that they can grow as confident disciples of Christ.

In practice: leaders purposefully invested time and love in particular individuals and gave them opportunities and encouragement to grow in their discipleship.

This approach is particularly suited to Messy Churches with a stable team who want to develop particular people as leaders.

There is definitely a spark ... an excitement ... in what we're offering and in how we're offering.

You're learning as much from them as they are from you.

What we have learnt about discipleship:

PEER MENTORING STRENGTHENS THE TEAM AND GIVES IT FRESH PURPOSE

- Peer Mentoring has led to a 'growing **openness and honesty** in discussions' amongst team members about faith.
- It has been an opportunity to identify team members' **gifts** as part of their discipleship journeys.
- Increased opportunities for reflection and discussion led Messy Churches to be more focused on how they are **communicating with the adults** who attend their Messy Church, to think about gentle evangelism and about how to start conversations.
- One Messy Church shared how they make sure one core team member is always **free to chat** and catch up with parents, carers and guardians at gatherings. They believe this has been key to identifying the new leaders they've been able to mentor.
- Despite Messy Churches identifying that they had relatively 'strong' teams to begin with, exploring Peer Mentoring prompted further reflection on where their team has room to grow and **seek God further**. The team health check in the Messy Magazine was also cited as a way to keep growing as a team.
- **Asking where God seems to be at work in people's lives was a new concept** to some. Being unfamiliar, it was challenging for them at first, but in staying with the question, it brought teams together.
- Messy Churches found witnessing the growth of even just one team member **encouraged and inspired** the whole team.

When you've had it, you know, you're absolutely worn out and it's ten to six on a Sunday night and you're still clearing up glitter ... you have to share that blessing of leadership ... the joy that comes when someone comes back to say "that was brill" or "I've still got glitter in the car two weeks later".

What we have learnt about doing this approach:

- This approach has the potential to overlap with the Maturing Teams approach. Maturing Teams is about whole-team development and feels fairly gentle and familiar. Peer Mentoring - with its proactive one-to-one coaching by the core leader/s for individuals in the wider team - **feels very new** to local church life.
- Peer Mentoring encourages leaders to **stop and reflect** on the progress of their Messy Church. This led to **practical improvements** in the way they run their Messy Church. New team members spot new opportunities and places for improvement.
- Peer Mentoring worked well with teams containing a **variety of age ranges**.
- Team members needed to **spend time with each other** outside Messy Church gatherings. The sense of hospitality and degree of investment that leaders have offered those they are mentoring stands out - especially when they did not start out as leaders or even members of the church.
- You have to encourage people out of their comfort zone but **walk with them** so you are there to catch them if they need it.
- The **language** of this approach needs to be considered contextually. The danger of the 'mentoring' word is that it can sound a bit patronising; it can carry a power dynamic that needs to be handled sensitively. The mentor needs to be humble and open to learning too. One leader reflected: *'In a work situation, it may be more acceptable for an experienced person to mentor someone in a job, but in a church situation you can't be sure what a person's spiritual background is.'* Supporting, partnering, accompanying and alongside were considered as terms that might work better in some contexts.
- Formal training in mentoring or coaching would almost certainly have given more confidence to the teams using this approach.

To have prayer focused on discipleship has been significant and has fuelled the planning.

You don't see it as a calling THEN, but I think when you look back and reflect, it is.

Our voyage: St Clare's, Newton Aycliffe

Peer Mentoring wasn't something altogether new for this ten-year-old Messy Church, but this research was a welcome opportunity to revisit it.

By now, mum Elizabeth was helping. A few years ago, Elizabeth attended Messy Church with her little girl *'and just kept coming'*. One day, when they were particularly short of helpers due to illness, Elizabeth offered to run a craft table. Looking back, Elizabeth said at the time she felt a nudge to do this, not only from the team but from inside herself.

Lay leaders Helen and Cath approach their mentoring in a gentle and relational way. Cath told us she is only involved herself through Helen's investment in her as a leader over the last ten years.

At the start of the research, Helen and Cath decided to reshape their monthly planning meetings to all spend more time studying the Bible story planned for the next Messy Church. This helped Elizabeth feel part of the team while Helen supported Elizabeth in taking on more responsibility as a core leader.

When COVID-19 hit and Messy Churches were faced with the challenge of staying in contact with families, the team rallied. *'Lockdown arrived and it was a case of what are we gonna do? Your ministry can't stop. Your discipleship can't stop. You need to think of other ways.'*

The team moved Messy Church online, creating Virtual Messy on their Facebook page. Their most popular Virtual Messy video was Messy Mindfulness designed and led by Elizabeth. Based on Matthew 6:25 - *'Therefore I tell you, do not worry...'* - this session responded to families' anxieties around school and COVID-19. It had over 6,000 views and was used in healthcare centres and local secondary schools.

Reflecting afterwards with the team, Elizabeth spoke about feeling closer to God by bringing this session to Messy families, and she expressed a desire to grow more. *'Helen is a fab mentor who has really supported me on my Messy Church journey. I would never have thought I would be doing what I am now when I first started to help out, two years ago.'*



CALL TO ACTION FOR PEER MENTORING:

If you're a Messy Church leader...

- Might you spend some time as a team prayerfully considering whether you can see there is one person who would benefit from some intentional 'alongsiding' in your context?
- At your next team meeting, go round the team and say what gifts and skills you all feel each team member has. Reflect on the variety (and celebrate God's provision) or the lack of variety (and wonder together who might join you with their complementary skills).

If you're a church minister or PCC / leadership team...

- Is there anyone on your PCC or leadership team who would appreciate being in a mentoring relationship, with the aim of growing spiritually or in practical skills?
- What could happen if each member of your leadership team committed to taking a special interest in praying for and getting to better know one member of your church for six months, having accountability to the rest of the leadership team?

If you have strategic regional responsibility...

- What resources or expertise could be made available to lay people in local churches so they could have access to mentors from the wider diocese/district?
- Could you strategically deploy the national Messy Church team of *'alongsiders'* in your context?



6. EXPLORING: YOUNG LEADERS

An approach for teams

Aim: to create opportunities for the discipleship of under 18s to develop through taking part in the leadership of a Messy Church.

In practice: the leaders worked alongside a group of young people, either encouraging them to mentor each other or simply working together to plan and deliver the Messy Church gatherings. [A Messy Young Leaders' Badge scheme](#) was created, though not used by the teams in the research.

This approach is particularly suited to Messy Churches who already have a group of older children and teenagers who enjoy helping.

I've learnt that it's much harder to talk about the Bible than I thought it would be, but it was really cool tonight. (young leader)

They are learning about discipleship – especially realising that if they help teach, they need to know it and live it themselves. (adult leader)

What we have learnt about discipleship:

INVESTING IN YOUNG LEADERS IS COSTLY BUT WORTHWHILE FOR THEM, FOR THE WIDER TEAM AND FOR MESSY CHURCH MEMBERS

- **Intergenerational relationships** can play an important role in discipleship – adult and young people learnt from each other. Also, children look up to young people; if they see teenagers as role models engaged in leadership and discipleship, they will be more likely to follow their lead.
- As young people **teach others** about the Bible and faith, their own faith is stretched and develops. Similarly as young leaders mentor each other, their faith deepens. For any Christian, it's a massive step to begin to articulate things to do with faith to someone else.
- Where older teenagers have been paired with the young teenagers, older teenagers gently gave each other feedback and **encouraged each other** on ways to improve for the next Messy Church. What a sign of spiritual

maturity! This is one way of developing holy habits that build a holy character. Not all adults find this easy. As one adult leader commented, 'If you can do that at 16 or 17, that's pretty good going.'

- In developing young leaders, we explored seriously the development of the gifts of all God's people to lead in church as part of a discipleship journey. The strong **mentoring dynamic** between adult leaders and young leaders, as well as older teenagers and younger teenagers, raises questions of what leadership is or should be. If mentoring leaders is a key factor of discipleship, who is mentoring the adult leaders in all forms of church?

What we have learnt about doing this approach:

- Developing young leaders involves **trust**, from both adult leaders and young leaders.
- Developing young leaders requires a significant **investment of time and energy**.
- **Parent/carer support** is important because of the safeguarding restrictions around contacting young leaders directly.
- There are numerous changes in the **stages of adolescence**. There is a big difference between a 17-year-old and an 11-year-old. Ask questions in your preparation sessions that all your young leaders can engage with, whatever age and stage they are, e.g. 'How might knowing Jesus help someone cope with the storms in life?'
- Giving young people **responsibility** creates an atmosphere where they feel cared for and valued. Visual/outward signs (e.g. t-shirts) were one helpful way to nurture that sense of belonging, responsibility and leadership.
- **This approach isn't for all teenagers**. Double check you aren't imposing it because it worked for you in your youth or it worked for

another Messy Church. Think how you will value the young people who do not want to lead.

- Inevitably, your Messy Church will end up with a larger team, which may be an attractive idea to some who may be struggling for volunteers. However, remember this is about **discipling young leaders**, not recruiting extra pairs of hands.
- Young leaders were given different **responsibilities**. Some helped to plan and lead in the celebration – in writing and telling stories – whilst others helped to plan and lead on the activities. Identify the gifts and preferences of your young people.
- This approach **celebrates** young leaders' contribution to church life. In some contexts, a public presentation and certificate approach will work well; in other contexts, this might feel like all the worst bits of school. Explore with your young leaders what they would like and what suggestions they have.

By the end, all five would happily pray at a meeting ... that was really encouraging. (adult leader)

We do have to be quite proactive to get them together and get them motivated. But they give a lot of energy and strength to us and help us be more organised, so not more work in the long run. (adult leader)

I'm quite reserved ... so being in that leadership role ... gave me self-confidence ... and just trusting myself that I can do the job. (young leader)

Our voyage: St Nix's, Yate

The Messy Church at St Nicholas (known locally as St Nix) began meeting monthly in 2010, with an average of 75 attenders and a wider team of 20 adults and teenagers. A handful of children are baptised each year and a few parents have done Alpha and joined a home group.

Aware that some of their older teenage leaders would soon move away for further education, leaders Paul and Alison Thurlow used this research to invite six new 10–12-year-olds to become leaders. They asked older teenagers to act as mentors, pairing them with a younger teenager. All teenage leaders gathered monthly for team reflection and planning, facilitated by Paul and Alison.

During the pandemic, Messy Church moved online. It was more difficult to keep the teenagers involved and sustain momentum for the research. Nevertheless, towards the end of 2020 the older teenagers met with Paul and Alison on Zoom to reflect on the research process, and asking the question had it helped them grow as disciples? One commented, *'When you're being taught yourself, you don't actually really know what you really know'* and this approach *'...just kind of renewed my faith ... made me more confident in my faith.'*

While the young leaders agreed *'it's quite clear this experience has been good for us as well as the people we were mentoring'*, there was also realism. One older teenager was able to share that he had lost his faith during the research period.

The effectiveness of the St Nix approach depended on Paul and Alison knowing their teenagers well. And being there as 'back-up', giving young leaders a proper chance to lead (without stepping on their toes), yet helping with the up-front presenting needed for the celebration.

Alison and Paul commented on the paradoxical nature of concentrating on teenagers while valuing the all age dynamic of Messy Church. In their experience, it has had a positive impact overall. As young leaders work with and befriend the other adult helpers on the wider team, it creates a fuzzy pastoral and personable boundary that allows young and old to learn from one another.



CALL TO ACTION FOR THE YOUNG LEADERS APPROACH:

If you're a Messy Church leader...

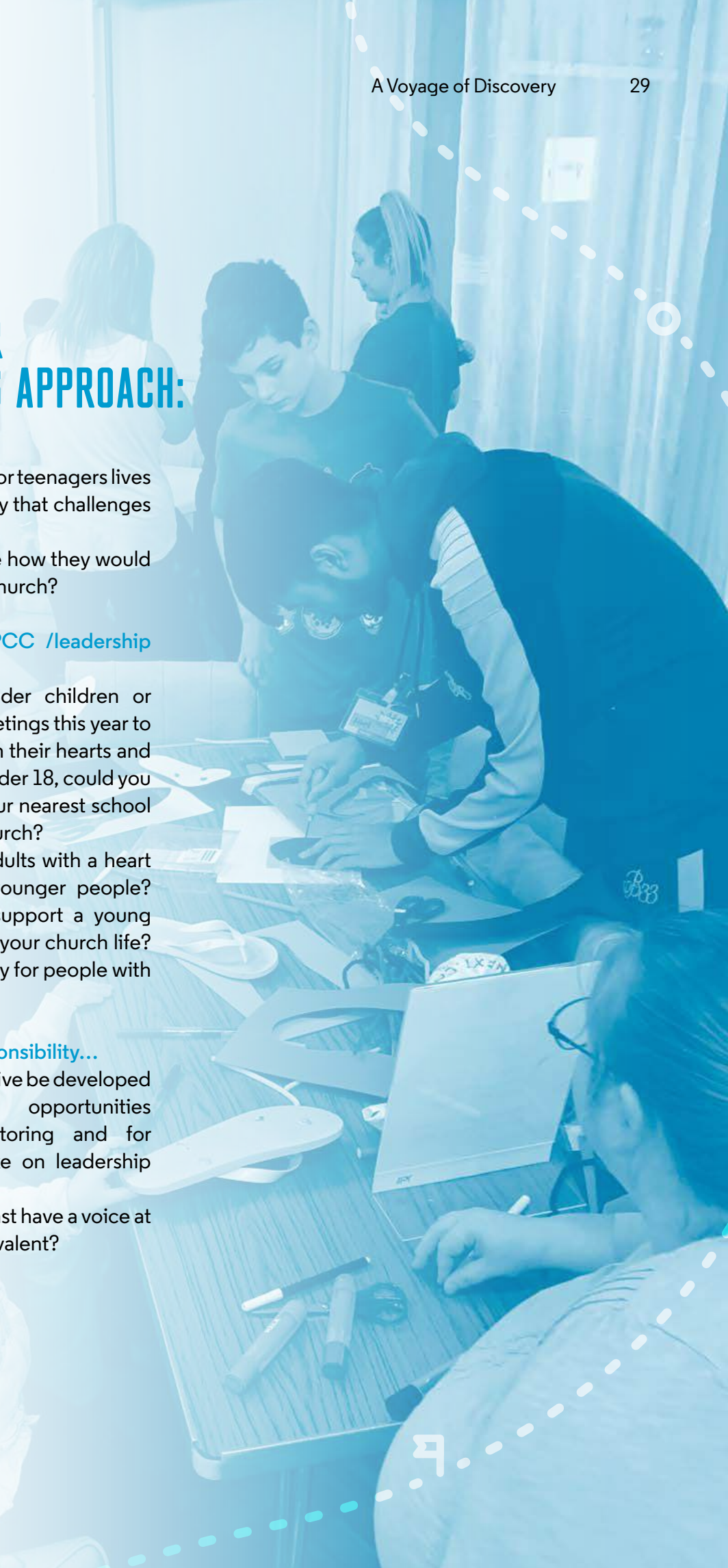
- Which of your older children or teenagers lives out their discipleship in a way that challenges or encourages you?
- Could you ask young people how they would like to serve God in Messy Church?

If you're a church minister or PCC /leadership team...

- Could you invite some older children or teenagers to one of your meetings this year to share what God is putting on their hearts and minds? If you have no one under 18, could you listen to what students at your nearest school want to say to your (their) church?
- Do you have two or three adults with a heart for nurturing the faith of younger people? Could they be invited to support a young leaders' team for any part of your church life? If not, who is prepared to pray for people with this calling?

If you have strategic regional responsibility...

- Could a Lent or Advent initiative be developed that intentionally gives opportunities for intergenerational mentoring and for 'unexpected' people to take on leadership roles?
- When did anyone under 18 last have a voice at your diocesan synod or equivalent?



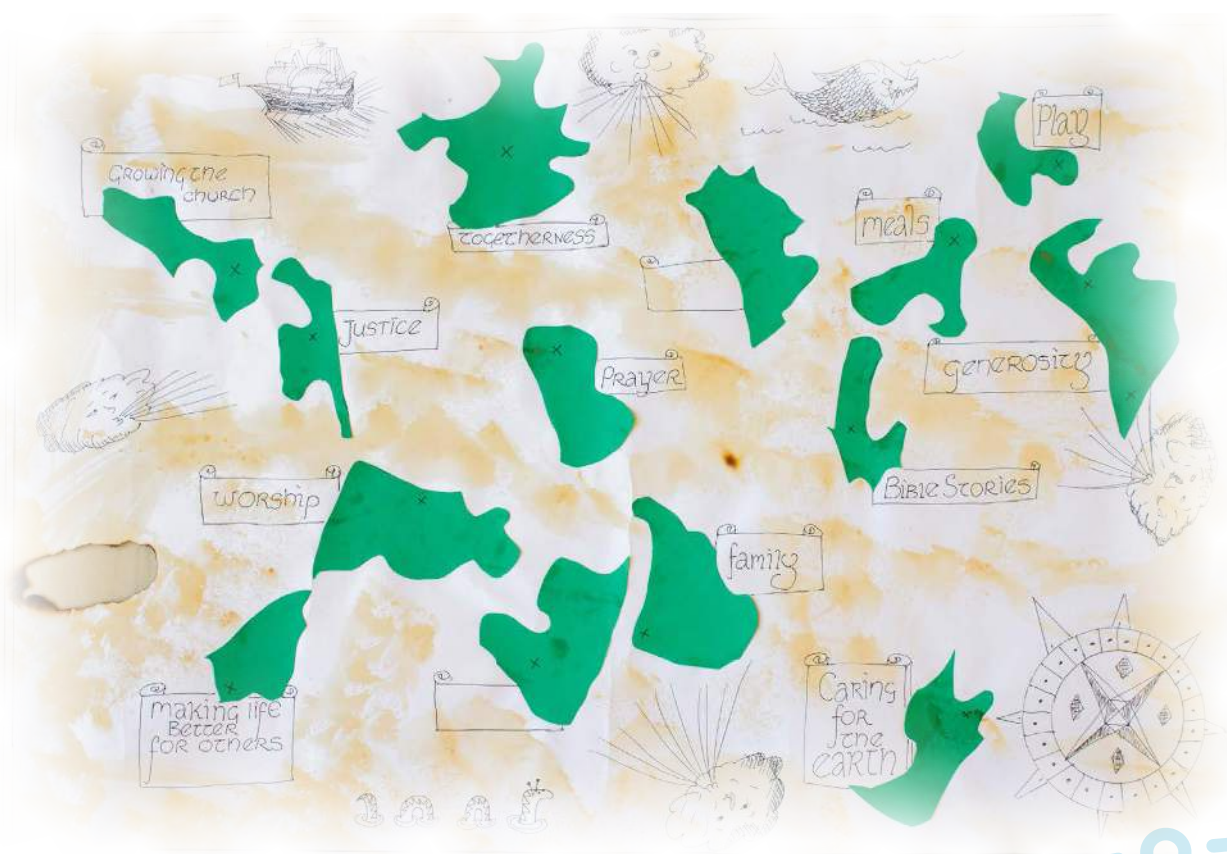
THE ISLANDS: A MAP FOR OUR JOURNEY

From the outset it was clear that we would need to find a way of articulating the concept of 'discipleship'. Many church people find it an unhelpful word and others consider it jargon. How, too, could we find a language that children could own as much as adults, but which would not exclude adults by implying discipleship is only for children. We needed something attractive and intriguing to give everyone a way of talking about this lifelong journey together with Jesus.

We decided to extend the discipleship metaphor of a journey into that of a sea voyage around an archipelago of islands. Building on the ten 'Holy Habits' from Andrew Roberts' approach to discipleship that many churches are finding helpful, we created a map. Each island on the map has a name based on either a holy habit (the island of 'Worship', of 'Prayer'), or something identifiable as a Messy Church value or concern (the Island of 'Meals', of 'Family', of 'Caring for the earth'). Some islands have no names; people may discover a new and important island on their voyage and we wanted to leave space for that.

We devised the [Islands script and questions](#) to use with the map. The participating churches were invited to use it with their families or their teams, depending on the focus of their approach, and listen to the insights from the ensuing conversation.

For some leaders and teams, the islands approach was unhelpful and not used at all, which was not a problem; the project did not depend on this tool being used. Others found it a helpful shared language for discussion and strategy. One team visibly came to life when it was presented to them; here was something understandable and engaging! Another team used it to enable their Messy Church families to take the lead on what they would 'explore' next time. Our conclusion was that this is a 'Marmite' tool – loved or hated.



If you're a Messy Church leader...

- Could you try out the Islands activity (or a version appropriate to your context – a city plan, a F1 racecourse, a mountain...) at your Messy Church for a set period to see if a shared language helps your families or team discover more of what it means to be a disciple of Christ?
- Or if you want to find out which aspect of discipleship your families want to explore, could you use the Islands activity as a one-off to discover where their interests lie?

If you're a church minister or PCC / leadership team...

- Could you use the Islands activity to help open up discussion about discipleship in a PCC, vestry or elders' meeting?
- Might this approach be helpful as a discussion starter at an all age service or in a home group?

If you have strategic regional responsibility...

- Could you ensure that intergenerational discipleship is part of your strategy to make and grow disciples?
- Does your diocese/district/region have the 'key to the treasure chest' for any of the islands? Is that a treasure you could share with others?

SHARING THE TREASURE

Is this the first research of its kind, trialling and evaluating different deeper discipleship approaches among churches across a wide range of traditions and contexts and making the findings freely available?

What has been discovered about Messy Church could stay within Messy Church, but that's hardly a sound biblical principle, when this project has come out of so much sharing and generosity. Our hope is that these findings can be shared widely and freely, that the initiatives they inspire will also be shared with that same extravagance, and that this virtuous cycle of generosity will enrich all churches, not just Messy ones.

In 2021, we stand at the shoreline of a new seascape, as the effects of the pandemic ebb away. It's a chance to explore new ways of being church. Our hope is that this research will be part of bringing life in all its fullness to Jesus' Church in her old and new forms. Paul writes: 'Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share. In this way they will lay up treasure for themselves as a firm foundation for the coming age, so that they may take hold of the life that is truly life' (1 Timothy 6:18-19).

RESOURCES:

For an overview of each of the six approaches to deepening discipleship, and additional resources to support you on your journeys of discovery visit:

www.messychurch.org.uk/deepening-discipleship

For information on wider resources to support growing Faith at Home from the Church of England visit:

www.churchofengland.org/our-faith/faith-home

DISTURB US, LORD, TO DARE MORE BOLDLY,
TO VENTURE ON WIDER SEAS
WHERE STORMS WILL SHOW YOUR MASTERY;
WHERE LOSING SIGHT OF LAND,
WE SHALL FIND THE STARS.

Attributed to Sir Francis Drake, 1577

OUR RESEARCH APPROACH

Putting these six approaches into action in a measurable way required a type of research that would encourage change and action as well as generating knowledge.

We undertook Participatory Action Research which involves three guiding principles:

- Research that is collaborative - researchers support leaders as local experts
- Research that is action-orientated - rather than generating abstract knowledge, learning is relevant and practical
- Research that is cyclical - learning is an ongoing process

The cycle of learning in this research takes us on from Playfully Serious and is designed to continue beyond the end of the formal research period, as Messy Churches continue to explore and build on these approaches.

The 'outsider' research team, led by Church Army's Research Unit with the national Messy Church team, designed the overall shape of the research process and created the tools to help document the local knowledge. Local Messy Church leadership teams were asked to complete regular reflection forms, noting observations from their gatherings and meetings along the way.

One strength of this type of research is the way [local Messy Church leaders themselves become the researchers](#). They know their contexts in ways that someone coming in from outside doesn't. They are the experts. Much like a captain knows their vessel and crew, they are well-placed to lead the exploration and record where it takes them.

In January 2020, leaders met together in their diocesan groups for the first of two sense-making sessions. They explored what they had been observing and reflected on the question '[Where is God at work in their Messy Church?](#)' before identifying any necessary changes to their approach going forward.

In November 2020, local leaders from 19 of the 24 Messy Churches who started this voyage came back together to explore their observations, notice where God has been at work and discuss the feedback they had gathered from their participants.



WHO TOOK PART IN THE PROJECT?

24 Messy Churches set sail at the start of this project:

- 17 Anglican Messy Churches, 6 Messy Churches with informal ecumenical partners and 1 Methodist Messy Church
- 7 Messy Churches from rural settings and 17 from urban settings
- 6 Messy Churches from the most deprived areas of the country and 4 from the least deprived areas (based on the Office of National Statistics' Indices of Multiple Deprivation)

HOW OFTEN DID THEIR MESSY CHURCH GATHER?

- 1 met weekly
- 20 met monthly (or nearly monthly)
- 1 met between 8-9 times per year
- 2 met between 4-6 times per year

WHO CAME TO THEIR MESSY CHURCH?

Leaders were asked to estimate attendance in the year before this research began.

The smallest Messy Church that took part had:

- Adults: 12
- 12-15-year-olds: 0
- 0-11-year-olds: 12

The largest that took part had:

- Adults: 52
- 12-15-year-olds: 32
- 0-11-year-olds: 43

The average size of the Messy Churches who took part had:

- Adults: 25
- 12-15-year-olds: 1
- 0-11-year-olds: 20

The **smallest** core leadership team was 2, the **biggest** 9, with a median **average** of 5.

The **smallest** wider leadership team (including helpers) was 5, the **biggest** 24, with a median **average** of 9.

This data is taken from the quantitative baseline survey completed by participating Messy Churches at the beginning of the research period. For more information, see Methodology: Facilitating Change Through Research - [Recently completed research \(churcharmy.org.uk\)](https://www.churcharmy.org.uk/research)

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