

Messy mission: Acts 1-12

On your marks:

The story in the first twelve chapters of the book of Acts, telling how the Christian church took its first exciting steps forward, is full of drama, surprise, opposition and blessing. This church was on fire for mission, as well as trying to work out how best to care for its growing membership. There is much to learn for churches today, both from the setbacks and mistakes they made and from their willingness to take risks for the sake of God's kingdom.

This idea would work well for a group session or within an all-age service. It includes a group drama.

Get set:

The Bible focus for this outline is Acts 1-12.

You will need: the four letters **A C T S** in large format, and a [drama script](#).

Go!

Background

The stories in the first twelve chapters of Acts are about a church in mission mode. What can we learn from them for our continuing mission today?

The church in Acts prayed and read psalms together - especially when the going got tough (see chapter 4, where they quoted from Psalms 118, 146 and 2). And they certainly met opposition. It wasn't all plain sailing after Pentecost - even though there was a favourable wind!

Introduce the four letters: **A C T S**.

Say, 'I wonder what these letters might stand for in the story of Acts - people, events, adjectives, nouns, places?' Invite groups to come up with some ACTS-linked words for each letter.

Here are some ideas:

- **A**ctivities of Christians with **T**he Spirit
- **A**dventures, **C**hallenges, **T**hreats, **S**urprises
- **A**postles, **C**hurches, **T**eachers, **S**ea voyages/**S**hipwrecks

- **Ananias, Cornelius, Timothy, Stephen**
- **Antioch, Corinth, Thessalonica, Syracuse/Sidon**
- **Amazing Conversions, Terrific Stories**

In summary: **ACTS** is **A**bout **C**hristianity **T**hat **S**preads.

Brief insights into Acts 1-12

Luke was a great storyteller and this book is the sequel to his popular bestseller 'Have I Got Good News for You' - in other words, his Gospel.

He writes a careful, well-researched story but even he must have been surprised at how it turned out.

Surely it should have been about the further adventures of the apostles we met in Volume 1, but, of the 'big three', we hear about Peter for a while, John is mentioned only in passing and we hear of James only once - when he dies.

So whatever happened to Andrew, Thomas, Matthew, Simon, Nathanael, Jude and the others? Instead we meet new heroes - Philip, Stephen, Barnabas and, of course, Saul (who is renamed Paul).

And Luke leaves so many loose ends! There could be more stories that need another book... or two... or three - for example, The further adventures of Philip; The further adventures of Barnabas; The further adventures of the Ethiopian treasurer.

The truth is that Acts gives us a story of ordinary people getting caught up in something best described as 'messy mission'. It wasn't just the esteemed first twelve disciples who were involved, but many more - blown by the wind of the Spirit into places and circumstances and activities that made the kingdom of God grow like a wild mustard tree. It didn't happen according to a neat human action plan but as an overflow of God's urgent love for the world - for everybody!

This is Messy Mission - lay-led, loose-ended, unstoppable, unpredictable and bubbling up in all sorts of marginal places, not always understood or liked by those at the supposed 'centre', whether they were temple officials or others with power to lose.

The church grows not by human strategy but by visions, divisions, arguments and opposition. If we want to be a Spirit-filled and Spirit-led church, we can expect no less - a bumpy but amazing ride.

Group or congregational activity

With a name like 'Acts', we can't help but turn this story into an active drama. Let's explore Acts up to chapter 12, with ACT-ions. [Present the [Acts drama](#).]

Final thoughts

We've looked at just twelve chapters, covering about twelve years, so we've only seen selected highlights with selected heroes; it's a selected history. Take heart! The first church didn't have miracles every day or opposition all the time. There were lots of empty spaces; lots of people who don't get a mention; lots of quiet, ordinary moments. The Christian life is sometimes routine, everyday, and unspectacular.

Very often, an opportunity is opened up by something that seems like a setback. For example:

- Peter and John are arrested twice, but each time they grow bolder and the church shakes with new power. They discover the truth of Jesus' promise that the Spirit would give them the words to speak (Luke 21:15).
- The church scatters after Stephen's death but the gospel reaches Samaria and even Ethiopia.
- Opposition grows stronger but it just means that the story reaches Israel's coastal strip with Peter, and in the city of Antioch in Syria a new church centre is born.

Within this account of messy mission is a story of people changing their minds about Jesus. They come to realise that:

- Jesus is God.
- Jesus is the resurrection. The Sadducees - the main opposition in this part of Acts - really struggled with this idea, and many people do today.
- Jesus is Messiah - another problem for the Sadducees, whose power was tied up with Rome. The Romans called Caesar the 'son of god' and 'prince of peace'.
- Jesus is the new temple. No wonder Stephen's speech went down so badly with the temple leaders!

It is also a story about the church having to change its mind about God. People of all nations were there at Pentecost, but it took a long while for these truths to sink in:

- The hated mixed-race Samaritans could become Christians.
- Pagan foreigners, like Cornelius, could become Christians.
- Bitter enemies and agents of the Sanhedrin, like Saul, could become Christians.

Acts is all about new thinking about mission. It reminds us that mission is what the church was created for, and it gives us a pattern for mission - but only by giving us no set pattern! We need to be prepared to be messy-edged, and have our neat plans messed up.

The thing that did most to change people's minds was the community lifestyle of the Christians - they really cared for each other and for others. That's what made people think again and change their minds about Jesus, and that's still true today. There were hospitality, caring, celebration, conversation, prayer, story and learning together. These are the marks of Messy Mission - creating a Christ-centred community that points people to Jesus.

Acts is the church in mission mode - a church that takes risks and makes mistakes, but a church that keeps on going and keeps on growing. Let us pray that we will be an ACTS mission church. Maybe the letters of Acts could stand for:

Accepting all; **C**reating space; **T**elling the story of Jesus; **S**erving food and each other

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