



MAKING DISCIPLES IN MESSY CHURCH

Growing faith in an all-age community

Paul Moore

Foreword by Graham Cray



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Introduction

Whether you are just curious about Messy Church, wondering whether to start one up or pondering how to keep one going and growing, I hope this book will help you to reflect on some of the theological and practical issues involved in sharing the good news of Jesus with families and strengthening the Christian faith of children and adults in Messy Church.

We felt we were stepping out in faith into the unknown when we launched the very first Messy Church in April 2004 at St Wilfrid's, Cowplain, a suburban Church of England parish near Portsmouth where I have been the vicar for the last twelve years.

Several of our leaders had been reviewing our work with children and families. We felt frustrated that we were attracting only a handful of children and teenagers on a Sunday morning. Speaking with parents in the school playground, they told us that Sunday morning was a bad time for them to come to anything, let alone a service where children might be expected to sit still and be quiet. At the same time, we realised that quite a number of our church members enjoyed using their creative and artistic gifts. Perhaps God had given us these gifts to use in developing a fresh way of engaging with families in our community.

The seed of an idea sprouted, and the group came up with the simple concept of Messy Church: an hour of Bible-based craft activities (the messier the better) for children and adults to do together, exploring an aspect of the Christian faith, followed

by a 15-minute celebration in church, with praise, interactive Bible storytelling, reflection and prayer, and, finally, a sit-down meal in the hall.¹

A team of crafty people was recruited from our church members. A catering corps was drafted. Paper, paint, glue, scissors, icing sugar and chocolate sprinkles were stockpiled. Invitations went out, largely by word of mouth from our church families to their friends at school.

On the day of the first Messy Church, 90 people turned up, much to our amazement, immediately making this our church's largest congregation. At least half of the families had never been to a service at our church before, except perhaps a school Christmas assembly or a wedding.

The weeks between the monthly sessions seemed to flash by, and families kept coming back and enjoying themselves. In between frantically planning the next session and thinking up new crafts, we began to reflect a bit more on this new thing that God was doing and how best to join in with God and help people move forward in their journey of faith.

If we have any wisdom to offer to the many churches who saw our Messy Church on the first Fresh Expressions DVD, and said, 'We can do that! Let's go for it!' it is still very much wisdom gained on the hoof.² We have learnt vast amounts from other people's stories of their Messy Churches, and we have been challenged by the many questions raised—not least this one: 'Is Messy Church making disciples?'



Is Messy Church making disciples?



Fast-forward to 3.30pm on a September afternoon in 2011. Children with mums, dads and grandparents in tow are arriving at St Wilfrid's for the first Messy Church after the summer holiday. Young and old, newcomers and regulars gather, chat and chill in the church hall over tea, juice and biscuits before we give a welcome and introduce the theme of today's craft activities.

A couple with a young daughter were married in church here last Saturday, and the mother, along with her toddler and the grandmother, has come to Messy Church for the first time today. They have also brought along a cousin and her children. I wonder what impact their experience of Christian community in Messy Church will have on this extended family? Will they be back again next month?

Then in walks a single mum with her daughter. It must be six months since they last came to Messy Church, although we have often waved and shouted 'Hi!' to them across the street on their way to school. 'We've been meaning to come, but just haven't made it,' mum explains as they sign in at the welcome desk.

This particular family has been coming along to Messy Church since we started. They have grown up with us; they belong. I remember when they missed the sixth birthday celebration, they insisted at the next Messy Church that we take down the birthday banner so that they could add their signatures in marker pen alongside all the others. Once a month, Messy Church is their church. They have never attended a Sunday service here, and nobody tries to persuade them that they should do—it might scare them off!

I wonder what impact Messy Church has had on this family? An emotional link with church, a bond, has slowly developed. They are pleased and even proud to have been associated with us for so long, but do they know Jesus better? Have they become Christians? Are they growing as disciples?

I'm sure similar stories could be told from Messy Churches all over the UK and around the world where this fresh way of doing church with families is increasingly being adopted and adapted. Nearly 1,500 Messy Churches have registered on the website (www.messychurch.org.uk/), and many more have not registered yet. Important questions are increasingly being asked by us and by church leaders as to whether people are coming to faith through Messy Church, whether it is making disciples, whether it can justify its claim to be church, or whether it would be better to regard it as a form of pre-evangelism, a bridge to something deeper, perhaps an Alpha course and then graduation to Sunday church attendance.

For those of us putting lots of prayer and hard graft into Messy Church or other fresh expressions of church, these are vitally important questions that we want to take seriously. We need to find reliable answers, so that we can be more effective in what we are doing. At the same time, we need to recognise that these challenging questions are equally urgent and pertinent for traditional or inherited forms of church.

Behind these questions lie certain assumptions that need examining: assumptions about how people come to faith in Christ and what we understand by discipleship. We need to look more closely at what is actually happening in the lives of the adults and children who are coming to Messy

Church. What wisdom can we find in the scriptures, Christian tradition and human experience that can help us in our post-Christendom, postmodern context to present the good news of Jesus and encourage people to respond to God's grace? What examples of good practice can we draw upon from Messy Churches around the world and other forms of church? What needs changing or improving, and what new ideas might merit some experimentation? Hopefully any clues to the answers to these questions will prove helpful not only to Messy Church, but to the whole 'mixed economy' of the Church.

What is happening when people come to Messy Church?

Messy Church aims to be church for non-churched families (those with little or no experience of church), rather than for church families (who turn up regularly), families on the fringe (who turn up occasionally) or de-churched families (who used to come to church services, but stopped, perhaps because they lost the habit when they moved house, fell out with the vicar or had to work on Sundays).

Messy Church began, as we have seen, as a result of our frustration with the lack of young families coming to our Sunday morning 'family service' despite the informal style and well-run junior church groups for children and teenagers. If families would not come to us, perhaps we should be taking steps towards them. Conversations with some of the families in our local community about the kind of church activity they

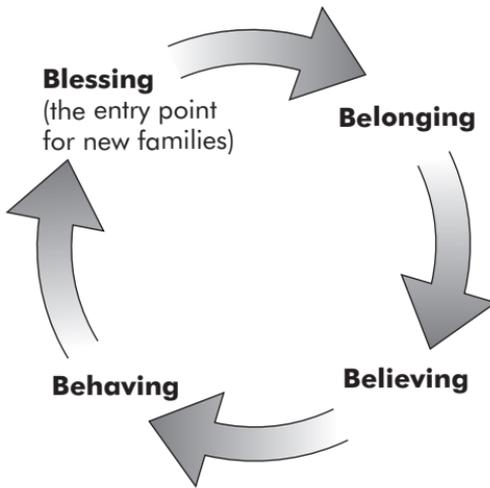
would like to attend led to a consensus that a monthly, fun, craft-based event for families, not on a Sunday, would fit the bill.

Our Messy Church meets once a month on a Thursday afternoon after school. Many Messy Churches meet midweek like ours, while others find Sunday afternoon is a good time for families, and some choose Saturday. Before deciding what to do and when, it is essential to do your research properly and listen to those you are hoping to reach.

Typical attendance at our Messy Church in Cowplain is around 80 adults and children, although the numbers fluctuate, depending on whether there is something on at one of the local schools, such as a disco or a school play. This total figure of 80 includes the team running the crafts and cooking the meal. The team is made up of about 20 adults and teenagers, who are mostly, but not exclusively, drawn from our committed church families. Of the remaining 60 adults and children, just over half do not attend church at any other time. The rest are families who come to St Wilfrid's on Sunday or belong to other local churches, but see Messy Church as providing something extra for their family.

So a significant proportion of those who regularly attend our Messy Church are adults and children with little or no church background. Our prayer is that through their monthly experience of Christian community in Messy Church, they will receive God's **blessing**, and, through this experience of **belonging**, will come to **believe** in and follow Christ, learning to **behave** as Christian disciples who bring God's blessing to others.

It is vital that we give families a warm welcome at the ‘blessing’ entry point into this cycle (shown in the diagram below) and do all we can to help them develop a sense of belonging to Messy Church over the first few months. As they progress through the stages of this cycle, they will need different input, support and encouragement at each stage to keep them moving on towards believing, behaving and blessing others. Assuming they complete the cycle, those who have become followers of Jesus should in theory continue on a spiral of ever-deeper fellowship, faith and love of God and neighbour—without falling off or getting stuck.



Judging by the stories from Messy Churches in the UK and elsewhere, encouraging numbers of non-churched people are reaching the ‘believing’ stage, coming to faith in Jesus Christ and going on to grow as disciples. This has resulted in a number of Messy baptisms in various places, and what was probably the first Messy confirmation service in Derby.

The long and winding road

Jo Gill of Marshalswick Baptist Free Church in St Albans, writing on the Messy Church blog, tells the story of a man who was brought to church by his girlfriend's grandma to help out on one of the craft tables:

*He had no background of church and was quite nonplussed by Christianity when he first came... He was not interested in church but was willing to get involved... He came along and then wanted to help again. We then started the Journeys course and he decided to come along. He was a bit into space life and belief in other things out there... not sure what, but couldn't grasp Christianity. He is now wanting baptism.*³

There are several points of interest in this man's story. First, he had no church background. He was indifferent to church and puzzled by Christian beliefs, but he still had his own thoughts and beliefs about the spiritual dimension of life. Research suggests this would be fairly typical of non-churched adults in the UK.⁴ It would equate to about -7 on the Engel Scale, a tool developed by James Engel in the 1970s to show the spectrum of spiritual knowledge and awareness from 'no real awareness of God' at -7 through to growth in Christ at +4 (see the diagram on page 20).⁵

Spiritual awareness



No knowledge

The Engel Scale

The Engel Scale is only a rough guide, but it can be useful to help us assess where people are spiritually, so that we can

have some idea of the next step they need to take towards faith in Christ and offer appropriate help. It also reminds us that coming to faith and becoming a disciple is one long process that takes a lifetime.

Evangelism is the first stage in making disciples. We turn afresh to Christ each day, and someone who became a Christian years ago is on the same journey towards God as those who are just starting out. We need to remember when recording our church attendance statistics that Jesus commands us to make obedient disciples, not ‘average weekly attenders’.

If we have not yet seen vast crowds of people becoming Christians and advancing in discipleship through Messy Church, this does not necessarily mean God is not working in people’s lives. There are plenty of encouraging stories to tell of people attending Messy Church who have moved several points up the Engel Scale. There’s the dad who always used to wait outside in the car to collect his child, but now comes in for a coffee and a chat. Or there’s the atheist husband of a Messy Church leader who now helps clear up after the craft session and sets the tables for the meal. Both these men have probably moved from -7 to -5 on the scale over a period of months, which is significant progress. With prayer and gentle encouragement they may take further steps towards faith.

What John Finney observed some years ago while he was Church of England Officer for the Decade of Evangelism remains true: for most people the journey towards a committed and owned faith in Christ usually takes between one and five years, sometimes longer.⁶ If your Messy Church has been going for only a few months or even a couple of years, do not lose

heart if you have not seen revival break out. At this relatively early stage it is unrealistic and unfair to expect you to be able to produce figures for the number of people who have become Christians as evidence of the effectiveness of this work. Of course God can, and often does, wonderfully surprise us with encouraging exceptions to the norm when certain people seem to be on a fast-track to faith, but even in these cases God has often been patiently at work in their lives over many years.

This has important implications, therefore, for how a Messy Church is evaluated by its leadership team and by church councils, ministers and denominations, especially when there are decisions to be made about staffing and funding. Just as the plum tree my wife Lucy planted in our garden will need several years to establish itself and grow before we can expect it to produce a crop of more than one or two tiny plums, so a new Messy Church will require investment in leaders and resources for far longer than just a couple of years if it is to have a proper chance of producing Christian disciples.

Returning to the story of the man who came along to help out, came to faith and was baptised, it is obvious, but worth noting, that he would probably never have come had someone not brought him along and given him a job to do. Personal invitation and being brought along by someone you know and trust are vital for introducing people into an alien environment, whether it is church or the local bowls club. Publicity does sometimes bring people in off the street, but it is no substitute for networking and building relationships with people.

As in this man's story, encouraging newcomers to take on tasks and responsibilities is an important strategy to adopt, because

they then feel needed. This reinforces their sense of belonging and the feeling that they are contributing to Messy Church rather than having something done to them or for them.

Those attending this particular Messy Church were offered the chance to supplement the monthly meeting by joining the Journeys course, which was then followed by Christianity Explored. Journeys is a DVD-based course developed in New Zealand for those who are not yet ready for Alpha. It is good to see more resources of this type appearing, specifically designed for people at the lower end of the Engel Scale who have some interest in the spiritual dimension of life but little or no knowledge of Christianity. This is the case for many of the people we are welcoming to Messy Church. We need good introductory resources like these, not only so that courses can be offered alongside Messy Church, but also so that we can learn from them and develop ideas for exploring faith more effectively in Messy Church sessions.

Most of these courses, not surprisingly, bear a strong family resemblance to the proven formula of Alpha and are aimed at adults. I have not yet come across any similar materials specifically designed for use by adults and children together in an all-age context like Messy Church or in the family home, and I think we need this kind of material.⁷

The Gray Matrix

So far we have used the Engel Scale to think about where people coming to Messy Church are on a journey towards

Christian faith and discipleship. The Gray Matrix, developed by Frank Gray of the Far East Broadcasting Company (FEBC), is an extremely helpful modification of the Engel Scale.⁸ Gray adds a second, horizontal, axis, which is a spectrum of feeling and attitude towards Christian faith and church, showing how closed or open a person is to the gospel. This enables us to take into account what an individual's feelings are about God and the gospel as well as their level of knowledge about the Christian faith. Are they antagonistic or enthusiastic? Gray also suggests we keep in mind a third invisible dimension, an axis going through the centre, which represents the work of the Holy Spirit in a person's life (see the diagram opposite).

Plotting where our Messy Church families might be on this diagram can be revealing. If, for ease of reference, we number the quadrants clockwise from 1 to 4, then families in our Messy Church who already have links with church and a positive, open attitude to Christian beliefs and the church would be placed somewhere in quadrant 1 (say +3, +3).

Those with little or no church background, such as the man dragged along to Messy Church to help with the crafts, would be found in quadrant 3 (say -3, -7). They may have little knowledge of what Christians really believe and all manner of negative feelings about God and the church.

I would describe quadrant 3 as the **Friendship Quadrant**. This is because, if we want to help people in this quadrant come closer to God, we will need to channel our energies and plan our programmes in such a way as to build relationships of trust with these non-churched people. By giving them a positive experience of Christian community through our welcome,

Was it the welcome, the conversations, making friends, the fun and laughter of getting messy, the feeling of being useful, the celebratory worship and prayer, the shared meal, or a Spirit-empowered combination of all of these factors? Certainly, over the months, he was gradually shifting in his attitude and feelings, moving towards quadrant 2, towards a more open, positive interest in Christian faith (say +1, -7).

Quadrant 2 can be described as the **Good News Quadrant**, because people here are more open and receptive to the gospel than those in quadrant 3. They will require a different approach and emphasis. They need to be given opportunities and permission to ask all sorts of questions, maybe joining a course like Journeys. If they continue to be open and interested, then it will be important for them to be made aware of the cost of following Jesus, to have the chance to talk all this through with a Christian friend, and, at the right moment, to be helped to take their first steps of faith before marking in some clear way (by baptism, where appropriate) their arrival at a committed personal faith.

So far the man's faith journey has taken him from the Friendship Quadrant (3) to the point in the Good News Quadrant (2) where he is open and interested enough to join the Journeys course (+2, -5), followed by Christianity Explored. He hears and grasps the good news of Jesus, believes it for himself (+2, -1) and as an enthusiastic new Christian enters quadrant 1 when he gets baptised (+3, +2).

Quadrant 1 could be called the **Growing in Christ Quadrant**, because this is where the lifelong process of learning to live as a disciple should begin and continue.

Reflecting on this quadrant, it seems to me that the church's record on making disciples is at best patchy.⁹ I was brought up in a rural Anglican church where preparation for confirmation as a young teenager was effectively the end of one's adult Christian formation. Many of my contemporaries clearly felt this to be so, because after their confirmation they never appeared in church again. If you did keep coming, you were expected to keep your faith going on your own, sustained by Sunday worship, receiving Holy Communion, digesting sermons and sometimes taking part in a Lent study course, if you were really keen.

Of course, much has changed for the better since then. We have recognised the importance for faith development and discipleship of encouraging people to meet regularly in smaller fellowship groups or house groups (as in the early church and the Methodist movement), and we have seen the popularity and effectiveness of food-and-faith discussion-based courses like Alpha. There is still a danger, though, that if we fail to provide fledgling Christians with the right learning environment, opportunities and support for their growth in Christ and daily living for God, then, sadly, like many churchgoers, they may never advance much beyond (+3, +1). They may never feel much connection between their faith and daily life. Faith remains largely theoretical and private, and gives them little hope or motivation. Eventually, as they face the normal hardships of life, they may become disillusioned and disappointed with their experience of church and its lack of impact on the rest of the week. Imperceptibly they can drift into quadrant 4, where faith becomes lukewarm and church becomes a duty and a chore. This quadrant could

be called the **Apathetic Quadrant**, and it is not far from the door marked 'exit'.

The Gray Matrix is a useful tool, reminding us that evangelism is about winning hearts as well as minds. Certainly Messy Church has proved itself to be good at winning hearts, building friendships and altering attitudes to church.

Just coming into a church building for the first time can be daunting for non-churched families. Messy Church is right, therefore, to put a lot of effort into the warm welcome, generous hospitality, fun, friendship and gentle, exploratory, no-strings-attached spirituality for families who tend to come with a postmodern suspicion of the church as a source of authority. Because their children enjoy themselves, parents are keen to bring them every month, though they would be reluctant to attend a traditional church service.

Talking to families at our Messy Church, attitudes typical of the Friendship Quadrant (3) in the Gray Matrix are often revealed as parents express their ambivalent attitude to church and religion. Adults can seem quite defensive at first, presumably because in our culture an interest in religion is felt to be childish or embarrassing to admit to in conversation. 'We don't do God,' as Alastair Campbell, former Press Secretary to Tony Blair, once said. Blair himself has admitted he was reticent about his faith while Prime Minister, because he might have come across as 'a nutter'. Even people of faith are anxious not to appear strange. One mum at our Messy Church commented, 'You don't have to be religious to come; we're not.' But experience of Messy Church's creative and exploratory approach over the months does seem to lead to

a more open and positive attitude. 'You're not preached at, but the godly theme is there, it's underlying,' said another mum. They appreciate the feeling of community, and express their preference for this form of church to others they have experienced: 'This shakes off the image of what people think church is like,' said one of our dads. 'My kids would rather come here than to a birthday party.'¹⁰

Stories from other Messy Churches suggest that the eagerness of the children is often the reason why families keep coming. The children's engagement is clearly often deeper than having fun, because it is often children who begin conversations about the Bible theme over the meal or insist on acting the story out again at home. Jane Leadbetter, who leads the L19 Messy Church in Liverpool, describes how, during the first course of the meal, children and adults at the tables are encouraged to chat about four or five 'wondering questions' related to the day's theme:

After doing this for a few months I have noticed how the children want to read the questions and lead the answering. Some children now ask for a pencil and try to write down their answers. This last month a child asked me for more questions. I really feel that the children are leading this forward and I am excited about how it may develop.

In March we had Messy Saints as our Messy Church fell on St Patrick's Day. In the celebration time in church we acted out the story of St Patrick, big style, with props and loud noises. A young boy of around seven years of age volunteered to be St Patrick. I sat down at his table to engage with the 'I wonder' questions and enjoy a meal. He was with his mother, brother, an aunt and a cousin. We do

not see them in Sunday church. As he tried to read out the questions the young boy started to take us right through the St Patrick story. Neither of the adults interrupted him, and at the end he said, 'and that is why St Patrick was a Christian and he wants everyone to trust God too'. I gulped and realised that by taking part in the drama he had grasped not only the story but also the language used by the storyteller, and he declared it without a doubt... The family come to every Messy Church now, and the mother has asked to be in the Messy team on a craft table.¹¹

What stories like this reveal is that children at Messy Church may often be leading their parents and other family members on the faith journey, which is an interesting dynamic that merits further research and reflection.

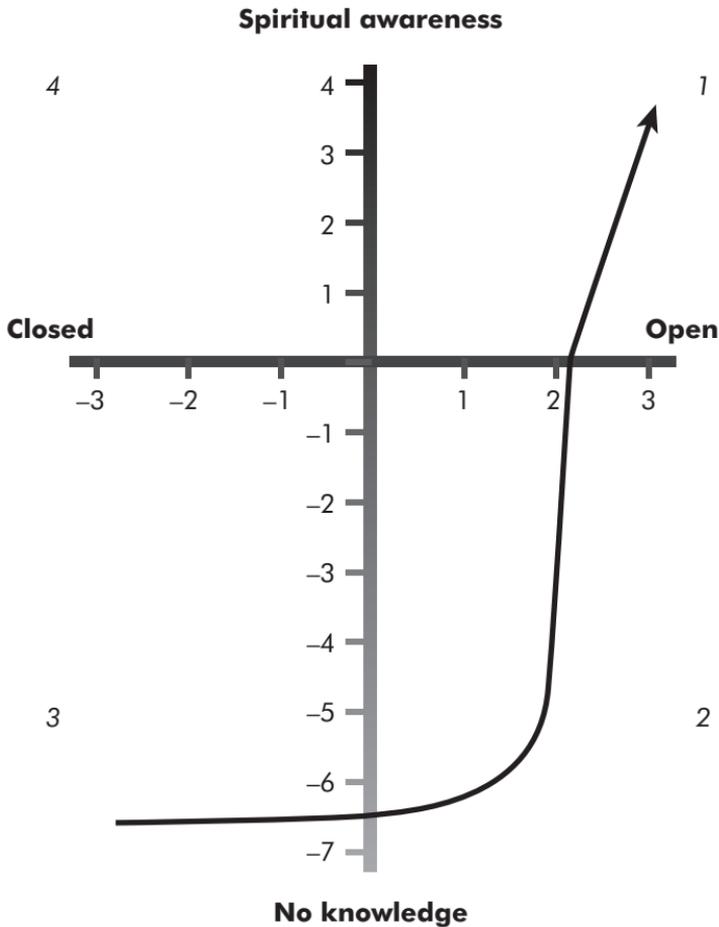
Messy Church aims to reach whole families with the love of God. Children are not dropped off at the door. They must be accompanied by an adult, usually mum, often granny or a childminder, less often dad or both parents together. Research by Judy Paulsen at her Messy Church just outside Toronto in Canada confirms that Messy Church is good at helping parents to become more open and talk about church and faith with their children. Interestingly, for a quarter of their families the accompanying adult is the grandmother and the parents have no church contact.¹² I can think of several similar families in our Messy Church. One grandmother brings her granddaughters every month and attends Sunday church herself every week, while mum and dad are agnostic or atheist and do not come. We hope and pray that the girls' positive experience of Messy Church has an impact on the parents, gradually changing their perception and attitudes, and that they will eventually

come into the Friendship Quadrant because of their children's enthusiastic witness.

Attitudes of children and adults towards church and faith are being changed at Messy Church through their experience of Christian community. Families are gradually journeying towards the Good News Quadrant (+1, -5). They are becoming more open to the gospel, and will no doubt be watching very carefully to see what difference faith makes in the lives of the Christians on the Messy Church team. If they become friends with Christians, they will be able to see what faith and discipleship are. To help them progress further, each new family probably needs to forge a strong friendship with at least one Christian adult and ideally with a Christian family with children of a similar age. Of course this raises big issues around the time and commitment required from members of the team, and how we need to inspire, train and encourage our church families to befriend non-churched families.

Using the Gray Matrix to see the many different stages people attending Messy Church are at in their faith journey can help the leaders to see more clearly what they need to provide to enable adults and children to continue moving forward, and also what kinds of input and support they need to plan and make provision for in the future. If it is the case that in many families the children are more open to the gospel than their parents, and mum, dad and grandma are all at different places on the Gray Matrix, how can Messy Church effectively assist the whole family? We find ourselves needing to do pre-evangelism, evangelism and discipleship work all at the same time. No wonder this is challenging and messy!

At least the Gray Matrix gives us a map to help us see the different points people are at on their exodus-like journey of faith, where they should be heading next, and how we can accompany and encourage them in moving forward. The probable route is shown in the following diagram.



The Messy journey into discipleship

Frank Gray makes the point that if a church intends to make disciples of people who are on this journey, then it needs to examine its programme and ensure that it is providing appropriate activities to move people onwards at all stages of the route. To do all of this in one monthly Messy Church meeting is a huge challenge. Getting it anywhere near right will require a willingness to experiment and make changes. If, after time, we see evidence that people at different points are progressing onwards and upwards, then our approach is clearly working. At all times we need to engage with both knowledge and attitude, head and heart, and cooperate with the way the wind of God's Spirit is blowing in the all-important but unseen third dimension.

First we need to facilitate more openness through positive experiences of Christian community and building relationships and trust. There are subsequent stages in which we gradually introduce people to Jesus and the gospel, help them to take their first steps of faith and provide the right learning environment for lifelong growth in discipleship.

How can Messy Church (or any church) do all these things equally well? Churches are likely to be better at one or more aspects and adequate or failing in others. It seems to me that Messy Church is more effective than many forms of church in helping people to progress towards greater openness and begin climbing the upward curve. The emphasis on welcome, community, friendship and unpressured exploration seems to be an important factor in this. Significant numbers of people are arriving at the Growing in Christ Quadrant (1) as a result, and there is now an urgent need to address their onward journey as disciples.

What does Messy discipleship look like? How do we make disciples in today's messy context? We want to draw upon the wisdom of scripture and our Christian heritage, while also recognising that we are entering unfamiliar territory. In the words of Bishop Paul Butler, 'Messy Church needs to reinvent discipleship.'¹³

For further thought and discussion:

- ❖ What does your church programme provide to help people who are at different stages of the journey into faith and discipleship?
- ❖ Where are the gaps or weaker aspects, and what could be done to improve things?

Enjoyed this sampler?



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Messy Church has been widely and enthusiastically adopted as a proven and effective way of introducing families to an experience of Christian community and the good news of Jesus. Sceptics ask, 'Are people becoming Christians through Messy Church?' The evidence is clear that they are. But the next challenging question is, 'Can Messy Church also nurture their faith and make these converts into disciples?'

This book analyses how families are journeying to faith through Messy Church and how we can support them. It explores what we mean by discipleship and methods for making disciples from scripture and church tradition. The aim is to encourage ministers and lay leaders to see how their Messy Church can be an intentional disciple-making community.

Paul Moore is Vicar of St Wilfrid's Church, Cowplain, an Anglican church near Portsmouth, and a member of the team that launched the first Messy Church in 2004.

Messy Church is growing from a single fresh expression of church into a whole movement of mission. Making Disciples in Messy Church brings wisdom culled from scripture and from experience to all involved in making disciples. Its lessons are vital for all those engaged in Messy Church and for all those involved in making disciples.

Steven Croft, Bishop of Sheffield

A joy to read and a contemporary epistle from a Paul of our time, this book is a timely and essential read for all who are serious about building upon the good connections to the local community made through Messy Church and seeking how to make disciples in our contemporary age.

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