

Messy and rural: Messy Church in rural communities



Rural isolation: building bridges

'No man is an island entire of itself' wrote John Donne. For many people, of course, a lack of transport facilities, mobility or money, ill-health, bereavement or a sense of being different can leave people feeling as cut off from the rest of humanity as Shetlanders in midwinter storms or the residents of Sark in the fog.

Some people choose move to the country for the isolation and for them the glorious peace and solitude can be a liberation. But for those who have not chosen their situation, the solitude of rural life can be more like solitary confinement.

I remember an older, widowed woman in church, grabbing me by the arm during the clear-up after a particularly frenetic Messy Church session. 'My dear,' she said, pulling me – with surprising strength – down to her diminutive height:

'I want you to know: I *love* coming to Messy Church. People are very kind and visit me at home, but quite often I'm on my own and being here with all this life and all these young people is just what I need.'

Her words stuck with me because I found them so surprising. Messy Church is noisy and, while very structured, often presents as chaotic which some older people find hard to deal with. But, evidently, the contrast was what she needed.

Another older man described his objections to his local church building a separate room to contain the children during services:

'At home, I'm pretty much silent all week,' he said. 'I like the children making some noise on a Sunday, otherwise I might as well worship on my own.'

Hampshire County Council's report *Social Isolation and Loneliness in Hampshire 2016-2019*¹ identifies a wide range of groups at risk of isolation and loneliness: children and young people, new mothers, carers of all ages, people above 65, those who are homeless or on a low income, LGBTI groups and, perhaps surprisingly, working-age men.

The local church is far more than a building; it's primarily a connected community of people who have a bigger reason for coming together than simply a shared interest. As each church seeks to reflect who Jesus is to the local community, it fosters relationships, looking not only upwards to God but outwards to welcome new people and inwards to care for those already in the circle. It is a vital bridge between one human being and another, a family for the least, the last and the lost, where islands can be linked to the mainland.

¹ documents.hants.gov.uk/corprhantsweb/2017-07-04SocialIsolationandLonelinessinHampshireHF000014384094.pdf

Strategies like Messy Church can make it easier for people who may be undergoing a temporary or longer-lasting sense of isolation to make that first, vital, life-giving connection with their local church. However, what makes the most difference isn't the form of church we use, but rather the Christ-like hospitality in each person's welcome.

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Healthy Togetherness in Messy Church

Readers will no doubt be aware of the famous maxim 'it takes the whole village to raise the child'. While we instinctively associate this principle with educating the next generation, the health and well-being of each one of us – of whatever age – needs the love and care of a 'family' of significant others if we are to flourish and become the best we can be.

The all-age value of Messy Church is founded on this very principle. Insisting that children should not come without an adult doesn't simply address safeguarding issues, important as they are. It is rather in the very DNA of Messy Church that old and young explore faith and become Christian together.

Recent research among young people in the Church of England who have held onto their faith into their early 20s reveals that one of the key factors in this has been the relationships they have with older members of their churches². Similar research from the States bears out the truth that not only does it take the whole church to raise a child but the whole church has a vital role to play in nurturing faith in each one of us³. Children need to see that faith lasts and is still relevant and lively right on into ripe old age; in the same way those of us who are older need the inspiration and encouragement of seeing God at work in our children, young people and grandchildren.

The writer of Psalm 68 tells us that 'God has set the lonely in families'. Isolation and loneliness are pressing problems today, particularly in some rural communities and so a Messy Church family of honorary parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles and siblings is not only fertile ground for nurturing faith but also just the sort of life-giving community that is needed by those who are, for a variety of reasons, estranged or far from blood relations.

Messy Church is not simply about reaching new people with the Gospel but also about reimagining how we do church as a Christ-centred, all-age community that welcomes the last, the lost, the least...and the lonely.

Martyn Payne

Messy Vintage

A missional offshoot of Messy Church, Messy Vintage has been developed for people in the second half of life. If some volunteers are 50-plus and those attending are in their 80s, 90s and even 100s that's four or five decades of what you might call 'all age' worship!

² churchofengland.org/media/3775547/rooted-in-the-church-summary-report-nov-2016.pdf

³ fulleryouthinstitute.org/stickyfaith/research

The idea began in Philadelphie, a village outside St Helier, Jersey, and more pilots are now taking place in several parts of the UK including at a care home in Holybourne, Hampshire. Just like the more familiar Messy Church, Messy Vintage finishes with a meal, usually a slap-up tea or, if taking place in a care home, with grace before residents depart for lunch in their dining room.

Key to Messy Vintage...

- It enables older people know they are part of something bigger
- It's about being a blessing to, and being blessed by, others
- Themes each month may be repeated across all the regular Messy Churches and Messy Vintage services in the same area
- Worship often releases the voice of older people; this is church for the voiceless
- Wherever it takes place it is about a church creating sacred space where people are
- The food should be as special and beautiful as the people involved are special and beautiful

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