

Life and faith in rural Britain...

COUNTRYWAY



Box Pew or Ball Pit?

Imagine that you are a vicar walking into an ancient medieval church in rural Buckinghamshire. You step inside, turn right and are faced with rows of high box pews.

What are your first thoughts? 'This church should be a museum; they could sell tickets to raise funds!' 'How can you preach to people sitting backwards?'

'That pew would make a great ball pit.'

I expect many rural churches are like ours: beautiful and precious but not very flexible. We have many long-standing villagers who love a traditional service but being in the London commuter belt we also have many young families with two working parents. Weekends together are precious; they want to spend quality time with their children and reconnect with their local community, but in a more interactive way than sitting in a pew.

Our solution was to start up a monthly Messy Church in our village hall with at least twelve crafts, games and activities each month, along with a hot meal. We have been running for over a year now and have an average attendance of over sixty people of all ages who are really starting to feel like one big family. Some of our regulars are even starting to step-up and offer to help.

Satisfyingly hugged

Last November we held a social, a bonfire. One of our Messy dads brought his barbecue while another took charge of the bonfire. All I needed to do was add some sparklers, hot chocolate and marshmallows. I don't know if people saw the smoke or smelled the hot chocolate, but they turned up in droves, including many new faces. Lots of people, who don't like craft or religion, were happy to come to a social, but then got to experience the Messy Church Hug; we have a motto that we want everyone to leave feeling as if they have been 'satisfyingly hugged'. Our numbers at Messy have since increased.

Courageously creative

In December we held Messy Church in those box pews I mentioned earlier, and our courageously creative vicar turned one into a ball pit with four thousand balls, added a roof to another to make a stargazing cave and turned a third into a comfy stable for teenagers to hang out in. The gathering concluded with the lighting of the village Christmas tree and consequently lots of people flocked in at the last minute to take a look at what was going on in this church which normally holds Book of Common Prayer communions and Matins. We saw at least one of those onlookers at our next Messy Church.

Messy Church is not designed to be a 'way-in' to traditional church, but even so, at Christmas every service in our little village church was packed and even a Messy sceptic put some of this down to the influence of Messy. It was lovely to see all parts of our community represented in those services, from young to old, from long-term residents to new families, all chatting together. It has taken a year of running Messy, but we are really starting to see the benefits.

Sharon Sampson

Benefice of Long Crendon with Chearsley and Nether Winchendon

This article first appeared in Country Way 84: Heaven in Ordinary, June 2020. Go to arthurrankcentre.org.uk/country-way for more information about how to subscribe.