

11 Rural Church Practitioners and Messy Church

Research was conducted in 2010 by the Arthur Rank Centre as part of the Rural Life and Faith project. This surveyed the views of rural practitioners of various sorts - lay people, ministers, training providers and regional church leaders – across at least five denominations. The online aspect of the survey covered the whole of England, along with a number of respondents from Wales and Scotland. In addition, case studies were conducted in the West Midlands and North East regions of England, involving detailed interviews with 66 rural practitioners and 6 lay focus groups. Amongst other information elicited from all respondents, they were asked about resources or training that they had found helpful for the mission of rural churches.

General Results of the Research:

As indicated elsewhere, the headline results from this research reveal something of the rural interest in Messy Church:

- 12 rural Messy Churches were identified that had started up in the past year in just the West Midlands or North East alone
- At least two of these newly-founded Messy Churches were ecumenical ventures.
- At least as many other groups or churches in the same regions indicated that they had been using a Messy Church approach, often by adapting existing Messy Church resources
- The single most popular non-rural resource recognised in a nationwide survey of rural practitioners – clergy, lay people and training providers – was *Messy Church*.

In more detail:

- 23 individual respondents who had personal involvement with Messy Church in some form found it to be a useful resource.
- 11 of these were ministers, 8 were lay people and 4 were training providers.
- The majority of these positive responses came from Anglican respondents; however 5 were Methodist, 1 was from the URC, 1 was with the Church in Wales, and two gave no denominational affiliation.
- Three of the six lay focus groups (two Anglican, one Methodist) contained people who were in some way involved in a Messy Church, and in two of the other groups were people who knew the *Messy Church* book(s).
- Four further respondents knew of Messy Church but had reservations about it for a variety of reasons (see below).
- Finally, 16 more respondents (most of them Anglicans) indicated that they had heard of Messy Church but ventured no opinion or provided no further information.

N.B. The high numbers of Anglicans amongst these respondents indicates three things about the nature of rural churches, the Rural Life and Faith research, or Messy Church itself:

- (1) In England, where the bulk of the research was conducted, the majority of rural churches are in fact Anglican.
- (2) Partially as a result of this first fact, and partially as a result of self-selection among the participants in the online survey, the majority of the research respondents were Anglican.
- (3) A rough assessment of the rural Messy Churches in the Messy Church network (discussed elsewhere) suggests that the majority of these are based in Anglican churches. However by no means all (rural) Messy Churches are registered in this network, and not all those in rural churches who find Messy Church useful create a formal Messy Church.

Positive Feedback from Respondents:

During the Rural Life and Faith research, all participants were guaranteed anonymity. As a result, the comments quoted here cannot be identified with either specific individuals or recognisable individual local churches.

A Methodist training provider in the North East talked of Messy Church as being, *“not specifically rural, but a very helpful approach for rural churches ... inspirational, image-full and practical.”*

One Anglican vicar in the North East talked of just having started a Messy Church in her benefice. She said this had been prompted by needing to do something on the demise of a previous family service (in one parish) and youth group (in another). She saw a ‘tea-time church’ in a nearby benefice and wanted to start something similar. She recruited a member of one of her own congregations who was a retired headmistress who had the right skills and knowledge. The diocesan Rural Officer also got involved in finding a number of local families who were prepared to ‘give it a go’ ... and it had just developed from there.

One Methodist lay focus group in the North East talked of recently starting an ecumenical Messy Church ‘in the dale’ where there had been previously little effective work with children or families ... or much ecumenical co-operation. Their own members were few in number and ageing, but loyal, and were thrilled that they were now seeing perhaps 120 coming each week, including about 70 children. Significant numbers of these were not previously attending any of the churches involved in running the Messy Church.

A Methodist lay person from the West Midlands revealed:

“As a result of attending a Mission-Shaped Ministry course, some of us have helped start up both a Café Church and a Messy Church based on our own congregation ... After a rocky start over several months (it has to compete with horse-riding and summer work on farms etc.) the Messy Church has settled down, and we have contact regularly with 40-45 people who have no part in our regular congregation or church activities.”

Lay members of an Anglican West Midlands focus group agreed:

“Messy Church has been very helpful for us to continue working with children and families associated with the village school, following up from Open the Book. We are even using the school premises for the Messy Church, and it has got lots of church people involved; but we have only just started and we are having a few teething problems. Our rector is very supportive, and lets us get on with this ourselves.”

An Anglican vicar from the West Midlands indicated:

“The Fresh Expressions DVD introduced us to Messy Church. The ministry team all thought it was a good idea, although probably too much for any single church to do on its own. So we have just started a Messy Church combining two neighbouring parishes. It is bringing the churches together in a way that has never happened before!”

An Anglican deanery training officer from the West Midlands suggested:

“We plan to develop a deanery Messy Church ‘mobile team’, as much of the deanery is rural and the churches quite small and dispersed. They can help in setting up individual Messy Churches, and give ongoing assistance and training, and accompany people in their local church setting. We have four Messy Churches in the deanery so far, and expect to have more.”

A Methodist training provider from the West Midlands indicated:

"I am a magpie ... and I encourage all my people to take anything that is useful. Messy Church is a good example since it is full of small, practical ideas that don't have to be part of an overall Messy Church approach. I do encourage 'proper' Messy Churches to start, as well!"

More Critical Feedback:

Some of the less positive responses were based less on personal experience than on doubts about the appropriateness of Messy Church for rural contexts, or on issues to with church and community size.

One Anglican priest from the West Midlands revealed:

"We looked into starting a Messy Church in the benefice. It seems like a good idea, but too much for any of our parishes individually. I think we could probably do something jointly, but there has been no agreement on this."

Another Anglican minister from the West Midlands was very forthright:

"Messy Church is very demanding of personnel. Virtually all our lay people are involved, which leaves little opportunity for much else."

This was echoed by an Anglican training provider from Yorkshire & Humber:

"For all its benefits, Messy Church is simply too focused on one thing and I have seen it drain resources – and especially people – away from other equally valuable missional elements of the churches' life."

An Anglican regional leader from the West Midlands simply stated:

"Too much is generally expected from Messy Church. Some see it as 'the miracle solution' to community-based mission. It isn't."