

10 Messy Stories from the Countryside

(Mainly from Messy Church Regional Coordinators)

Revitalising a tired congregation

Janet Tredrea from Cornwall:

Some rural churches are teetering on the brink of death. I can think of one which, because over the past few years no-one could agree a feasible, practical or suitable way forward due to budget or building constraints and lack of clergy time and vision, has needed an injection of new life in which all the members can take part. The idea of Messy Church was put to the remaining members (numbers depleted recently as several left the congregation because of disillusionment and lack of vision) as a last ditch attempt to promote the gospel to outsiders. It was stressed that everyone had to take ownership – the elderly could pray, give donations of food or money and all the able bodied were to join the 'hands-on team'. It worked; the Spirit was fanned back into more prominent life, team spirit is vibrant, fellowship is had very month in studying the topic of the next session and that dying church now has an active 'wing' to which the outside community is sitting up and taking notice and enthusiastically supporting. The disillusioned are back on the team and the dying church has been 'resurrected'!

Working together across a wide area

Janet Tredrea from Cornwall:

I was also thinking about the idea down here of having a team made up from several village churches who prepare a Messy Church and then travel with it to perhaps 3 villages to present it, have a rest of a few weeks and then begin the cycle again.

(This is an idea that is also being considered at deanery level in the rural parts of several Anglican dioceses.)

Working together across churches

Anne Offler – Stanhope Methodist Church, Co Durham:

This meets as 'Family Fun Day' – and began Christmas 08, chugging along till autumn 09, then 'resting' for almost a year due to leader problems. There was a desire by the people in the church to begin again and, after planning, this happened autumn 2010. We meet in the chapel hall and have people from the village and other villages in the Dales. The church membership in the local rural churches is quite low – and mostly little old ladies! Stanhope is a bit of a focal point so Messy Church here serves the villages around it. Sunday afternoon is a very popular time as we were told early on – nothing much happens in the Dales on Sunday. A core group of helpers and families are meeting together monthly, with the helpers gelling together as a team and some of the parents now also beginning to 'own' Messy Church. The families do not attend church at any other time so we feel the real value of Messy Church in sharing the message of God's love.

Growing a team

Anne Offler – Howden Methodist Church, Co Durham:

This village is about 2 miles from Crook which is the biggest local town. The church started Messy Church at Easter 2009 and has been on quite a journey. At first the numbers of families fluctuated each session between 25 and 3 people – sessions were changed from Saturdays to Sundays to holidays to try to find a solution. After a review and many prayers at Easter 2010 the team decided to continue for 6 months longer as they all felt a commitment to Messy Church. During that time several 'core' families began to attend and make Messy Church a regular event in their calendar. This Messy Church now feels 'established' with regularly 20-ish children plus adults most of whom do not attend church apart from Messy Church. It meets the first Tuesday morning of each school holiday.

One of the amazing things I have noticed with this group is the growth in the members of the helpers' team. From a group of anxious individuals who came together hardly knowing one another the team have themselves grown in their fellowship and support of one another. They have been aware of God enabling them and carrying them through the rough bits. The team is amazing – they are more confident and share God's love readily with one another in a way they would not have believed they could at the beginning.

This Messy Church is supported by other members of the Circuit congregations. The team leader has a list of people she can call upon if regular members are not available.

Ecumenical Team

Anne Offler – Willington Messy Church:

This Messy Church is unique for me in that it is totally ecumenical. An ecumenical group continued to meet for prayer following on from Hope 08 and had a vision for Messy Church. The 'authorisation' for it has come from the PCC in the Anglican Church, the Church Council of the Methodist Church and the same level of meeting in the Roman Catholic Church. It meets in the Methodist Church hall with total agreement, as it is the only one of the churches with a hall. It has a core group of attendees drawn from all 3 denominations. The ecumenical team work together in advertising Messy Church in their own denominations and in jointly leading Messy Church.

Challenges and opportunities

Rev Sandra Williams, Shropshire:

Upton Magna is a small village, population of village and district is about 300; 5 miles outside Shrewsbury and 10 miles from Telford. St Lucia's Church of England Primary School is in the village and has currently 104 children on roll taken from quite a wide catchment – numerous surrounding villages and even Shrewsbury. There are no shops, the pub has been closed for the last 6 months, there is a small business park and the village is surrounded by farms and the Sundorne Estate.

Challenges exist for a rural parish with a very loyal, but mainly elderly congregation and expensive building to maintain. Most people in Upton Magna are used to travelling out of the village for everything they need, therefore it is harder to get people involved in the actual community. There seem to be fewer volunteers which then leads to problems because to maintain something like Messy Church you need local lay people to be involved.

Opportunities exist in the introduction of Messy Church: encouraging interest from families through school; a more hands on approach to worship. This will hopefully excite interest from families to want to hear more about the good news of Jesus Christ, and form a community that wants to be involved.