

3 Case Study of a Rural Messy Church

From:

Ali Dore
Churchyardigans Messy Church
St Michael's Church
Caerwys
North Wales

Background

Caerwys is a small rural town population approx 1200. It really is like a large village but has a charter so can be called a town. We are in a rural, mainly farming, area. The town is mainly English speaking, but is very close to mostly Welsh-speaking areas to the south and west. Estate agents call it a commuter town as it is close to Chester (30 mins), Liverpool (ca. 45 mins) and Manchester (60 mins). There is a strong community spirit.

St Michael's is a *very very* traditional Church in Wales. There are 44 on the electoral role. The majority of the worshipers are of retirement age or above. There is a family service once a month. The three families that regularly attend are the two families that run Messy Church and the Vicar's family. The remaining Sunday services are Holy Eucharist with 25-30 worshipping each week. The current House for Duty Vicar has been here for ca. 18 months but will be leaving at the end of May.

There is also a Welsh Capel in the town which is attended by the Welsh-speakers. There are 2 maybe 3 joint services a year between church and capel.

Growth in the established church has come mainly from people moving into the town (mostly retired English) who already have a Christian background.

The Messy Church has been running for 2 years. It runs once a month on a Sunday from 4.00pm to 5.30p.m. It is held in the church as there is no church hall.

Currently we do not charge or ask for donations as we received a grant from the St Asaph Diocese to start up. We do ask people to bring a plate of food to share.

It has attracted ca. 18 different families over the last 2 years. We get an average of about 30 people at each session. This includes the helpers. We have a core of 6 to 7 families (plus the Messy Church leaders' children and the vicar's children). As it is a small town we know most of the people who come to Messy Church already, or it is likely that someone else will know them or is related to them!

The Questionnaire

We could only gather information at our January meeting, as our December Messy Church was a Carol Celebration. We didn't feel it was quite right to give out questionnaires as it would have spoilt the atmosphere. And the timing for gathering information was not the best, seeing as it was over Christmas and other things took priority!

We used a questionnaire at our January meeting. We also tried a graffiti wall, however we did not receive any comments, possible because the January meeting was very action packed and there

wasn't enough time. (This was probably our fault. Perhaps we should have made more of it but people were just too interested in making the walls of Jericho out of sponge cake!)

We chose the Bob Jackson questionnaire (suggested on the Messy Church website) because it was mainly tick box which we thought people would respond too. We handed out 6 questionnaires, all of which were completed and the questions and results were as follows:-

Question	No. of Positive Responses
<i>How long have you been coming to Messy Church?</i>	
Under a year	2
One to two years	5
<i>What about other forms of church?</i>	
Messy church is the only church I usually go to	4
I also attend Sunday church at least once a month	3
I was not a churchgoer when I started coming to Messy Church	1
I was already a churchgoer when I attended Messy Church	1
I used to attend church a long time ago	2
<i>What attracts you to Messy Church?</i>	
Friendship and community	6
Getting in touch with God	6
Hands on activities	5
Helping in my spiritual journey	1
Something to do as a family together	4
A chance to find answers to life's questions	2
Food and fun	2
It introduces Christianity to my family	5
The timing is right for me	1

Other comments were:

"Good to meet people"

"My children look forward to Messy Church"

"I enjoy going to Churchyardigans (Messay Church) with my family, even getting my fiancé to come"

Two answered the question *Can you suggest how Messy Church can improve or develop?* with:

"Just right!"

"I like it just the way it is"

One person answered the questions *How can Messy Church help you more?* and *What are your main issues or questions at the moment?* with:

"Still questioning my faith, but keep trying through Churchyardigans. Thank you"

Beyond Messy Church

***What have you tried to do to encourage discipleship beyond the actual Messy Church session?
How successful has it been?***

Initially we were very reticent about doing significant amounts for fear of putting people off coming. We were just glad people turned up. We started in an interregnum so didn't have a vicar on hand so to speak. It felt like an enormous responsibility. Throughout the development of our Messy Church we have had strong opposition from some within the "main church" which affected our confidence to approach areas such as discipleship.

As time has gone on, we have put the Christian message in a stronger way. We have developed and changed the language we use as we have become more confident. We think some families have backed off from this. Also some families have issues with commitment. So, although they have stopped coming now, to actually have them attend for a year was actually a great achievement. We have just started giving out take away leaflets with the theme of the day, what the activities mean, things to do as a family and so on.

I am not sure how to measure success in this context. Clearly this approach attracts some families and means others do not feel comfortable and probably do not come back. None have started coming regularly to the Sunday morning service, which is very traditional ... and we have deliberately not promoted this.

The responses to the questionnaire suggest that families come to "Get in touch with God" as much as they do for the "Friendship and community" elements of the programme.

Given we are a small community, and therefore statistically difficult to analyse with any meaning, I would suggest that success is as much as about being able to provide a meaningful Christian facility to these families rather than numerical measurement.

We find discipleship a difficult issue to tackle, as does the rest of our church here. For example it has been very difficult to start a Bible Study group. The response has been hostile: "We don't do that kind of thing in Caerwys"

The conclusion to this, in our view, is that success within this type of community should be measured in the number of Messy Churches that are running and not necessarily in the number of people attending any one Messy Church. Therefore the fact that we still continue to meet after 2 years is evidence that discipleship has been advanced within the community. This may not be true of urban churches, which have significantly greater catchment areas and would always expect greater numbers and discipleship may be evidenced in different ways.

What do you feel is the right way forward for your Messy Church in terms of growing disciples?

The next steps for us is probably to work out further opportunities for people to get involved in Church life outside the traditional Sunday morning service. Particularly for top juniors and teenagers (i.e. 9 years +), but also other hard to reach group such as men and adults of working age, generally. We see being a Messy Church as a great benefit as we can all learn so much from each other.