

## Methodology

We conducted five separate focus groups with 29 leaders involved with 25 currently-running Messy Churches (though many had been involved to some degree in others that had stopped, moved or changed) across five dioceses in England, in a range of urban, rural, deprived and affluent relative contexts.

These sessions were run as semi-structured informal interviews, and all participants' contributions have been completely anonymised before then being transcribed, categorised into qualitative codes, and analysed further to capture any insights emergent from recurring elements salient across multiple nodes.

## Questions

1. Within the Messy Church family, how can leaders talk about 'discipleship' in a way that attenders will understand?
2. How do you tell (or what signs do you look for) when someone is taking a first/early step in discipleship?
3. How do you tell (or what signs do you look for) when someone is growing into deeper discipleship?
4. Have you come across any creative ideas/solutions to the challenge of growing deeper discipleship in Messy Church? Which of these have you tried and what happened?
5. Where (or in what ways) are Messy Churches vulnerable and what can be done to lessen this vulnerability?
6. What do you think the future holds for your Messy Church...in 5/10 years' time?
7. What sort of relationship does your Messy Church have with its parish? (i.e. resourcing, mutual learning, prayer, other ways you've noticed, etc).
8. What do you think a mature Messy Church looks like?
9. What happened to parents whose children moved on from/outgrew your Messy Church?
10. What would you wish to feed back to the Church Commissioners about Messy Church?

## Rationale of structure for coding

Most of the categories our focus group data was coded with are broadly identical to pre-existing elements of frameworks used widely in our fxC research and terminology around ecclesiology, missiology and intentionality, in addition to which we incorporated the values of Messy Church (MES).

These included: 3 metrics of organisational sustainability (self-financing, self-governing and self-reproducing); 4 creedal marks of church maturity (one, holy, catholic and apostolic); 5 Messy values (Christ-centredness, all-age, hospitality, creativity and celebration). Each of these twelve codes was further split into two: a ‘G’ aspect (which seeks to capture by description the intentionalities/capacities/activities of the MES leadership/community), as well as an ‘R’ aspect (which, conversely, captures the effectuality/impacts/developments from/for the MES leadership/community).

In performance management jargon, the Gs may be characterised as ‘leading indicators’ and the Rs as ‘lagging’, or as I have preferred to refer to them here, ‘giving’ and ‘receiving’. Divergences across the G-R dynamics of each of the twelve thematic nodes appear to reveal some curious imbalanced trends - though there are the plausible options of superficiality, or that my own coding biases have skewed the shape of this breakdown.

Alongside the dozen G-R pairs, there are also four single categories that are more analytical than thematic. Firstly, speakers’ acknowledgement of human subjectivity, finiteness and limits (either their own, others’, or in general); secondly, speakers’ faithful expressions of trust in God’s plan/wisdom/work; thirdly, discussion of any friction in vision/behavior of sending/inherited churches towards Messy Church; and finally a catch-all category for any other external or out-of-control factors affecting anything else discussed. Together these four categories helped mop up a richer depth from the data, where much of the participants’ experiences could not be qualified as telling us anything particular or certain about the core research themes because of the sheer unknowableness of lots of it from a frontline view.

**Breakdown of contents from node hierarchy**

The final breakdown of how many selected sections of text from all five focus groups found their way into these categories is as follows (*note, quite a few coded sections of text recur in multiple nodes; I’ve tried to be sparsely efficient with such overlaps while respectful of counter-intuitive interconnections. Sections of coded text also vary greatly in length*):

G-3-finance	37	R-3-finance	27	<b>TOTAL 3-self:</b> 279 (64, 65, 150)
G-3-govern	40	R-3-govern	25	
G-3-reproduce	71	R-3-reproduce	79	
G-4-one	65	R-4-one	95	<b>TOTAL 4 marks:</b> 489 (160, 112, 118, 99)
G-4-holy	59	R-4-holy	53	
G-4-catholic	58	R-4-catholic	60	
G-4-apostolic	57	R-4-apostolic	42	<b>TOTAL 5 values:</b> 384 (91, 133, 68, 48, 43)
G-5-Christ	45	R-5-Christ	46	
G-5-all-age	58	R-5-all-age	75	
G-5-hospitality	41	R-5-hospitality	27	
G-5-creativity	22	R-5-creativity	26	
G-5-celebration	23	R-5-celebration	20	
Acknowledgement of human subjectivity/limits				139
Acknowledgement of God’s objectivity/power				64
Inter-congregational misunderstanding/friction				76
Exogenous influences				81

### Full node-by-node summaries of all salient elements

Similar coded entries from each node are grouped by thematic and analytic factors to draw out salient elements unpackable from each node in the overall hierarchy. Each paragraph with nested bullets represents one such sub-nodal category for grouping these insights.

Notes on this process highlight both congruent patterns within nodes, as well as various incongruities which may have links to sections of summaries of other nodes, to draw out deeper insights relevant for our original research questions and considerations.

All sections of text in quote marks are verbatim contributions from focus group participants.

These are the headings:

- Exogenous influences
- Human finiteness/subjectivity
- God's power and plan
- Inter-congregational friction
- Self-financing
- Self-governing
- Self-reproducing
- One
- Holy
- Catholic
- Apostolic
- Christ-centred
- All-age
- Hospitality
- Celebration
- Creativity

### Exogenous influences

Difficulties communicating openly with attenders

- “for some people I think there is still a real reluctance to talk about where they are”
- Linguistic & cultural barriers between church folk & non-churched attenders

Difficulties finding an ideal congruence between MES plans & rhythms of attenders' lives. Exacerbated by tendency of attendance to be quite transient. Considerable variabilities across MESs' contexts.

- This trickiness extends into any self-reproductive ministry activity (most of which discussed as prone to similar vulnerabilities listed below)
  - Obvious tension with awareness that effective discipleship/maturity in Messy Church would be strengthened by being more than merely monthly, but it's already a “hard juggling act” and increasing regularity “would feel harder because it's resource-heavy” - yet several do feel “time pressure's always there” & suggest this hinders mission
    - One says of monthly meetings, “that tends to be the limit of what it's allocated”, and another adds that doing less-than-monthly felt “too spaced out”
- Makes regularity of Messy Church engagements thoroughly unpredictable. Bigger ones might quite reasonably be considered a “logistical nightmare” and potentially “you're in

danger of [attenders] feeling uncomfortable with the amount of people” while team can feel “like ‘whoa it’s all a bit busy there’, and actually... I wouldn’t be able to tell you who was there, because there’s so many people that you just don’t get to see and engage with everybody”

- Which may make planning ahead extremely difficult (one’s immediate response when asked what MES may look like in 5 years was “Gosh! Hahaha!” followed by whole group undertaking a long silence)
- One did take measures on capping as were frequently brushing 100 which was unsafe number for team/building size - but after cap [80] numbers fluctuated in downward spirals & now they find themselves “worrying whether [we’re] gonna get anybody”

General decline of churchgoing in traditional congregations (which constitute bulk pools of volunteers & source of funding/legitimacy) poses risk to Messy sustainability

- Because it is very resource-intensive!
- One cites potential encouragement/renewal factor that “there’s an awful lot of young teens twenties that are now professing sort of to be Christians and active people”
  - Adds “perhaps the church isn’t dead after all” - but is this kind of demographic growth likely to benefit MES directly/consistently?

Tensions in time/energy capacities between MES and everything else in life

- Affects leaders/helpers
  - Especially leaders also involved in ‘proper church’ as Sundays can bring up “so many pulls in other directions” and institutional structures may restrict people at certain time in certain ways; and when some of team can’t make it piles pressure on rest of them. There’s one in which they “just didn’t have the manpower” & respondent stresses real burnout risk; “you’re stretching people too far if you’re not careful” - small teams cite this as persistent vulnerability, particularly among volunteers (one exclaims, “I think the church is absolutely rubbish at looking after volunteers... there’s this expectation that we do it because we’re Christians... or feel we have a calling... all of which is true... [but] people drop out and move on, because volunteers will only continue for as long as their needs are being met... church volunteers are not the same as [others] but they still have needs... and the church just - doesn’t regard those at all”)
    - Exacerbated if MES helper-team not committed as they’re liable to become transient in similar ways to attenders - so “if something better came up... Messy Church didn’t happen”
  - Illness cited by several as a particularly unpredictable but serious vulnerability, given the tendency of MES helper-teams (as cited by some participants) to be on the elderly side (one, asked what MES will look like in 5 years’ time, doesn’t really want to look that far forward as “we’ve had two team members recently die”, while another had “two that have had strokes”, and another while still running it consistently is concerned that without new blood eventually “it’s just going to be physically impossible”)
  - Retirement of leaders (esp. from church) may hinder MES if they move on, potentially seriously if key MES leader. Several cite retired persons as playing key roles. Another cites having “a lot more time now for doing things like this” having recently been made redundant but still facing high (unreasonably?) expectations from other staff in church or affiliated institutions; “same as when I retired. As far as they were concerned, I could do everything. And you can’t!”
    - Vulnerability linked to developmental capacities for indigenous leaders
    - Some point out difficulties in being to-whatever-extent reliant on vicars who are themselves increasingly over-stretched/under-supported
    - Several complain of lack of support for leaders/volunteers who try but “can’t do it without support”; some suggest investments are needed in training/etc to develop Messy leadership across all regions (“we need local support”)
- Affects attenders (adults/children)

- Work & parenting responsibilities: e.g. “one of the parents works longer hours and the other parent’s dashing home to get them from [whatever]” - variability of this noted, shifting as children get older
  - Intensive jobs may leave little room for consistent churching; “if both partners are working all week” then weekends may be “their only time all together”
  - Family can be uprooted! Several cite long-term attenders moving away as being an endurable but rough knock to Messy community, while this kind of mobility not perceived as uncommon across all relevant contributions
  - Complications of broken homes - alternating weekend visits?
- Full range of general background reasons cited for non-committal attender transience (“social things just sometimes happen [so] we find our numbers fluctuate”, or as others put it, “people’s lives are just so - busy -” “Frantic.” “and - yeah”):
  - Working, bowling, amateur dramatics in the village, nearby festivals, ballet performances, football tournaments, Guide/Scout outings, swimming lessons, cricket, any after-school clubs, the village fete, working late, Wimbledon, good weather, sunshine, bad weather, half-terms, basically any holiday on calendars or booked off, football, birthday parties, visiting parents/relatives, shopping...
    - Stuff like this might pop up in clash with MES & leaders might presume (sometimes rightly) that there “ain’t gonna be anybody”. One discusses how relaxed attenders are that some may come for a bit of MES then “troop off out” for mitigating whatever clash they face - another decries lack of commitment in modern culture as “the same vulnerability that strikes me as across church generally”
    - Stuff like this also underlies MES willingness to be adaptable to those who like coming (in terms of days, times, activities) to minimise impact of inconvenience upon attenders’ lives
  - Exposure to effective evangelical contact may be lessened by capacities of MES team being overloaded with Messy ‘Martha stuff’
  - Difficulty in ascertaining who’s potentially ‘drifting’ & who’s just an unreliable regular - leavers rarely announce their intentions, just becoming (if still local) “ones you occasionally see but coincidentally”
- Affects particular nevertheless high-effort events, e.g. when everyone has loads going on, so even though “it’s absolutely bonkers that we don’t” some may “always struggle in December to have a Messy Christmas because there is so much going on in December”

Location may hinder locals’ engagement (or awareness of church existing at all, let alone a Messy one; one describes a rural situation where building is “up a cul-de-sac at the end” so “there are people who’ve lived in the village for years and don’t know where the church is”, another inner-city MES has to contend with “the main A24 going through the middle of [the parish], we’ve got two schools but they’re in different boroughs” and “no high street [or] centre at all”)

- Alternative/superior locations may be unavailable/unaffordable/unpermitted or moving may simply be too much effort for team

Building may hinder attenders’ engagement for variety of reasons, sheer space for numbers attending being prime widely-shared concern, but also: Disabled accessibility? Kitchen? Toilets? Are churches intimidating to non-churched? Are non-churches stultifying/non-sacred to Christians? Safety-wise is there anything kids are likely to get stuck in or under or hurt on particularly easily [e.g pews]?

- One says, “interesting - church buildings seem to be one of the key things, that people liked coming into church buildings, and that was something that’d really helped, more than things like Alpha and stuff”

## Human finiteness/subjectivity

Perhaps least helpful (in our research terms) yet most insightful (in Messy methodological terms, maybe) quote from whole data: *“I don’t know. Because people don’t always know what they don’t know, do they. None of us know our own blind spots, because if we did we wouldn’t have them.”*

- One participant questions the whole CofE frameworks & criteria for counting Church attendance or defining fresh expressions; “cos I’m not sure if they’re qualified... I think it was optional or something if you do other services or fresh expressions” (Claire replies “they’ll count numbers for fresh expressions, but it all hangs on whether the person filling in the form counts the initiative as a fresh expression of church”). Another highlights capacity for bias inherent in the study as all participants were self-selecting as all agreeing to contribute by sharing their views on what it’s like leading Messy Churches (“obviously all of us here - erm, are very involved and really support the idea... so we would like to see much more being done really to support us, I think”)
  - Raises interesting field of potential tensions-questions between the centralised record-keeping & grassroots emergent ministry... or does it? Claire says *“I think the danger is we look for traditional or inherited patterns [when actually] Messy Church is quite refreshingly turning some of those things on their head”*
    - Many participants voice gratitude for this research taking place, as they simply wanted some answers to questions they’ve run into through MES
- Another’s pre-response highlight playfully-individual-subjective nature of any communication (for these focus groups as much as for trying to explain the gospel to unchurched kids) as sort of unavoidably ambiguous, yet risks worth taking for opportunity: “I don’t know whether this answers this question, but I think it does in some way.” Another’s reveals presumed shared soil of concepts/notions among MES leaders - “I can’t quite think how to say this but d’you know what I mean?”
- Speaking of blind spots... numerous participants clearly struggle to envision ‘maturity’ in MES context, both in terms of discipleship (e.g. “I don’t know what counts as deeper, really”) and as fxC generally, one group’s response to Q8 being a very long pause then the question “What do you mean by mature?”; seems to be conceptually related in discussion to the perceived lack of clarity as to what fxC are & what maturity means for them - does having an established pattern of activity make a church into an established church if it survives long enough? (“I’ve no idea”)
  - Linked in several parts to considerations of creatively developing MES models/forms; one “whether it should be something that’s majorly changing... or whether it’s actually working as it is, and we should just be doing the tweaks” & one “whether that is that Messy Church in itself grows more of that stuff [further ministry], or whether those things come from other avenues, I don’t know” and yet conversely avoiding the tendency of “Sunday morning [to] do the same as you’ve done for the last ten, twenty, fifty, hundred years”
- Analytically inferring that intersubjectivity of shared-concepts-in-language plays huge role in Messy discipleship as it plays a huge role in any effective communication - with examples abounding just in these focus groups; participants keenly aware of shades of nuance put out or perceived by each other & are sensitive to how they put out or perceive these in other contexts, where perceptions of what is put out may differ in effectual missional impact based on how it is communicated.
  - Widely cited that inclusiveness/accessibility important for missional efficacy here; no point using “a very churchy word” on people who “are not part of church... established church”
    - Conversely - all the Christian jargon in a scriptorium won’t much help attenders who expect to see clergy in any legitimate church, if clergy aren’t there...
  - This is a non-stop learning process which much of the Church is apparently a bit behind on. On being asked Q1, one group says nothing for thirteen seconds & first contribution is “Deathly silence...” & a nervous chuckle. In another group one asks, “is the focus on the word ‘can’? So not necessarily what’s happening now, but what we would like to happen. ‘How can’ as opposed to ‘how do’?” In an addition to a Q1, asked “if there’s a better word, how do I explain discipleship to your families?” & one replies “I don’t really know a better word”

- Pair of participants discuss (of their take-away activity sheets, which aim to facilitate further family discipleship at home); “I’ve not ever had any feedback... whether it’s used” & “We’re the same... haven’t even thought to ask for any feedback”
- When asked Q5, one group’s response was to ask clarification of ‘vulnerability’
- When asked Q8, several groups’ response was to question/contest notion of Messy Churches being mature; one says what MES “is provide a starting point”
- Multiple participants cite this particularly as being “quite a difficult thing to do” “because you don’t know what seeds you’re sowing in somebody” or “how someone might be growing” as even regulars attenders you might not “know that they are not reading their Bible, or praying every day”, and any resources used for encouraging faith at home “again you’ve got no idea whether people look at them, use them... you’ve got no way of knowing that” or “whether that just goes straight in the recycling”. Therefore hinders confidence in reproducing ministry - one says of intentionality toward developing relationships with parents outside of MES, “we don’t quite know how we’re gonna pitch it... I’m nervous because I’m almost worried I’m gonna scare people away”, and another had a “thing again we thought of doing, but we haven’t been brave enough to do it yet”. Difficulty may be more quantitative than qualitative; transient patterns of attendance & overstretched voluntary runners can’t effectively disciple those who “didn’t turn up at things” & struggle with situations like where “the majority of people at Messy Church are people who we don’t know very well, and they tend to come irregularly”
  - Several do discuss ways in which they’ve found springboards of communication into a shared pool of understandings/narratives “in a simplish way” for clear mixed-group impact - one admits this is “easier said than done. I concede that”. But use of openly shared personal stories widely cited as effective & “really important in discipleship”
    - One cites usefulness of term ‘to be the best that you can be’ as recognisable & Jesus-linked vehicle for simply explaining discipleship; “[dunno] if that’s theologically correct, but that’s what we say”
    - Widely cited that providing relationally-grounded opportunities at MES to be challenged in person-appropriate, up-building roles with responsibility, if given with discernment - can be key doorway for empowering explorers whose part in committed engagement with MES by no means guaranteed (e.g. teens)
    - Several also cite “providing time” as key in sustaining meaningful engagement; leaders “don’t always know” this as conversations happen between individuals & many may be busy elsewhere in the Messy Church.
      - Perhaps minor & unsurprising point (in a focus group comprised of lay-leaders) but multiple interviews feature consciously cooperative & efficient time-keeping for sake of maximising discussion of all questions (and occasional apologies for talking too much); one (perhaps displaying attentiveness & ‘constantly-on-duty mindset’ cited/suggested as vital for keeping Messy afloat, in many of these leaders’ experiences) replies to Claire’s time-keeping heads-up with a rushed/mumbled explanation keeping focus group informed of lock-up logistics for end of session
  - Sheer persistence here alone implies MES leaders’ dogged dependent faith that the Holy Spirit is at work. One describes whole thing befriending those who turn up as “like taking steps into the unknown, rather than having a plan”
    - Although way in which this work seems to unfold is highly unpredictable among most Messy Churches known by contributors!
- Not just attenders: difficulties here also maintaining communicated live vision of MES amongst Sunday congregations & clergy (even those helping). One says, “they support it, but... do you think they’re aware that, if you like, they don’t talk about it at all?” Another talks of difficulty in reliably assessing attitudes of churches to MES as clerical interactions often perceived as being somewhat disingenuous
  - Same queries about maturity/sustainability of discipleship in these churches apply too: “I’m not sure how much we know about where people are in their discipleship in other congregations, other than some people who are particularly verbal about it, but a lot of people aren’t... I’m not sure that it’s much different from that” & “I think that might be one of the vulnerabilities just - just of congregations generally though” & several

stories do imply that such vulnerabilities in sending/Sunday congregations involved in helping may impact stability of Messy congregational formation/development (source potential from higher up the hierarchy - needs governance/funding support for its own sustainable reproductivity, which falters at hurdles like “oh, we can’t help this week cos we’re all doing a big fundraising thing for a new church roof”)

- Subjectivity of attender/helper engagement with Messy Church also something that simply must be accepted & worked with by leaders; e.g. kid wants to do a particular craft but leader thinks another may be more appropriate - is it really worth challenging them in this environment of sacred/playful discovery/celebration? One participant discusses this & another then affirms “I think we can all agree with what you’ve just said.” Seems almost an intuitive sense in Messy methodology helping facilitate social-psychological intersubjectivity in a playful & spiritual dimension that even if naught else has clearly taught/honed these sensitivities of the MES leaders in ways that are honest, humble & hopeful. e.g. “I think for some, it’s - I don’t know whether you find it with yours but” - *very keen to nuance*
  - Spiritually nurturing people - difficult observing particular signs (e.g. “growing deeper might be an easier one to answer, it’s hard to recognise first steps”), but as implied here already leaders’ capacity for humbly attempting to empathise/understand others drives the capacity of a Messy Church for effective mission. So for attenders asking questions may be an early sign of the same work of the Spirit in stirring them to holy curiosity? One says, “it’s a very informal thing, really, the way you notice, isn’t it... you can’t really say, well that’s, you know, that’s the point... it’s a journey” & another suggests more about expectancy being more reliable than clarity; “you might be very hopeful that they become disciples but we don’t - you know, that’s not - in our heads” & goes on to reaffirm humbly modelling as pragmatic participatory intersubjective vehicle of evangelism/discipleship at all levels; when we see signs of this taking root in the hearts & lives of attenders, one suggests, i.e. “when you see families starting to support each other, and that, you think... actually our messy - you know, God’s message of and what we’re sharing” becomes self-fulfilling prophecy by God-glorifying childlike community as can see people “perhaps talking about taking steps of faith. Yeah” (several affirm they believe “you can tell when someone’s taken a first step”); interestingly another later cites social loyalty to MES events as perhaps one of these, “just - returning” [followed in transcript by a largely unintelligible surge of what sounded like excited agreement]; as (arguably particularly among de- & non-churched families) choosing to keep coming testifies acceptance of Messy Church as a coherent & valuable package in their family’s life.
    - Tellingly this pretty much describes basic model of attractational apostolic community at heart of pioneer ministry methodology & church planting ethos; some MES leaders express desire to be better equipped to think about their Messy Churches in these terms (some also describe how BRF’s resources have helped in these regards)
      - Possible over-dependence on organisational resources & not enough equipping lay-leaders for autonomous/collaborative grassroots ministry development? One participant is quite surprised that another have just ‘made up’ some scientific quiz activities for engaging older boys
    - Several broadly imply value of attentiveness to present ministry, as “time flies” - and nature of MES (subject to “sort of human constraints as we’ve talked about”) makes foresight extremely difficult. One group’s first responses to Q6 were “I have no idea.” “No, I don’t think any of us know really”
      - Of predictions that are ventured, a recurring one is MES overtaking/replacing established church congregations in certain contexts (esp. rurals) based on their rough growth/shrinkage trajectories; “but then that’s hard to gauge because people come and go... we’ve got very few families that have come for the whole seven years... people seem to come for a season”
      - Spiritual journeys too deep & delicate to undertake particularly hastily - many social/cultural gaps to be bridged before gospel can even be communicated in necessarily trustably-well-received way (one says “sometimes even when we think we’re sowing seeds... we’re clearing rocks” - but do both not happen?)



- Scale matters here: larger MES with smaller teams will struggle to develop breadth & depth of relationality (e.g. “ours is quite a big, busy Messy Church... gradually after six years I’m feeling like I do know names”)
  - Outdated containers for structured locality of Church? one questions whether by ‘parish’ another was referring to “the parish church [or] the people that live in the community, who are outside the church?” & here highlights an ambiguity perhaps close to heart of blended economy approach to CofE mission
    - Closing lines from one group powerfully appeal to common grace in the vision; Messy Church developing the blended economy in Anglican/fxC interdependence should be celebrated & upheld - “the other thing is to accept the messiness of it, like stop - don’t try and -” “Put it in a box.” “erm - don’t try and make it, yeah, try and tidy up. Just accept it as a move of God and run with it”
  - & space/time: if “it’s just frantic” & “you’re so busy running around you don’t quite get the same sense of it” [another adds “Heheh! No, you don’t.”] where “you sometimes have snippets of real conversation, but on the whole it tends to be on the surface”: important to ask how “we can slow it down a bit so we can have a bit of time with people where actually [they can] relax a bit and chat”
    - As without this, hampers evangelism & discipleship of team/attenders
    - Events like Big Questions or Alpha cited by several as great ways of just providing a space where conversations like this can happen. However even then entails sensitivity to relationality of mission - “how much do you follow up afterwards where you’re not seen to be hassling... almost trying to indoctrinate them and make them feel uncomfortable?”
    - Some highlight risk yet need to lean into engaging openly/apologetically with relational discernment - “it’s quite hard sometimes... because you think, ‘I really don’t want to... where is that going to fit in?’ And yet they’ve really thought it through... and who am I to say...”
- Attender transience a key difficulty on this front. One puts it, “they don’t say, ‘I’m leaving now.’ They just don’t come any more”. Another suggests this an expected possibility within MES’s open-door policy - “you can come and go as you please, sort of thing”
  - Though participants’ experience of families leaving or children ‘aging themselves out’ (“when they do get older I don’t know what happens to them but they stop coming”) varies; some claim often these leavers feed into other churches/ministries, others cite means of retaining somewhat, one says “I feel like sort of we haven’t really sussed that yet”
  - Interesting observation from one; some spiritual personal journeys among disciples made in Messy Church may tangibly affect their transience by drawing them into closer contact with wider Church (says “I don’t know if they saw that as a sign of, ‘I want to become, you know, I want to deepen my commitment so therefore the thing I must do is go to a church on a Sunday morning’, kind of thing”); this would seem to vindicate the efficacy of MES as bridges into established Anglicanism & call into question their sustainable long-term reliability as missional communities that can remain distinctively messy in character while being able to nurture depth of discipleship/growth
- Emotional impact & personal labour of MES has non-negligible effects on leaders/teams’ welfare; “it’s very easy to get to the point where it’s too much pressure or you’ve just not got enough people”
  - Several cite in-moment stress (e.g. “I just find it... I have wobbles”) & de-stressing techniques (e.g. “I have to take a deep breath sometimes”) & pre-stress anxiety (e.g. “thinking, I can’t be ill on this church day or something cos it wouldn’t happen”) even when not necessarily doing anything one time (“still kind of... keeping an eye on this and that and the other and you know making sure that everything’s happening”)
    - One summates, “there’s a lot and we’re all quite busy... in a sense it’s quite draining on the leadership [and] team... not to say it isn’t rewarding as well [but] I don’t really want to do too much more”

- Another recounts growth into stoicism of team following a major shift [from monthly to fortnightly] being at first “a bit horrified... but we’ve kind of... now it’s kind of what we do, and, yeah”
- One says “giving [the team] a bit of a rest when they need it” important, another answers “And how do you do that when you’re limited on numbers?”. Another talks of how she is open to possibility of rethinking/restructuring the way they do Messy but “to be honest, I just do not have the time, the energy or the resources... that’s a whole ‘nother ball game, and another person might feel [able]” - value of dynamic teams; willingness to experiment for seeking ways of reducing burden & improving impacts (one says “maybe it’s good to do something together [as all-age whole-family activities], but we did them separately [by age groups]”, more tailored approach than typical Messy & claims “we felt that God was sort of saying to us - okay, it may be very small but actually for those people who did come it’s really powerful”. Value/power of just listening to people in well-shaped inclusive sacred spaces?
  - But when these teams under-supported, no matter how much effective ministry they may be achieving, if not “feeding our team enough” then not sustainable... “and I don’t know how we make that transition, or if at the moment even enough people want to”. one claims: “often on duty and not really feeling like I’m being fed at those times”
    - Several cite planning sessions as where leaders/team feel ‘fed’. One focus group includes eleventh question considering what it would look like for Messy Church to feed the team spiritually: first response “Yes, I don’t know” followed by concern over low regularity of events anyway
  - This ‘culture of burnout’ may discourage helpers from seriously committing to teams, which renders them less dynamic, which means MES may just die after a few years.
    - This linked in several contributions to prayerfulness of Messy teams out of need to sustain vision & energy, with willingness to take breaks or let things die - or committing to changing them well. One puts it “dreaming dreams”. Acceptance of human limitations widely implied as helpful subjective aspect of cultivating intersubjective climates in which childlike playfulness cited in many anecdotes as emergent/manifest spiritually; “I think it sometimes is just being open to an idea, that God is saying, to one of the team, ‘I think it might be worth a try’, and sometimes there’s a purpose to that that we can’t see” (although caveat; there are also numerous anecdotes of times such leaps of faith were taken & seemed to have unpredictable/mixed results)
- Healthy (spiritually & psychologically) response to this pressure maybe “I don’t think we should be trying to do everything, and actually we have to make choices and sometimes we have to be hard about it and actually say, ‘this is my priority’... it’s very easy to take on other people’s sort of opinions and feel guilty because we’re not fulfilling them, but... I think sometimes we just have to be brave and just let people down... just say ‘well, no, I’m not Superwoman or Superman. I’m doing this and this is my priority”
  - Likewise the church trying to do too much too fast may overstretch its capacities; one gives example of struggling with baptism logistics because too many were happening & everyone wanted to bring loads of friends! Another puts it aptly, “there is a finite number of resources [within] an established church” and working out best practice for MES futures is “going to be tricky for churches to work that out actually”
  - Intrinsic tension here between inadequate time/social exposure to Church community being widely seen as key hindrance to disciple-making but efforts to do things more-than-monthly widely seen as key hindrance to Messy Church sustainability?
  - One [absent] participant from group modelled this [admittedly ambiguous] acceptance of her own finiteness greatly; “who said she was going to come but couldn’t come”
- Attenders are also finite beings; one says “the biggest problem in trying to get people out on another night is their lives... They often work long hours” and if pulled into further events/etc one leader highlights risk that “they just find it a bit much”
  - Social/economic factors may distort who MES is effectually reaching; “it’s those parents [working more hours] that are hard to reach I think, more than the stay-at-home mums”
    - One cites a MES where “there weren’t any dads there but that’s part of the thing about doing it after school... on the whole it’s the mums that finish work early”

- This thorough spread clash with work as priority/necessity of family lives, one describes as “just a conundrum we’re still wrestling with” around lack of commitment in crooked generation of contemporary culture... two later astutely put it “sort of - and I find this - I’m trying to get my brain to accept this shape, because it isn’t the shape that I -” & is interrupted “I think it is the way of the world, generally isn’t it” & “it is, yeah, exactly”
  - Ties transience into life-pattern appropriacy - “different people go to different services... Messy Church is just another one a bit like that really” but for people who like MES it “hasn’t got that baggage” perhaps associated with traditional forms of church (same one claims “we have benefice services and people sort of think ‘oh, well, maybe I’ll go to that then’... I mean, sometimes they do” [having been interrupted on ellipsis by someone saying “Nobody comes.”])
    - MES operates in genuinely attractational way - one describes it as having an “‘Oh, we’ve got to have it in our own village’ type thing”
    - But many leavers do move onto different church stuff, or at least hope is there; some have seen families who were “baptised and then disappeared again as far as we - you know, well we don’t know” - clearly linked with clerical cooperation
- After so many expressions of don’t-know & doubts with so many further questions unspooling from underneath them, it is reassuring that one focus group ended with a final invitation from Claire; “any comment, idea, thought you’ve had on a previous question, that you’d not shared... but you’d like to feed in as we finish?” & after a long pause someone says “Don’t think so, no” but someone then adds “it just hadn’t occurred to me, the question of what happened to parents - when their children moved on... however much Messy Church is for the family... you wonder - but hadn’t really occurred to me” & reaffirms importance of thinking about how to include all-ages best.
  - Elsewhere following discussion of how valuable/difficult it has been found to maintain clergy engagement with Messy community, one who is more-formally employed as general Messy promoter/facilitator as well as voluntary helper/leader (of several) says “I think there is still a lack of understanding - says me, it’s my job to make them understand”. Those in same group spoke universally highly of value to their messy ministries in having someone performing this role in their area; one says, “we need local support!” Messy facilitator says their role “does pick up a lot of those vulnerabilities... you know it’s not all about the training and the structure but it’s the little things. A lady rang me - erm, yeah” & another continues “yeah, it’s just having somebody to chat to, the issues that they’re facing, isn’t it. And help you to think through how you can deal with-” another interrupts to point out that “if like me, you are not paid and you’re a volunteer, and you don’t get any kind of pastoral or spiritual support for the work that you’re doing from your own church, the only place you can access that [kind of support] is from somebody like [the Messy facilitator in question]”

### God’s power and plan

Each quote listed here (separated by ampersands) is from different participant - they do not real-narratively follow one another. Tapestry format - strong analytical interlinkage with human finitude node.

Multiple affirmations across all focus groups of rest & trust in God’s faithfulness & capacities for doing unexpected work behind the scenes: **(on not knowing if we’re saying the right things)** “you don’t know what seeds you’re sowing in somebody” so even right words for context might be better if “you don’t need to actually quite - say it like that”; **(acceptance of subjective/sinful nature affecting Messy ministry)** “I mean there are the sort of human constraints as we’ve just talked about” & “those I think are probably just - there’s not an awful lot of evidence, I mean well obviously you don’t know what God is doing in-” interrupted “well that’s the thing, isn’t it?” & “it is the way of the world, isn’t it”; **(on prayerfulness)** “we always say the Lord will provide and he always does” & “one of the things that I always thank God for... we’ve always broken even, He’s always provided” & several other answers to prayer cited “and we pray for more of that” & “we’ve taken a break while we do some praying and consultation” & “we’re not expecting them - you might be very hopeful that they become

disciples but we don't - tell - you know, that's not - in our heads"; **(on respecting diversity of paths/contexts)** "we do talk about journeys - a lot - and being on a journey" & "we're blessed where I am to have lots of children in church but nationally we don't"; **(on inhabiting relationality outside of 'main events')** "sort of pastoral work... with the families, in their homes... for being able to have conversations with people, it's probably... at least a good place to start"; **(on gentle discipleship)** "try and nudge them along to that next stage and just see what happens" & just "trying to help people to see that we're all trying to work towards the same thing" & way one "unintentionally" facilitated "a real, sort of, pastoral space [which] then that becomes an opportunity" & it can be "just a really slow long road"; **(on trusting verbal empowerment of Spirit)** "actually God speaks through stories doesn't he and personal accounts" & "you don't know what God's doing in people" & "so yeah, I mean, take a deep breath and do it anyway" & "it's something about those ways of working which just become a way of working... Messy Church has become part of the Christian vocabulary of what can happen rather than it being, 'ooh, that's a bit odd'"; **(on responding to callings)** "you don't have to've been coming to the church for twenty years and be confirmed... anyone can be a Messy Church leader and that can be a medium through which you grow into a better, deeper relationship with God" & "this is my priority... you believe God's called you to do this. You know, whatever that is, and that's fantastic. I believe God's called me to do this" & "I'll stop doing it when God tells me it's time to move on"; **(on assurance of God's plan despite uneasy unknowing)** "depends on where God wants it to go" & "I believe that God's got a plan... and when he shows me where that job is, I'll say, 'of course. How right you are, God. But it's, you know...'" & "believe God does want us to be there... He's proved it with the amount of support we've had from the village... God has it in His hands. I just find it... I have wobbles because I'm here and... that's the truth" & "you just hope that some more will come along" & "it's just trusting that whatever situation we're in with the people where having come through the door you're trusting God for guiding you to provide what they need, and then trusting him to actually carry that work on" & several do find allies in established churches that are broadly "have a bit more of a positive atmosphere [and are] a bit more - looking out and open to different things"; **(on planting seeds practically)** "the whole seed-scattering thing... if you don't do it, it's never gonna have any impact is it?" & "for so many of our families with children... they are so, at the beginning of any journey that it is just those tiny tiny ideas and thoughts that we're planting... for growth" & "we've got to trust that God has spoken to them" & everyday-related practice of these seeds modelled through the church as "an outworking of that" "And that is discipleship" & once sown "you might water it for a bit, and then somebody else takes over"; **(on faith in harvests)** "believing that God will make use of it in His own good time" & "don't be frightened of it" & of adults attenders who went to Sunday School as a kid or kid attenders for whom MES will constitute wholesome church childhood memories, "whatever that experience was is still with them, isn't it, and hopefully that will bear fruit at some point in their lives - you just don't know" & "so if we've inspired children with a desire to get to know Jesus then that's a success" & "they'll remember it, they'll remember it... I'm sowing seeds for twenty-five years' time" & others note "four atheist husbands [who] would come and help if we asked them to... that's interesting, isn't it?" goes on to discuss as big step in answer to long-running prayers; **(on signs of spiritual birth)** "an awareness that God is much bigger than our little lives" & "I think that you can tell [early steps] if they would initiate a conversation... or ask a question or something... even if they come back next month" & people growing in noticeable hunger for closer relationship with Jesus, manifest in visible fruits [e.g. intergenerational discipleship facilitating its own perpetuation] such as "the lives that get changed within [MES]" & certain families/individuals for whom "can see it happening - something very real"; **(on using planning sessions to facilitate further discipleship for helpers)** "I do get fed as I prepare... largely as I prepare I get fed. I think, if it's the way I would choose to be fed, the answer is probably no. But that's the way the Lord has chosen to feed me at present" & "probably the preparation and doing the service before-hand is more [in-depth an act of God-glorification] than when you're actually standing up there doing it" & cos you're "looking to see 'ooh, yeah' sort of thing and 'oh, it means this'"; **(on leavers)** "it feels like they disappeared... on the other hand, they have also heard the message, and you don't know again what's going to happen to them in time to come" or "who else they're gonna

meet” & “they know where to come if they’ve got a problem later on in life... there’s the contact again, ‘oh I used to come to Messy Church years ago’ sort of thing”; **(on the past & future of Messy Church)** responds to Q6 with “Gosh, hahaha! [long silence] The thing is, I suppose when Lucy began that very first one she never imagined, did she - that you know what is it now - twelve, thirteen years on, it would be what it is now. Which is why I think it’s a really hard question to answer because that for me is an example of a kind of surprising God who took something, and it’s gone completely out there right across the world. Well, not every country in the world but lots of parts of the world, hasn’t it? And in a way, who’s to say, you know, what God’s gonna do with it into the future? Erm - I think it’s personally very difficult to say” & one talks of “kind of discipleship of the whole Messy Church movement as well... when we talk about the journey” [from analytic context think this refers to grown capacities/dialogue/intentionality around discipleship in MES under BRF] & one adds “without really knowing exactly how [MES growth or engagement] might happen... over the last five years we’ve seen some of that happening, so hopefully that would continue going forward”; **(on potential fields of conflict & cooperation in Church economy)** “maybe in some of those smaller very rural communities... it’s going to perhaps become the church. Don’t know” & inverse scenario “Does it matter if they don’t stay in Messy Church, but go somewhere else?” “No.” “No, no.” “No, absolutely no. We’re just part of the journey” & “God uses so many different ways to reach people... it doesn’t matter if he’s using Messy Church or if he’s using - everything else” & following story of three-village rotating MES single congregation (which “it’s been quite an interesting journey, actually”) “There’s a lot to learn out of that, isn’t there” “Yeah... you kind of think, from a missional point of view... stick to the same time, same place, but no - we move around and actually have them at different times... [group laughs] I know! ... shouldn’t work, but it does”; **(on not judging Messy success by worldly standards)** “it may be very small but actually for those people who did come... it’s very powerful. Impactful” & “God’s time is not out time, we’re too impatient, we want to see results, don’t we - and I mean God is so much more longsuffering and patient” & serious accusation of result-orientated idolatrous mentality where “you end up sort of saying ‘well actually, it’s not for us to tell God what to do’ - God will know - we’re not dictating to God ‘I want this number of people in my morning service’... we measure success on numbers, which is awful” & “I always used to get asked, ‘how many people were there this month?’ And it’s like, who cares” [group laughs]

### Inter-congregational friction

Very widely cited (except among few who perceive themselves to be somewhat lucky) that many main Sunday congregations linked with MES don’t grasp the vision of it (even among some who attend MES as Christians), and view it broadly as all-age event for bringing families into traditional forms of Church - probably goes without saying, “perception [that] it’s not proper church [makes it] vulnerable” and if perception of vision can become accurate AND legitimised would aid “strength and sustainability” via “not just the church people and the finance but [also] the prayer support”

- When Claire, asking Q7, preambled - *“is there a sense of mutual learning, interdependence, or what’s the cross-fertilisation between the Messy Church and the inherited congregation? Is it positive, the relationship? Does it keep you up at night?”* the participants’ immediate reply is a prolonged burst of group laughter - unsure if this is encouraging or not
- **Misunderstood/unsupported Messy Church leaders:**  
*Each quote listed here (separated by ampersands) is from different participant - they do not real-narratively follow one another. Tapestry*  
**(on explaining Messy)** one convinced church of Messy vision but “struggled for a while” & “I keep having to say... But I don’t think that they get it... it sometimes feels as though we’re children’s church as far as most of the inherited congregation are concerned” & “in some clergy... there is still that lack of understanding... they don’t see the importance of the simple things that you’re talking about” & even in a “very supportive clergy... there’s a complete lack

of understanding about what we're doing, however often I've stood at the front and enthused... when they go they go so it's just a bit of fun, well they're that sort of age" & "it's like... I don't know what to do because I'm hitting my head against a brick wall... trying to get the message across"; **(on churchgoer misperception/apathy)** "we don't actually need or want to know much about it really, just let it happen" & "ours think of it as something rather strange that they don't know how to deal with... pulling people into coming and helping with and insist on telling them about every month" & "nobody would ever wonder whether that was still gonna be happening in five or ten years" & "I find the team harder... most of my team don't even see Messy Church as church [so] they see it just as something I do and they come along to help me" & "getting church families to come... we get quite a lot [but] they do come in and wanna sit together and it's like 'come on, see it as part of ministry!' and we had one session where we almost felt like we were telling them off" & "how much [are they] going to fight to keep this thing running?"; **(on pointless conflict & potential idolatry)** "I sometimes think we are so keen to see results... the previous minister had this problem... you're missing something here" & "so bogged down with our buildings and we get so horrible with each other about our buildings and congregations... but for Messy Church the building is a means to an end rather than the thing we come and worship" & "I think [the local clergy] resented the fact that people who came to Messy Church didn't come on a Sunday... they just saw people as potential bums on seats"; **(on Anglican governance)** "Messy Churches are vulnerable to the - erm, attitude of... the clergy and the PCC" & "our church looked upon Messy Church as a way of ticking its boxes for family work and children's work" & sometimes "people who made the decisions are not interested" so "you need to have some people who are part of the decision-making body who are interested in what Messy Church does"; **(on Anglican ownership)** "doesn't really own it... it would stop, I think, if I pulled out... I inflict support for it on people and they're willing to give... But if I said, 'we're not gonna do it any more', they'd say, 'oh, that's sad', but it wouldn't, I suspect, be picked up" & "why are you just waiting for things to take a downturn before you ask us what's happening?" & "if I was made redundant or the church didn't have enough money to pay me... I don't think anybody else would necessarily take it on"; **(on being left alone)** even if well-resourced, an under-supported MES may be "stuck out here, on its own, doing its own thing" & "we've had comments of 'well, they're not *our* church children'" & "I think the only time Messy Church got prayed for was when I was leading the intercessions on the Sunday"; **(on structural risks)** "even if it never looks anything like Sunday morning church, that doesn't mean it doesn't count" & "there's an acceptance that in style it wouldn't, but in terms of, you know, the way people will engage with it and become Christian community and financially give, they might not do that either"; **(on proposals doing Messy stuff in Sunday church)** "they went, 'ooh, it's quite an interesting idea, but it's maybe just a step too far'" & "my gut feeling is they'd just stay away" & one who "did Messy Eucharist... in a Synod meeting - and a couple of people left. Bit too radical for them" whereas "other people loved it"; **(on potential MES 'death')** "they [main church] wouldn't feel the loss directly" & "just going to go 'oh well, that's a shame, bye-bye'" & "it'd be forgotten within a year" & "the one that we've just suspended... it was never an issue with money, but they... just weren't interested in it... it's never discussed in the PCC... just no ownership from the church"; **(on Messy's fxC distinctiveness)** "I wish I'd known at the beginning, things about [it] as a church plant" & "we were always in the beginning a missional community... that idea that there are people from the established congregation as committed [to it] as other people that come in... the future vision for the church is to have more missional communities, so I think that as the church develops their understanding of what that looks like, we'll sit kind of within that, so it's kind of an evolving kind of relationship"

Several cite difficulties reliably sourcing funds for crafts/food/etc from Church 'authorities'

- One who's never been given a budget "because they don't want me to spend money. Aaargh" while another who is on PCC "brought it up in budget each time... we've been quite fortunate at the moment" but still feels that "if anything's going to go, financially, well - it quite easily could be Messy Church", while another was directly asked "whether we might try something else because you have to spend a lot of money on Messy Church"

- Another whose church makes it “an argument that has to be had every time” just “switching the lights on and the heating to do Messy Church”, noting that such considerations for normal church occur without second thought - “But then, you make money out of an ordinary service”
  - This same MES’s leaders also claim team/helpers would “turn up and the church has forgotten to put the heating on. Time and time again, in the middle of winter. And the - ‘ooh, we forgot it was Messy’ - you’ve been doing it for eight years, on the same day, how can... [also they] haven’t fixed the security light that’s broken outside, because they’re all there in the daytime so they don’t need a light... but we’re sending children out into the dark”
- Some suggest contending with churches’ expectation that MES, since it claims to be ‘church’, should be maturing in ways that render it financially independent (of which leaders “dubious about that” even though “church would like it if that was”) - one says “it feels like Church Commissioners have thought... if it doesn’t look enough like church that can become financially sustainable then it isn’t church, it’s just an outreach thing” or a “sort of evangelical vehicle”
  - Worth noting for purposes of this qualitative analysis that self-financing is part of the sustainability dimension, rather than maturity (which is assessed by creedal marks). One participant says “you could say that a lot of Sunday congregations are immature, couldn’t you?” as how much of their membership “just turns up on a Sunday for an hour and a quarter and then goes home?” while comparatively at MES “they’re not just having it all done to them”
- Several face light pressure from church governance to charge for MES to keep its costs down; one responds “you don’t make a charge for people to come in on a Sunday”

Numerous discuss burden of expectations held upon them by church institutions uninvolved with MES to fulfil same church duties on top of Messy Church without apparent regard for the personal costs of labour in messy ministry (e.g. “people still expect you to clean the pavilion, do the readings on Sunday, intercessions, etc... [when I haven’t even] had the time to be able to go and visit all Messy families”)

- Hugely potent insight from one: “if our behaviours are being shaped because we’re worried... that other people will think, gosh, we’re not pulling our weight, you know, because we don’t do the cleaning rota... I mean, I’ve been a huge disappointment in my church because I think they all came in thinking I was going to come in and run the Sunday school ‘cause I’d run children’s programmes and I was a primary school teacher. And I thought they all went, ‘Ooh, great!’, because the two previous vicars’ wives had done that... I just didn’t go near it... I just said, ‘No, I’m sorry’... I didn’t say sorry, I just didn’t do it... that was painful probably for people, but it just wasn’t what God was calling me to at that time. And there are other things I feel really gutted about that I don’t do, but actually, I’ve not got it right but I just think... I’d encourage people not to feel guilty about it”
- Highly ambiguous capacities for these expectations to shift when church undergo staff change: one cites minister who started it as being super-dedicated to MES (“she was doing the role that I’m now in effect doing, as far as Messy Church goes, but she wasn’t well-received by certain people in the church who sort of made it awkward for her”) being replaced by interim (who committed by ‘foolishly’ asking “what are the key things you want me to be at?” of MES leader in a meeting) being replaced again; “he will come, but not that same commitment”. Another two cite how minister around when MES started “was happy to visit [but] there were always issues with it... saw it as a bridge to Sunday morning, therefore it wasn’t successful if people weren’t coming on a Sunday” but “our new minister is very behind it” which “makes a big difference”. Another (in interim) worries “will we get a new vicar?” as this affects MES!
  - Ministers’ non-involvement may be offset in some cases by persistent presence of any other congregational members, PCC, church wardens, etc - but suggested that liability of such persons to committedly attend may be significantly related to their

minister's committed & visible involvement and/or clear communication of why this is good.

- How do these discontinuities affect MES attenders' experience of church? e.g. "we were never able to offer a communion... the clergy wouldn't come in and do it, basically, and us as laypeople were not able to"
- How does this affect voluntary helpers' perception of how church values them? One says, "nobody asks an archdeacon to do it voluntarily, do they", one "there's this expectation that we do it because we're Christians... we feel we have a calling... all of that's true... that does not mean we should just be taken advantage of"
- Strange kind of evangelical impatience; "our previous vicar was very keen for me to start it, but actually never wanted to come... no interest really... the idea was 'when are they gonna start coming to Sunday church?'"
- Implied by some to have potentially ambiguous impact on attenders' attitude to clergy, who "are seen by the wider population as the - er, figurehead of a church" so visitors from culturally-christian background "unless they're seeing someone with a dog-collar there... perhaps they might not see that as a valid part of the church"
  - Encouragement of "relatively new pastor [who's] very positive about it... was saying [that] you've sort of got the world and the church, and Sunday morning is very good at focusing in on the church and a lot of the groups we do... are very good at focusing out at the world, but Messy Church is probably the key thing that absolutely covers both... so he sees it as absolutely vital"

Conflicting pressures/influences on Messy leaders widely cited as key arena of volatility/vulnerability; one goes as far as to say "leaders generally can make a Messy Church vulnerable"

- Leader transience particularly difficult effect on buoyancy; in many MES's this may messily overlap with attender transience (in terms of root causes) given high rates of voluntary lay-lay indigenous leadership & diversity of attenders' wellbeing backgrounds
  - Also keeps them adaptable & on their toes? One says, "it would be brilliant if we had somebody who was enthusiastic and could have a new vision, cos I feel our vision's a little bit stale... we're doing things the way we've done them for a while because they seem to work reasonably well, but I'm sure there are other ways we can do things... or be"
- Those pushing hard for MES success where this means bringing people into Sunday churches arguably risk burnout/frustration. One claims "straight away, their ethos is - is not right", and another says "leaders that haven't got the vision... can be quite destructive"

Size a concern as if can't maintain team/attendee relationality harder to maintain unity of vision even among Messy congregation; one says "we're big enough almost to have fallen into two factions... what I didn't envisage [but] which is challenging us", and suggests that should this occur "that's something I would have said at the beginning [as a vulnerability]... people will fall off, the team will lose enthusiasm, the numbers will go down"

- Counter-intuitively this can also become a challenging tension when MES 'succeeds' in getting attenders involved with Sunday churches, as clashes/commitments may spur transience!
  - *Trajectory of Messy congregation growth & traditional Sunday congregation shrinkage going in opposite directions. Possible source of 'established' forms' insecurity?* (one suggests may be approaching a transitional stage in some kinds of localities where MES replaces small dying traditional churches; "hopefully not, but... realistically that may happen... [yet] then we're able to properly resource [MES] because we're not trying to keep other things alive")
    - Another asks, "when does it stop being a fresh expression of church?"
- Implied by several participants (esp. those who've known Messy Churches die) that when such vulnerabilities kick in, MES very quickly becomes susceptible to being totally undone by church



decision-makers (one says, “oh well, if resources are stretched, that’s the thing you won’t do”)

- Unless, suggest some, MES brings in lots of new Sunday attenders (unless it doesn’t!)
  - This (cost-effectiveness, basically) cited as key conflict arena between MES/PCC governance; one says “there’s a definite division in the church”

Several explicitly suggest Messy demands greater top-down support/investment - one’s “feedback to the Church Commissioners... they need to acknowledge that Messy Church is a vital part of church... a different way of worshipping, and give it the priority it needs”. One says “bodies like the church commissioners should be kind of really out there in supporting and saying, ‘yeah, this is... a valid and useful form of church life... so that the people who are being doubtful... see that there’s these big bods who are actually behind it - in the same way that they’re behind everything else we’re doing on a Sunday”. Another adds, “if they haven’t been... I’d encourage them to go to one”, another “in order to thrive [MES] has to become part of the lifeblood of the church” while not being “just like a nursery ground for Sunday”. Another “they need the feedback... something that could be fed to the vicars... that would have fruit [in terms of MES/church unity]” and to flourish “do need the people at the top and in charge of all the groups to sort of be pushing it as well”. Others add that since MES “is such a massive movement in this country... within the Church of England I think there should be people that are looking after all the sort of Messy Church” while another hazards “this is controversial - there needs to be some kind of culture shift... Messy Church leaders are - well, we call them lay-lay people, don’t we, largely... there needs to be some investment in the kind of, I don’t know... I mean a training and licensing is probably the wrong route, but there needs to be some kind of recognised [*unclear from recording*] in the ministry” - because “you don’t have many churches that are run entirely by volunteers, do you?”

- Another discusses “the parable of the great feast”, then commenting (to voiced concurrence) “That’s at Messy Church. That’s what happens. It doesn’t happen at Sunday morning”
  - Among final comments in Salop focus group: post-contribution addition “I’ll get down off my soapbox now.” “Bet you’re glad you brought it with you.” “Yes I am.”

## Self-financing

### ‘Given’

Difficulties managing activities with small teams covering their own costs

Labour intensive: reliance on ad hoc voluntary help

- Inc. families; elderly persons; busy people helping in spare time
- “you don’t have many churches that are run entirely by volunteers, do you?” - but risk of team burnout; “you can’t expect volunteers to just keep on volunteering if they’re not having that nurturing support, training... supervision”
  - Input/opportunities here needed; investment from Church
- True for higher-scale coordinators (small paid MES team despite 4000 congregations)

Reliance on regular donations/contributions from attenders (maybe unreliable)

- Both MES & sending congregations
- Shortfalls often made up by team
  - Or ad hoc local community fundraising

Sending church committed/tentative support

Dependence on parish church for MES resourcing but no budget (minimal costs)

- (or with a budget) “all lumped in with children’s work”
  - Paid ministry of MES-leaders often likewise

Reluctant necessity of sometimes charging attenders for certain items

Aims of economically (as in thriftily) benefiting attenders equally/generously - MES as a free space

- Navigating tension between hospitality & fiscal viability

CofE resources potentially ample but structured less than accessibly in many contexts

MES resource-intensive so vulnerable to church decision-makers

- “if resources are stretched, that’s the thing you won’t do because it’s resource-heavy”
- Expectation of mature MES “putting your money in the pot and paying your way”
- Little surety of “where it fits in the pecking order”

### ‘Received’

MES budget from sending-church

- Or lumped-in: “they won’t give me a budget because they don’t want me to spend money”
  - But general compliance in expense claims
- Or in resignation; [non-self-financing MES] “isn’t church, it’s just an outreach thing”

Team buy necessary resources out of own pockets & keep for re-use

- Makes MES more sustainable by subsidising its impact on church funds

Attenders’ donations not uncommon but variable by engagement/demographic

- Emphasis on non-compulsory donations

Low-cost mentality lends flexibility/adaptability insofar as whole thing still plausible

Offerings of time - constitute the voluntary backbone of MES ‘workforce’!

- “people giving their time, people giving their skills”
  - But: “people drop out and move on... volunteers will only continue for as long as their needs are being met” & little structural support exists for this in churches

Pervasive sense of apprehension about stable sustainable funding/resourcing

- Prayer & financial support from sending church often coincide...

### Self-governing

#### ‘Given’

Single individual may hold bulk of responsibility by default

- “I’m very aware that it’s me that runs it, that plans all the activities, that organises it all”  
& “So what are we going to do? Is anyone going to do it?” And then I ended up doing it”

Or many have small key group of regulars for planning MES

- Emphasises this process, entailing engagement/aims for activities, has spiritual value/content
  - “the fellowship of the team is absolutely brilliant”; maybe missional also e.g. includes “at least one individual who’s quite on the fringes of faith” - one says planning sessions now held as open meetings
- In absence of clear/primary leader figure, planners may divvy-up/rotate between them
  - But having a ‘main leader’ useful for delegation.
  - And actual MES still “very hard work” for small/busy team

- Becomes an exercise in inclusiveness/adaptability - working around the known/perceived life patterns of attenders (e.g. involving parents to tailor all-age focus beyond merely kid-friendly)
  - “constantly evolving, isn’t it” [within basic framework of MES models]: “building a community... where it’s not all dependent on the leaders” as attenders join in helping when they feel enough “ownership”

Missional/ecclesiology/ecumenicity couched in perceived intentions of sending church (maybe an ambiguous role played by structure in CofE relative to Methodists etc... variable PCC supportiveness)

- Often felt restricts MES as being considered just children’s work (which puts risk of alienation between sending/messy congregations - exacerbated by expectations of moneymaking)... “it’s also competing for resources with all the other things that churches want to do”. Negative example “it’s never discussed in the PCC... there was just no ownership from the church”
  - Counteracted by vocal sender leadership/governance; “the vicar needs to be 100% behind it”, “you need to have some people who are part of the decision-making body who are interested in what Messy Church does... regarded as part of the life of the whole church”
    - Even if uninvolved in planning, priestly presence helps legitimise MES as church
  - Clarity to what extent it’s valued/prioritised elusive - minister handovers provide such opportunities to establish common vision
- Structural authoritative support demanded: “we need those people at the diocesan level” to better support MES runners

### ‘Received’

Missional intentionality diffused into planning [which is like a mini Bible study anyway]: “it’s about sharing what Jesus said... we make it clear that our leaders are really aware of that” - enhances gospel understanding of attenders involved; “the preparation, actually, is part of the feeding”

- Informal coffee/natter planning times; “everybody’s involved”... one woman (with prior “no experience of church at all”) researches possible crafts online for each & develops ideas
  - Tension of this openness is people bringing own ideas in which leaders unsure of - but “they’ve gone and thought about it [and] come back with a real desire to do that”; craft & worship at MES flexible/accessible enough that usually works out fine
    - Though coordination of such can be stressful: several cite time-sensitivity
  - Structural/denomination tensions with attender expectations
- Participatory nature shifts burden off core leaders: “reaching a point where you were going to receive and be part of the community but not necessarily leading everything”
  - Or conversely if no real uptake for ownership remains big commitment for small team

Sending congregation support makes operations easier (extra pool of potential voluntary labour)

- But somewhat ambiguous: “it’s often on the PCC agenda cos I put it there”
  - Citing a dead MES; “we didn’t know you were struggling so much, if only we’d known’, and this person was a church warden. And we thought ‘well, if only you’d asked’”
- Volunteers often either under considerable time-pressures (kids) or have mobility issues (age)

Vicar vision vital: transitions allow for refreshers/collaborativeness/cross-congregational enthusiasm

## Self-reproducing

### 'Given'

MES as fxC plants: "we were always in the beginning a missional community... the future vision for the church is to have more missional communities"

Time-rich individuals on leadership/runner team enabled to explore/develop possibilities. Likewise time-poverty & lack of leadership's/runners' labour-pool hinders planning/going beyond normal

- Sheer intensiveness of MES makes hard to do regularly, let alone do more of. How?
  - "I don't know, have a Messy prayer meeting or something happening in between" or put on "extra things throughout the year". One "just run[s] [Messy Church] every two weeks... more of it"
  - Large & willing volunteer capacities (and minister/staff supports) obvs makes easier
    - One "struggling to get new people coming through"; range of inputs regarding involvement here of both Messy/Sunday congregations
- Consequently discipleship journeys are slowed by this reduced exposure: "someone coming to Messy Church for a year is the equivalent of going to church for twelve weeks... you don't really expect vast steps in a few weeks"
  - So friction/burnout risk if MES leaders "giving their time and service because they think that this is a way of bringing people into a Sunday congregation"; sustainability of the ministry here may hinge upon both "people who are very committed" and "mak[ing] it realistic for the team" - not over-stretching intentions beyond viable capacity

Several cite hesitancy with new ideas

- "we don't quite know how we're gonna pitch it... almost worried I'm gonna scare people away"
- But confidence using sessions from official Messy Church resources; "we really rely on them"
  - Yet unsure apprehension of 'maturity' in MES context - "you'd want it to be fresh" in possible tension with nature of self-reproductivity; "carry on doing the same things... cos you've always done it that way"

Relational developments recurring key element of reproducing ministry, as friendships deepen so do opportunities for witness; one describes as "having kind of a network of different things that are all linked but also kind of independent from each other" - so attenders attend whatever & are met by Christian community (several cite sending-congregation involvement as wanting, several as ample)

- Consciousness of [in]equalities in missional exposure: "might be for the mums because then the dads can babysit the kids or whatever... [then we'd] swap that round"
  - Tension of not being able to fully plan unless you've already done it & see how it went... finding appropriate activities/structures for evangelistic/welcoming [all-age?] space
    - Involving self-volunteering attenders in planning helps reproduce appropriately
  - Several mentions of Messy-style spinoffs for toddlers/elderly, linked to who comes
- Recurring concern providing something that will retain engagement of parents/families after kids get 'too old'; annual events cited as good point of return & household/outdoor hospitality effective relationship-building
- Avenue for participatory discipleship; attenders (young/parents/older) "being part of our team"
  - Potential basis for in-depth gospel growth with training for this; MES conversation had "sense that if your Messy Church has been going for more than [a couple of

years] then you should be thinking about discipleship”, despite many attenders having “nothing, in terms of a spiritual background or awareness, at all” still getting engaged & educated

- Leaders’ own roles help to disciple them too
- Helpers growing into leaders; “empowering people to take more responsibility”

‘Fear factor’ that unless self-reproductive power of MES unlocked may leave young people unreached; longer-term view may have seen attendance/engagement fluctuate considerably. Attendance scales variable but not uncommon in rivalling their Sunday congregations

- Continuity develops presence: Baptist e.g. “the village sees us as the heart of the community”
  - “But it’s tough. It’s tough” (resource/team stretching)
- Real apprehension that MES may in terms of community function replace inherited church in some places (villages); will raise new questions for its self-reproductivity, but now demands a conscious climate of diverse interdependent mission

Commit national investments in MES support/training/facilitation; could develop options/capacities. “if like me, you are not paid and you’re a volunteer, and you don’t get any kind of pastoral or spiritual support for the work that you’re doing from your own church”, this could be a crucial boon in lay-lay ministry fruitfulness

### **‘Received’**

Unpredictable patterns of attendance make long-term maturity planning somewhat disconcerting

- Also anticipating/planning around seasonal events (e.g. Advent lull due to Christmas shopping) or everyday patterns (e.g. weekdays most convenient for working families)

MES simply *has* reproduced a lot - “hundreds across the country”, and though many see rapid growth transience of attenders makes this fluctuate; “people come and go... seem to come for a season”

- On retention: “either you don’t see them again or they come as helpers” (all-age factor here) with clear discipleship implications - “you can see it happening, that they gradually grow in confidence... that actually they can do things about these stories”, likewise leaders cite growth in personal assurance of being able to do it well & facilitate community formation alongside general structures of events
  - Even unengaging parents bringing children are ‘reproducing’ ministry by doing so; they want their kids to hear Bible teaching, have fun, build character - based on retained experiences of Sunday school etc.
  - Likewise reconnecting de-churched: one claims “there were people who’d fallen away from our church who came back because of Messy Church”
- Easily-reproducible but relationally-heavy model; suits localisation?
  - Risk of transient attenders just spreading out further across bigger range of events
  - Paradoxical balance between ‘being convenient’ for attenders & prompting ‘genuine engagement’ among them: story of 3 wardens from 3 churches in 3 villages teaming up to co-lead a single Messy Church that rotates around - has brought many more new families along from each village than before this pattern started!

Numerous encouraging anecdotes of attenders (of greatly varying age, ability, stage on faith journey, backgrounds, etc) volunteering to lead craft activities, plan/prepare meals, teaching random stuff to & making conversation/friends with others

- Enabling this a way of “involving everybody”, and builds family-esque relationships in contexts where these might not be readily present (“the family unit is not always in one village, is it”); organic means of not-too-structured intergenerational fellowship & discipleship/service

- Likewise reproducing Messy-style projects going out into under-served communities (or bringing them in by hospitality: “most dads would go a long way for a bacon butty”)
  - Or smaller groups from main attenders; extra exposure to Christian community not diminished in value by size of group!
    - Events not rendered pointless if “there’s no ‘god slot’ in it”
    - Some tailored informal Messy-style “opportunity for people to develop those ‘I wonder’ questions a bit more deeply”
  - Difficulties maintaining reliable contact with some (e.g. youths/nearly-teens)
    - Several cite successes keeping them involved by giving them roles/tasks
  - Several cite vulnerability of these additional projects to transience/limits of helpers, runners, leaders, attenders; maybe “they’re not always all available every month”, or “people come and go, y’know”; perhaps “there’s not a natural turnover... I can feel a crunch time coming”
    - Some cite ‘taking a break’ from MES for team recuperation
- Feedback effect of improving children/youth work in sending congregations
- Discernment & listening: “finding out what they think... what people actually wanted”

Self-reproduction’s tension between retaining freshness/energy (for newcomers’ impressions) but remaining flexible (for team’s rest); changing around leaders’ & attenders’ changing relationships?

- “it’s good that it does change... Keeps the freshness”
  - Try new things: may yield unexpected results & bring in previously-uncontacted people (who may become helpers/leaders; “[MES seems to be] attracting people who like to do - and there is a lot of doing that needs to happen”; participatory inclusiveness aids adaptability, “anyone can be a Messy Church leader” which facilitates evolution, stokes energy & helps guard against burnout by sharing commitments)
    - Unpredictability & variable impact recurring cited experiences; pathways!
- Suggestion that ‘mature MES’ would have “new people coming in” (effective mission)
  - As well as “core group of active participants” for whom MES = Church
  - Apprehension that ‘maturity’ means resembling established church’s modes/patterns
    - Another adds: “I think in the idea of being mature like old cheese... we’ve just got old, which is why we’re having to change and develop and learn”
- Hosting extra stuff (or more of same) doesn’t necessarily mean people come to more of it...
  - One MES started running fortnightly in hope that its regularity would cultivate regular group of attenders (currently ‘too big’ but variable); but “they come randomly” so still overwhelms team capacities unpredictably

Sheer local popularity of MES in some villages poses institutional threat to longevity of established churches (overstretched rural clergy & tiny elderly congregations) - “they’ve heard about it and they want some company... maybe in some of those [places] it’s going to perhaps become the church”

- Despite (some) sense of apathy toward MES’s continuity among inherited congregations; these remain ‘priority’ & retain persistent efforts
  - A participant jocularly quips (reflecting perception of MES by inherited forms); “I mean, what’s with this Sunday church, not working very well anyway so... let’s scrap it”
  - Multiple leaders highlight essentiality of church support structures if MES to continue self-reproducing effectually. Anticipatory of our research project as facilitating toward these discussions

## One

## 'Given'

Just being friendly to all the people!

- Talking about “the things that as you say relate to... everybody’s everyday lives”, naturally in & alongside conventional activities of MES
- Grasp of universally-appealing moral core of gospel: “for the vast majority of the population it’s actually about, you know, trying to do the right thing to other people”
- Tension for leaders between quality of relationships & quantity of attenders
  - One declares that “every time it’s a low number I really question whether we’re doing something wrong” while others claim “there’s something very valuable about it being a little one... it’s really quite intimate... we have some lovely moments together”; or “the little ones enable that growth of relationship and faith because they can have really good conversations”

Conscious recognition of MES [if church] being vehicle for discipleship of all attending (inc. team)  
- several cite development of these trusting relations as formative precursor to discipleship

- And cognisant of ways perceived drawbridges may need to be lowered for mission, e.g. village where “the majority don’t go to church” or transience by dint of secular engagements
  - Furthermore of potential tensions between grace-led inclusion & proper safeguarding (“if anybody is welcome... it is tricky”)
  - Or of potential sources of engagement not directly gospel-conscious: recount of pair of mums who said “this is our night out, Messy Church” (meal for kids on budget, & a genuine sociability opportunity for them); even just parents who still keep coming back must find it important on some level (chatting as kids do crafts - or joining in?)
  - Watching own/others’ language use to discern how to meet them with truth, name or describe structures/patterns/activities as this may alienate non/de-churched attendee before “walking beside people, and befriending them first of all”
    - e.g. explaining acts of kindness, “you’re not going to say, ‘well, because the Bible says...’ [another chimes in ‘In Leviticus’, is how I would begin]”
      - One argues here; “it’s important that we don’t use churchy language... it’s very easy to slip into words that we would understand which mean precious little to the man in the street” (e.g. ‘discipleship?’)
- Unavoidably generosity-grounded with no strings/expectations attached
- Participatory activity leads to participatory identity - many accounts of helpers’ growth/faith
  - Several say their MES’s “talk a lot about being a family together”; essence of ‘oneness’ “starts with a sense of belonging, doesn’t it... feeling part of a community where people remember who you are when you come in and what you told them the last time you were there” (extends to reproduced/extra bits)
  - Transformative power can hold for de-churched, re-engaging with faith via community

Procedural/habitual affirmations of family/community in structure of running/planning meetings

- Including ‘ministry’ bits: several cite clergy-less MES’s where group efforts compensate for this (and help new believers grow deeper by joining in) - “it sort of stops it being the possession of the one who knows and actually becomes owned by the group”
  - May help transcend commonly-frictional trappings: “it’s the community that gathers that’s important... for Messy Church the building is a means to an end” within which “it’s not all dependent on the leaders”
    - Giving them something to do can uplift/empower those on the fringes (of group or of faith; relevant for teenager retentions? See “young people like to be given responsibility... it’s an acknowledgement that [they’re] not a

child anymore” - but discernment [i.e. knowing them well enough] required in such delegation)

- Necessarily inclusive if involving everyone in growth-oriented discussions; “our questions are intergenerational as well because we don’t separate children’s work at all” & likewise “you’ve got to make sure you’re looking after the adults’ needs as well as the children’s needs”
  - Though several cite instances of separating age groups & this working well for certain activities (e.g. children play games, adults meditate with vicar)

Facilitate development of these bonds outside MES meetings/events; “finding ways to have time with people and build that sense of community” (which in light of transience necessitates flexibility) or just getting to know them in case “you could bump into them in Sainsburys or something”

- One cites open-invite prayer email chain list which has had good uptake; other imaginative ways of stimulating prayerfulness/fellowship
- Visiting families, modelling servant-heartedness & mutuality
  - Free food & acts of love prompt responses opening doors for gospel discussion
- Noticing absences; compare with Sunday regular not showing up for several weeks - would someone care/realise? Do they at MES? One cites attenders texting to apologise for not being able to come; does this happen in Sunday congregations?
  - Most cite instances of anticipating absences & planning ways around them (schoolterm about to start? advertise sooner! Wimbledon on? screen it!)

Capacity for formations of such communal ties semi-dependent on willingness/availability of sending church to help out at MES & befriend attenders there

### ‘Received’

Friendships are being made, by/among/between team & attenders!

- Agreement between three: “the key... building up relationships” - “what keeps them coming back and wanting more? Is fellowship... they feel safe... comfortable... can say what they like [and] ask what they like, no-one’s gonna judge them”
- One citing *Messy Discipleship* book example happening in their MES, whereby “a family where there are believing parents taking another family under their wings, doing things together and growing discipleship organically”
  - Intensity (& continuity) deeper in rural/local contexts where people know each other
- These friendships can function as anchors for non-Christian attenders (one cites as maturity “people who go to it feeling... that they’re part of the Messy Church community rather than it being an event that we put on”)
  - But doesn’t guarantee consistently committedly regular attendance of them (many cite unpredictability/transience as characteristic of attenders); some claim those returning more reliably “indicates that there’s not just ‘oh gosh we haven’t got anything else to do this Sunday afternoon’... [but] a degree of interest beyond that”
    - Nor does this preclude attendance/participation at/in further church life; or to bring other friends & their kids too (some accounts of one-off visitors being just struck at how positive/warm/fun it all was)
  - And often (even large) teams may be simply overburdened to pay keen attention to relationships rather than being “on duty”
    - One says “it’s much more difficult to have those conversations”
    - Some cite ‘welcome desk’ role as having enabled quieter times of connection when huffed parents or shy kids flee the “hustle and bustle inside”; they would “come out for a natter... [which] became a real, sort of, pastoral space”



- Nor can they be at all taken for granted; follow-up on transients difficult but essential if wanting to really connect with unmet needs. Sadly, several cases of persons/families who [often without warning] had “just fallen off my radar and I don’t know why”
  - Several speculate on running into such parents that they miss MES but feel that “it would be a bit weird to come without their children who’ve grown up”, and “it feels like there’s potential there that they might come back to something, but it’s not clear what the something might be”
    - Another highlights initiative to signpost such things where they exist
  - One contrasts with Sunday church in terms of collective contact-sharing
    - Others contrast incidences of pre-absence apologies in Messy!
- Ideal aimed for wholesomely Christian: “people of all ages, all stages of their faith journey... looking out for each other, loving each other, serving each other”
  - One says “start with the assumption that they’re all somewhere on the journey” even [as another says] for those who prior “didn’t have any church connections”
    - Another adds many attenders have “no expectation that you might speak in a different way to the way that you speak all the time” when ‘evangelising’, so do so in context of informality/friendship?
  - Re. to safeguarding tension; “working on the margins... where there is great need” the “vulnerable families that come” may see “safeguarding issues come along with that”
  - Particular engaged roles of leaders in facilitating trust-building for early non-committal pastoral care & nurturing spiritual direction
    - Informal offerings of prayer can “feel totally natural and comfortable”. One has regular lady helping on a prayer-desk - continuity of which has made children “expectant when they go in there... a totally different atmosphere” and really engage with intentions/content of praying with others

Many anecdotes of diverse range of attenders participating in MES to lesser/greater extent & thus becoming an enthusiastic enjoyer/helper (one suggests they experience a spiritual excitement which they don’t yet know how to express outside of the safe space stimulating these feelings)

- Two discussing how this dynamic perpetuates itself: “if you can get up there... maybe the next time or the time after you could do a little bit more” & “it helped other members of the team who might feel ‘I could never do that’... they see them doing it and bit by bit I hope they’ll be encouraged too”. Another adds “that gives them a sense of belonging and contributing”
  - One cites this working on non-MES-attenders, even! Local men were invited to do Christmas readings, which brought in more of the village, “and we’ve now got people saying, ‘when are you going to ask me to do a reading?’”
    - Several cite larger-than-usual seasonal/festival attendances at MES
  - & some mention cases where people went further, wanting (or setting up!) additional elements of active ministry
    - Though sustainable involvement in this (as with initial team) depends on the demographic composition, as noted by some (e.g. “let’s make it realistic for the team... rather than spread ourselves so thin”)
  - Urge to reciprocate directly applies to donations...
- Several speak of “culture shock” of attenders meeting Messy welcome/generosity. Relational precursor to attenders’ reciprocating hospitality, collaborating on crafts, learning more about Jesus... “it’s a very fringe thing [but] a clear sign that somebody is interested” - one beautiful quote from a humbled helpful attender: “this is the only place I’ve been where people have thanked me at the end” - result hopefully that “they wanna be in our gang”
  - Couple of noted instances of people asking about joining an Alpha Group or similar
  - Several cite self-integration as ‘organic’ discipleship: attenders who “once you realise it is becoming a norm in your group” might rethink that “hugely old-

fashioned... not something that may have crossed your horizon really” act “having their child baptised or [being] baptised themselves”

- Though others note variance in backgrounds means certain families may wish to hold baptisms in traditional church even if only attend Messy
- Another points out cultural heritage aspect of identity; “after a family, church was like the next thing you did... you belonged to a group, you always went” - this now up in the post-Christendom air

Accounts of establishing relational networks beyond MES events & these bearing fruit

- One setup email/text prayer chain, has facilitated each-others'-burden-bearing & [even when anonymised!] commitments of praying for these; another story of fruitful prayer sessions (at which “everybody was terribly stressed”) that started as offer of hand-massages (yielding “amazing opportunities to sort of probe a little further as to why”); and numerous other anecdotes of MES-goers loving/supporting one another spiritually/practically (as one points out: by instinct, not rota) and sharing skills/efforts/time
- Several cite striving for informal interdependence between projects; “people can sort of, you know, pick and mix a bit”, if a church offers “that whole spectrum of something for everyone in every place” - missionality as ‘lifeblood’
  - Also provides fertile context for follow-up; “what’s happened [in MES] coming up again elsewhere so it’s not completely forgotten about... they’re making that connection”, and opportunities to foster faith outside monthly events
- If clergy involved helps religiously legitimise such interactions - e.g. those sought out for rites (account of conducting funeral for husband of a mum; Messy-attending families came)

## Holy

### ‘Given’

Numerous suggestions that Church entails inseparable missionality/discipleship, as facilitating both “people coming to know the Lord” and “those progressing in their knowledge of the Lord” - broad consensus among all participants with ‘following/becoming like Jesus’ as discipleship definition

- Space for growth through planning/study as necessitates engagement with scripture
  - Creating spaces for attenders to continue this; take-home activity/question sheets (of varyingly formal models) cited by several as efforts utilised
    - “trying to find ways of encouraging faith in the home”; one whose church staff bought little Christmas/Easter books as seasonal gifts for each family
  - One cites ‘curriculum’ of MES activity themes across year - discipleship separated
- Space for accessibility/engagement of & with MES teaching; various factors cited here (with caveat recognition of inequalities in attenders’ prior exposure: some may have “obviously got no knowledge of the Bible at all”) but ministry is unconditional - “what we do is seek to offer God’s love to people”
  - Sensitivity to ‘holy jargon’, aim not being “scary for people who are dipping a toe into church waters” - discerning people’s curiosity without being alienatingly Churchish, gaining trust before/alongside offering guidance
    - Difficulties exist in ascertaining spiritual growth/direction: onus on team “being a listening ear” in recognition of different paths/journeys
    - Some highlight value of willingness to change way MES is done if can help
  - Unpacking Bible: “story is a great way of conveying a reality... people relate to stories”
    - Often in celebratory context
  - Encourage question-asking & connection-seeking; several recount possibilities of good conversations emerging from little questions/prompts over craft/meal tables
    - Some have constant/ongoing prayer stations or question boards

- Opportunities offered to go deeper (exploration/study courses, holiday clubs)
- Practical/intentional element upheld in values of environment - e.g. teach forgiveness as means of conflict resolution between kids at play, quiet moments of prayer/stillness
  - Many anecdotes imply opportunistic nature of these happenings, though a couple recount more traditional-seeming/ritualistic means of running prayer & reflection as going down well
    - Though all are grounded in developing relationships within safe spaces

Some cite simplicity of MES as lending potential support across denominational borders

- One says “it’s very ecumenical” & happy to equip anyone for Messifying their own denomination
  - Varying degrees of orthodoxy/opportunism in festival engagement (one holds a saint-focused light party around Halloween, another holds “confession with the pumpkin”)
- While others worry this very simplicity might rob it of deeper growth-potential for adults: one talks of whether they’re “getting sufficient meat for the level they are at” to which responses ‘probably at the moment’ but “aren’t they not going to need something more substantial” longer-term?
  - Some have tried to sidestep this with non-all-age offshoots; seems to have potential for bearing fruit without notably affecting overall MES community cohesion

Team’s trustworthiness/behaviour matters in testament - “sort of a practical example”, “living it out... the actions that are speaking rather than [verbally] articulating any of it” - one talks of how this effect occurred in secular workplace, when told “we know you’re a Christian, but you don’t need to talk about it because we can see that you are” she thus declares powerful tactic of “just, be who you are and let Christ be in everything that you do, and people see that [and] very often they find it attractive”

- Couple cite presence/involvement of clergy [or congregation helpers] as giving this a boon
- Safeguarding/consistency also key in forming trusting community
- As this, when noticed, leads naturally into discussion of the Christ ethic

### *‘Received’*

Numerous stories of attenders growing in explicit/apparent engagement/enthusiasm for Christ (does recur that discerning underlying change occurring less observable) as informal ‘contagion’ of holiness. Many encouragements.

- These include: uptake of study/question opportunities, asking good questions & maintaining discussions, voluntary self-involvement in aspects of Christian-community life-sharing (email prayer chains, open prayer sessions, helping with activities/logistics/maintenance/especially planning), being involved with further ministry/events (e.g. one-offs, offshoots, homegroups, even Sunday mornings), utilising resources for home worship/prayer, embedding Christian values/ethics into their personal/family behaviors, seeking pastoral care, one-anothering and burden-bearing, listen during celebration & creative time - intergenerational co-exploration, attending regularly, developing own understanding of biblical narrative/concepts
  - This “deepening of people’s relationship with Jesus” a kind of unquantifiable growth & its own kind of Holy Spiritual fruit... difficult seeing it happen: one suggests MES could benefit “if we could create more of a sacred space” where (not “fighting against noise”) people can more easily grasp prayer “as something worth doing... [which] is real, is answered”; another emphasises a “culture of faith in the home” as key to sustaining transformation which is harder to monitor than when observable in MES

- Despite many resources produced/distributed to this end (holy homes) several cite unsureness whether these are helpful - used at all?
  - Given variability of journeys no guidelines how much it'll take for someone to go from 'start of journey' to 'baptise/confirm my whole family please' -if they do. But some do! One says, "it waxes and wanes like a lot of these things... none of our journeys are a trajectory in one direction, let's be honest... particularly when you're further back"
    - Complicated moreso by all-age: some kids very engaged while some adults don't concentrate, some of both vice versa... "it's a progression". A simple suggestion of reciprocity as initiation-point - "it's not just coming and having something done to you, it's beginning to engage, to be part of it"
      - One claims "often it'll be the children'll drag their parents" along
  - This goes for team too: "anyone can be a Messy Church leader... that can be a medium through which you grow into a better, deeper relationship with God"
    - Several recount initially-reluctant attenders who through prompts have grown into dedicatedly-helpful team members
- Similarly MES presents opportunities to Sunday congregations to grow through service (some particularly mention in relationality, welcoming/befriending MES attenders)

Some recount attenders' association of holy transformation with MES as people, structure, building... implied gospel content is presented attractively by context?

- One puts it; "it's more than just a craft club... they're not just saying well you know 'we don't want the God bit'... it's almost like they come back cos they want a bit more of it". Has power to re-attract people put off church previously - several cite de-churched reconnections
  - Several highlight symbolic power upon group of sacraments
- May be personal history/culture factors at play also - several cite parents' commitment to kids attending despite lack of noticeable faith, speculate roots in Sunday school forming character

Recurrent implication that maintaining close interpersonal relationships with attenders only reliable way of knowing roughly where they're up to with faith journeys

- Particularly as kids get older - discern what holy challenges they may be ready for "coming back into being integrated" or they might age themselves out of reach

## Catholic

### 'Given'

Trans-denominational power/status of sacraments highlighted by several.

- Likewise the 'churchiness' of buildings themselves - some say "can add to the atmosphere"
- Couple of tentative suggestion/questions as to what even constitutes denomination; whether MES would be considerably counted given its distinctive proliferation & successes?
- Some stories of baptisms/confirmations offered & requested to be held elsewhere (one says "they're always offered a Messy Church baptism, but they prefer" in traditional service) & so another claims to always offer this choice. Interesting tension with numerous citations of these Messies declaring that Messy Church is their church?

Several cite vital-yet-unseen roles played in faith journeys by other churches & Sunday congregations.

- Numerous references to Messy attenders visiting other churches.
- Involvement of such varying hugely across stories; general anecdotal suggestions that smaller churches are more conducive to such cross-pollinations (e.g. in a "little tiny" one where "the whole church is involved") becoming visibly manifest.
  - Build natural relationality across/between these communities, fosters cohesion here: "going to select individuals who wouldn't normally be involved with Messy

Church and say, 'I hear you're a great bridge player. A great knitter. Could you come along [and] share that skill'... might be a way to start to bridge that gap". Likewise sharing Messy stories in Sunday church; "to be able to say to them, 'well, you know, this is fantastic what God's done... share that with other people'... trying to help people to see that we're all trying to work towards the same thing".

Promote mutual upbuilding

- Messy helpers' team often draws/relies heavily upon this; but actual congruent vision variable (one claim "it sometimes feels as though we're children's church as far as most of the inherited congregation are concerned... I don't think that they get it", while clergy are involved but lukewarm; another claims of an elderly couple who've "never really [been] involved in anything, have they, in the life of the church before" and yet "we can't keep them off the rota! Every month! They absolutely love it")
  - All-age/family aspect of these overlaps flagged as important
- Similarly variable response from Messies as to engaging further Sunday offers. One summates "different people go to different services", another suggests key is valuing interdependent diversity - "recognising and valuing each other's ministries, praying for them, all the subtle stuff"
  - Another even says "we tell [team] not to come on a Sunday morning" because they all see MES "they always knew... it's church for us"
- Several hazard question that criticisms of Messy's loose discipleship may also be valid critique of inherited congregations... "the majority who turn up on the Sunday and don't necessarily do anything else [to] develop their faith"
- Many suggesting that Messy needs clearer explicit recognition from the pulpit as being a legitimate form of church to kick-start/uphold congregational engagement
  - One claims "vicar needs to be 100% behind it... include it as part of the service" & another highlights value of vicar's front-line friendships with Messy attenders ("just like everybody else, he gets a job... there, wearing his collar, so people associate him with that") as humanising clergy roles & legitimising MES church ("unless they're seeing someone with a dog-collar there... perhaps they might not see that as a valid part of the church"). Another says, "when I stopped being church warden, the church wardens didn't come, the vicar didn't come, PCC members didn't come" - suggests MES engagement/attendance can be seen by clerical persons as organisational obligation rather than relational mission
    - Risk; view of Messies as just "potential bums on seats for Sundays... [not] as a valuable congregation in their own right"
    - Institutional constraints on MES catholicity - not sanctioned for lay-led Anglican communion; raises questions as to necessity of ordained-leds?
  - Some have considered/attempted Messifying Sundays to whatever extent as "an opportunity [for main cong.] to come along and have an experience of it"; one caveats "my gut feeling is they'd just stay away". Celebratory events (e.g. a Nativity or Good Friday) held open for all of Sunday/Messy congregations, "trying to bring all of God's family within our deaconry together" - likewise.

Some cite presence of Christians from multiple traditions gathering ecumenically as Messy congregation (or people exploring Christianity from across multiple traditions)

- Several are explicitly/aspiringly ecumenical Messy groups (often last local churches left going in small-town contexts? one says Methodists keen to promote their Anglican MES efforts); another says "I think to become ecumenical would be a dream"
  - Couple further suggest in vulnerable church contexts ecumenicity may be necessity for MES to survive as remaining expression of local Christian community - several cases where it's already replaced family service!

- One says of boy who learned about faith via Messy then joined Catholic church for communion & leader went along; “it might not be the way that I worship, but he’s still progressing”

### ‘Received’

Numerous anecdotal support for messily-for-the-bestness of simply allowing/accepting offers of help from people in either congregation, at any step of faith journey, as holding capacity for upbuilding.

- Non-churched helpers often get involved with church life beyond MES’s introduction & Christian helpers often get involved with MES despite lack of prior engagement with this kind of help

Size of MES congregation has twofold impacts on effective maturation - larger ones take time/effort moreso to develop (esp. voluntary leaders also in clergy - “people still expect you to clean the pavilion, do the readings on a Sunday, intercessions, etc, etc”), & being larger relative to Sunday congregation may disperse capacities for social cohesion (one speaks of a “growing divide” between broad camps of preferred tradition; “we’re big enough almost to have fallen into two factions”, which is ventured as risk of serious decline for MES’s health/sustainability) if involvement not consistently promoted.

- Intentions aside, top-down local church promotion of interdependence often found wanting; one team includes both clergy but “how do they position it in meetings and through what they say?” ‘Well, they don’t... the only mention of Messy Church is asking people to help with moving the chairs at the end of the 10 o’clock service”. One feels their sender-church saw MES “as a way of ticking its boxes for family and children’s work”. One’s church even said of Messies “well, they’re not *our* church children”
  - Some cases of MES being preserved as replacement for dying-out alternative service, combined with such efforts, or similarly becoming tacitly sanctioned by clergy. Several cite in relation to this prayer/funding/organisational support (or lacks thereof) - best uptake where small/elderly congregations wanted missional renewal so supported MC & “it’s been an eye-opener for them”; one where Messy & Sunday congregations blur together every so often has worked really well (slow warming initially but at last, “it’s not threatening and it’s not complete chaos”)
  - Others however say, “if I said, ‘we’re not gonna do it anymore’, they’d say, ‘oh, that’s sad’. But it wouldn’t, I suspect, be picked up.’ ‘They wouldn’t feel the loss directly”. As with “why are you just waiting for things to take a downturn before you ask us what’s happening?”
  - Practicality of effective mission not guaranteed by uptake for helping: one cites worry of Sunday regulars leaping into MES in such excited quantities that “people who don’t know us as well would get submerged in the rush”
- Ministers leading by example (i.e. presence/visibility more than particular tasks) widely cited as good resolution to this potential pickle, cultivating “more of a positive atmosphere... looking out and open to different things”. Also cite instances of where positive steps here occurred through laypersons’ efforts in promoting MES to inherited congregations
  - One says MES “is a thing that doesn’t need somebody in a dog collar”; but numerous accounts of church staffs’ involvement bearing fruit
    - Though some also voice worry over lay-people’s dependence on clergy for the performance of vital church functions (“the sort of rules and regulations that surround communion... [if vicar] wouldn’t come in and do it... us laypeople were not able to... [argues it’s daft to] wheel in this very special man and all his special clothes to do something when we’ve been ministering for a long time”), which is perceived as potential hazard for attenders’ view of wider church unity

- Similar possibilities noted for holding MES in church buildings (one says “people liked coming into church buildings... that was something that’d really helped”)
- Formalised leadership widely agreed as helpful for MES organisational stability, but also values lay-people’s largely-voluntary roles; one says “training and a licensing is probably the wrong route” (as becomes less accessible)

One claims that C of E “only have certain criteria” for attenders’ count, which excludes MES - despite local numbers being seriously directly comparable in multiple cases. Compare with various claims of enthusiastic support for MES from other denominational congregations (e.g. “the Methodist church has closed, in the village, so the Methodist presence predominantly, is through Messy Church”)

- Many being saved: most participants cite attenders/families who’ve been baptised/confirmed. Many requested formal setting/ceremony for this. Several citations of those undergoing these then going on to attend more traditional churches (esp. once children ‘grow out of’ MES), and several cases of baptisms/confirmations being followed by more people asking about these & going for it themselves (“the first one makes it seem like a possibility”)
  - Also cases of attenders making little discernible growth in faith journey but who can/do identify MES as being a church that they’re part of
  - One beautiful story of lady in her 60s, who “had been looking for a church for thirty years, and she’d never found anything that she thought was real and authentic - until she came to our Messy Church... she asked about confirmation”

## Apostolic

### ‘Given’

Sharing personal testimonies/stories widely cited as useful starting-point for Christian conversation (either as part of service structure, or loosely around craft/food times)

- Opportunity soil here in smaller/informal groups, but largely constrained by insufficient-ish time & staffing (“we have got on our team some people who are very good at having personal conversations [but] unfortunately they tend to be busy... sticking this onto that or whatever”)
  - Reciprocity of listening important here; “finding out where they’re at”, as this builds trust & deepens interpersonal contact organically (ergo; friendship)
  - One suggests holding some MES leaders off activities to ‘float’ & chat freely
- Some leaders express reticence/difficulty using crafts as evangelical segues; one feels it lacks capacity for intellectual depth in “how I communicate Christian thinking... to children to try and prevent some of the stumbling blocks happening”
  - Mitigated by capacities of team to offer alternative avenues of exploration (several cite casual Bible studies or more structured courses, or invitations to join planning sessions)
    - & holding MES structures open-handedly if could better suit attenders!

Various voiced struggles with articulating gospel cogently to people who often have “obviously got no knowledge of the Bible at all” (“or spiritual awareness”) while many involved in ministry/leadership may lack experience of that: whole-team training/growth widely considered to be under-supported (esp. considering that many on teams are new believers roped into volunteering after attending)

- Several aware that among such demographic “the people who come... just would never come to Sunday church” - because “so many people have got such a negative image of church... so if we can help today’s children grow into adults who’ve got a positive impression of what church is... moving people on in their understanding”
  - Follow, “we’ve gotta pull rocks out of the field before we can even plant the seeds”

- Messy presence innately apostolic: “it’s reaching people that Sunday church hasn’t reached... as basic as that really” & must recognise this context in how it proceeds for missionality; “some people feel embarrassed about it, or nervous that they might not have the right answers, or might not have the language to talk in an everyday way... whatever socioeconomic setting you’re doing it in, you have to have the right communication skills for the group of people in your congregation”
  - Implies much equipping needed for those uncomfortable with leadership roles, to be empowered for mission/responsibility
  - Others’ points imply deeds attest more accessibly to attractiveness of faith

Presence & inhabiting full social/geographic space of church’s context cited by several as important factor in developing/maintaining missional mentality/freshness

- e.g. meeting in the village hall “right slap-bang in the middle of the village... taking it into the community” with context-sensitivity so “really, yeah, making a difference... love and serving” without unspoken expectations distorting motives (and so “you might be very hopeful that they become disciples... what we do is seek to offer God’s love to people”)
  - Implication that ‘maturity’ is childlike/freeform - “you might have a mature team leading it, not in age but in experience, but even that changes”, another adds “it’s good that it does change. Keeps the freshness”, and someone else highlights need to keep this vision actively reflexively evolving (“everything has to evolve”)
    - Several keen to point out Messy maturity doesn’t mean it resembles Sundays; also numerous anecdotes of Sunday congregations’ general [un]helpfulness in supporting (to whatever degree) Messy outreach/church
    - Another suggests maturity implied by “integratedness within the community” where MES is “being intentional, saying ‘yes’ to those opportunities... seeking them out as well”
  - Several have people paid by sending churches to pursue such pastoral family work, key building relationships with non-churchgoing Messies - “building bridges and giving those more intimate times... rather than just scrabbling around for a few minutes in a hectic Messy Church”. Some without regard such persons as highly desirable
    - Some also cite non-all-age times in MES where these intentional opportunities pursued among particular group (most commonly older kids)
    - Under pressures real tension exists in ‘dying’ MES, as if anyone is still coming, is it not worth persisting for their sake, no matter how few? One cites case of having to ask these questions sparked families involvement in helping run MES which boosted its viability of continuing
- Some float possibilities of becoming community hubs to degree than can run hosts of locality’s ecumenical traditional stuff (e.g. village carol service co-run by all churches declining annually, one suggests could replace with open Messy Christmas at a school); one case where became well-known enough to be consistently engaging people every Christmas & summer
  - Several cases where such efforts had more uptake from community than Messies!
- Digital aspect of this; one cites a facebook community as helping sustain regular contact with Messies

### **‘Received’**

Broadly cited that providing reasons of faith alongside sharing stories can prompt people to share their own & engage in discussions/activities growing in confidence within those parameters; various attest role of community/sociability in developing this (“a kind of get-together, a social group” which supports “also that they would be looking out into the world” - another says “people are, will be, growing in their faith, and bringing new people to faith, and all the things that a church should be doing” as clear/simple vision which all churches (inc. Messies) fall short of wholesale perfection)



- One highlights gradual process of this as empowering people's personal ministry; "get up there and do just, you know, answers to a couple of questions once, maybe the next time... you could do a little more"
  - This tentativeness also held up by another as important in getting best responses from 'evangelising' attenders, as their focused responses to biblical stories/wisdom easier to see spiritual direction & so nurture them in than talking about discipleship.
    - Meeting people where they're at; some are at "0.1 stage on the road". Several cite importance of effective/inclusive communication in such discourse/efforts, and behavioral coherence - living faith out practically as an "evangelistic tool", finding opportunities in the here & now to share yourself/your faith
  - Several recognise humility/reality that MES might not constitute main steps of journey for all drawn into contact with it. Opportunities for involvement in further ministry but discernment of "how much do you follow up afterwards where you're not seen to be hassling... almost trying to indoctrinate them and make them feel uncomfortable"; has to be undertaken in light of relationship

Several mentions of organic 'virality' where attenders bring other people; this broadly associated with church growth (on personal level of "faith and discipleship" & in congregational size). Many state that (rurally particularly) MES is growing much faster than inherited church

- Ranging from those who "invite their friends because it's a fun thing" (one seemingly surprised at this, as very rarely used to happen among churchgoers "because it's - bit embarrassing?") to "Messy advocates [who] really want everybody to come"; likewise sender-church helpers largely volunteer "because they enjoy it".
  - One says this growth is "where we meet new people", another speaks of incredible encouragement in considering "the number of people, just in our country, that have actually had an encounter with the gospel in some way or another" because of MES; another suggests this has bolstered children's/family work in sending church too
    - Another talks of MES being "so big" that it'd caused an actual "conundrum"
  - One says this natural response to "positive experience of church... rather than none" (displays ownership - "being like 'this is the place to be'"), another goes further & suggests natural spiritual response can help faith grow just by being part of discipling community. Another talks about children's response to theme-led games/activities, "they do get into quite a real discussion about things... I think they'd love to do more"
    - Multiple stories of regular/committed regulars becoming helpers/team
    - One recounts youth group becoming energised after a mission trip; set hopeful precedent & though all have left for uni/etc group continues, though reaching older children rather than teenagers
  - Several cite worries about coping relationally/logistically with influxes of attenders - if team relatively too-small it can become "challenging to have anything like a meaningful conversation". Useful helper role "chatterers... just people who are there to talk", but another cites recurrently having to nudge sending-church helpers into properly doing this conversation as apostolic activity
- Some suggest such things happen more in bigger seasonal events (e.g. holiday Bible clubs, local Christmas whatnots); mentions importance of relational continuity so attenders/team (esp. if numbers of both large) maintain that "very strong community of people that will go back and back", so by exposure raising "huge potential really for discipleship"
  - Presence out in local community cited by some as performing similar role (e.g. family worker linked with three schools, "very visible" and kids at all 3 schools "know her" as do other locals, from her consistently being there at Christmas/summer/Sundays)

## Christ-centred

### 'Given'

Majority of participants talk about discipleship as “journey”/“following Jesus” (having been called?), as grounding language of Christian life in clear gradual/relational terms avoids jargon & engages non-churched families well. One says, “I don’t think Jesus used the term discipleship so much either”

- Baked into stories, celebration, discussion themes, teaching, games, baptisms (or demonstrations/explanations of these), mealtimes, crafts, special occasions/events, activities, etc.
  - Efforts to make this content applicable (“growing in love” or “relat[ing] to the activities of everyday life... a practical example” & the “outworking of that”) so families retain Jesus teaching in home life; “sharing what Jesus talked about coming back home when you’ve got something wrong”. One links this closely with personal development; “in Jesus you could be the best person you can be”
    - One gives cracking example of game devised to teach family forgiveness (e.g. “you picked up a card: ‘my sister trashed my room so I trashed hers back. Go back two squares’... [or] you say, ‘doesn’t matter. These things happen.’ And you carry on playing. You know, you forgive them... and move forward three or four spaces”)
    - Claire comments “there’s obviously something about Messy Church that makes you think: this is a methodology I can work with”... to which participant replies “Well, yeah, I’m a teacher”.
- With clear wide recognitions that “discipleship’s not just about the people that come along... it’s about the team as well, because we’re all following Jesus... all learning, growing closer to him, becoming more like him”, nor is it a compartmentalisable component of church life - one wishes church view “can move from [it] being one of the things we do to being what we do”
  - Personal testimonies cited as helpful bridge here; “sharing our stories and about us sharing things that have happened in our lives and modelling that for people who are just starting out on their journey with Jesus”
    - Role of community in immediate connection-formation of attendee/help/lead relationships; “recognising a need that somebody has... [and saying] ‘I wanna walk a bit of this journey with you if I can’” - ‘formal’ discipleship may occur further down the path.
      - And may need more substantive teaching/pastoring down the line than Messy Churches are often enabled to provide! (some provided in extra Bible study groups/sessions)
    - **Great Quote:** “the walk to Emmaus is the one that always strikes me... the fact that Jesus - these disciples walked along, he walked with them, talking to them... it was only at the very end when he said he was going to go that they recognised him for who he was... and that’s what we’re doing at Messy Church, we’re on that walk to Emmaus”
  - Though teams’ understanding of personal relationships with Jesus hindered by lacks of perspective
  - Socialisation & informal learning heavily implied by multiple contributions as distinct elements in effective evangelism within MES/church community activity; one puts it “just be who you are and let Christ be in everything that you do, and people see that and... very often they find it attractive, don’t they?”

Efforts to model/instigate Christ-like culture of prayerfulness/servitude/inclusion; several cite risk of toxified ‘expectancy’ on attenders - “you have to have a mindset about giving, about what you’re offering to people, not what you’re expecting back from them... you might be very hopeful that they become disciples but [obviously, they might not]... you’re expressing God’s love to people”

- Particular missional focus on/outreach to marginalised communities? (one's MES has "been quite active in responding to refugees... that kind of social action, what can we do as Messy Church... as part of our faith journey")
- Nobody can be reasonably excluded - one says "we're told to go out into the highways and byways and invite everyone in"

### 'Received'

Numerous affirmations of reality that attenders' growth/development on personal spiritual journeys may take many/varied/overlapping/unpredictable pathways to lead them toward Jesus (attenders already feature mixture of degrees in personal discipleship; "you've got beginners, enquirers, mature Christians - the complete range")

- This upholds MES as legitimate channel of discipleship while also recognising that even for many who get baptised/confirmed "it wasn't all through Messy Church"
  - Also rebukes "fear factor" of potentially-unretained children as they outgrow MES & shifts emphasis onto seeds planted
  - One claims part of what MES does is "provide a starting point" from which "one would expect... that as people grow and as children get older... they will probably move to something else"
    - Consider "if they're going to be sort of dedicated followers of Jesus, going once a month to something and nothing else isn't gonna be the whole thing"
    - But more established forms of church not automatically healthier discipleship; a church may have a "majority who turn up on the Sunday and don't necessarily do anything else... nothing obvious to develop their faith"

Suggestion that providing welcoming community helps nurture Christianity's realisation for attenders, arguably/tentatively discernible in observable 'signs' of deepening faith (which several also cite as being valuable form of growth alongside mere attendance numbers)

- Examples:
  - People sharing bad things that've happened to them, struggles, circumstances, sin; providing social/emotional support in these cases important & cited as opportunities for helping people learn to pray & share with confidence - "they have to share it because they're excited... they haven't experienced it maybe before or for a long time, so they've got to get it out somewhere and a safe place is somebody who they know" (i.e. friends made via MES. or moreso the God whom via MES they may've realised is "much bigger than our little lives" & so "prayer as something worth doing")
    - One mentions realism needed in cultivating this openness; "everything doesn't go swimmingly [just because you're a Christian]. You have poo land in your lap, as somebody once said"
  - Attenders increasingly "seeking to [help out] rather than just responding when asked" & helpers doing "nothing that points towards them but actually does everything that points away that actually makes [MES] happen" - i.e. growing in "servant-heartedness" - broader implications for "love and service" in local context
    - Some cite helpers going way beyond the 'call of duty' & when thanked profusely "they genuinely say, 'no, we love doing it', and they get a lot from it"
    - Explicit Christ-imitations in acts of service potent ways of sparking interest in recounts of stories (e.g. an Easter service where they did "foot washing, both with the adults and the children" and got many "talking about their need to have their feet washed... their needs met in various different ways")
  - People growing in participatory curiosity; adults/children "asking what it's all about", engaging closely with celebration/teaching times ("sometimes some very profound things come out of that") or themes of craft/activities, or coming to extra stuff

- All-age may strengthen this; “the little ones enable that growth of relationship and faith because they can have really good conversations” and adults can help reinforce by managing kids’ behavior by pointing to Christ’s example
- One mentions family worker’s survey of kids & non-churched ones cited singing songs & learning about Jesus as what they liked about it
- People growing comfortable with each other during mealtimes; maybe parents getting relaxed & joining in, “try to have table conversation” with the kids
- Several cite development of genuine friendships between church/seeking attenders as a key factor in facilitating this

## All-age

### ‘Given’

Recurrent strong anecdotal/intentional emphasis on whole-family discipleship, but many cite need to “remember the parents or carers who come along” implying instinctively child-oriented bias (one says “I thought it was meant to be sort of everybody welcome... it does tend to be children of primary age or a bit older”). MES is “about learning together as family”, and almost goes without saying “children can only come if their parents bring them and if the parents don’t want to come... then they won’t”

- Apostolic self-awareness of language usage important in maintaining “really difficult balance”
- Several highlight potential danger of focusing in on needs of harder-to-entertain older children (young’uns relatively easier to keep happy [if often more mess/labour-intense], but in teaching they may “need things to stand on”), to neglect of parents’ meaningful inclusion.
  - Tangible vulnerability with these older kids; “it’s very difficult for them because once they go into high school they’re scattered” and teenagers can just be difficult - “what do you do with those young people that really don’t want to be seen with their parents anymore?”
    - Sociocultural factors at play here? “it’s not just age that makes people drift off... they don’t all get to a certain age and then disappear” (although many do; half-implied resignation/determinism among many leaders on this tendency)
  - Several give examples of having split all-ageness of MES structure in parts (so as to try developing youth-worker relationships with these older ones, as well as with parents in other cases) working quite well
    - One suggests this “definitely helps keep them in... but it’s harder then to get them engaged with helping”
  - Some suggest from experience that restructuring events around anticipated wants of these older kids not as effective in actually keeping them around MES as “moving them across to being helpers”, others argue retention here better if activities consciously do include options/ranges of “things that are appealing [to] all different ages and abilities” with clear acknowledgements of children’s changing sense of self-identity with age
    - Another adds, “yeah, but you can’t have all of them”, though some do claim to have large numbers of teenagers on teams - maintaining mutual sense of value held up here (“let them know you want them to come, that you like them... or that you need them to come because we need you to do this for us... [helps to make them] feel that they’re wanted”)
    - Minority accounts of sustained growth & retention, now have “much broader age range of children” having prioritised “involving the parents”
      - One points out such success dependent on enough attenders engaging

- Equipping for further exploration of biblical themes at home: take home sheets common here (with ideally enough of range of components to reflectively engage children & parents/carers)
  - Some cite times where celebratory occasions enabled avenue for Messifying elements of other church service (e.g. first Advent Sunday wreath-making as family activity, or cross-parish inter-church Nativity performance/events)
    - Although several although cite concerns that stuff like this encourages sending-church complacency in family service/outreach as ‘MES does it well enough’
  - Several express hopes of seed-planting so even those who drift will retain positives in experience/memory of church (“like sort of old Sunday school type of thing”)
- One talks about ongoing reflexivity in how hospitality/creativity are approached so ‘outputs’ of MES times aid & don’t burden parents of (widely-agreed it’s easier to excite) children; so while crafts good as “the story’ll follow them home” they don’t want parents inundated, like “what am I gonna do with this?” - so experimenting with new forms of activity (making bread or growing seeds e.g.) whereby “if they’re gonna take them home, there’s a reason for it... so it doesn’t cause a barrier with parents” (esp. of large families)
  - Another talks of extending this to Sunday gatherings as well for special occasions; MES baptisms held retain kids, what “tried to make that more of a family friendly service”
- Safety awareness of constant importance to team; fun happens, as do accidents

Extending MES community’s church-like spaces into contact with other age groups might yield fruit

- Some have had “baptisms as a result of [parents coming into] toddler [group]”, several cite contact with new parents as beginnings of longer-term engagement with families
- Some get elderly MES fans as regulars; one couple “couldn’t bring their grandchildren because the grandchildren were busy... [asked if] could they come anyway”, another has run light MES-ish activities at nursing home with dementia patients (it’s a “good vehicle for older people... it doesn’t really matter if you’re wandering around or talking out loud or not”)
- Some know adults who seem to want to be part of things but “in practice... wouldn’t come to Messy Church without children”, so there’s impetus to develop “other things that would feel more normal to come to” for childless/children-‘too-old’ persons
  - One lovely anecdote, kid who “desperately wanted to go to the rival after-school club” so their mother just stayed to chat & do the crafts until “they went to collect them and they came back in together. And it was like, ‘what’ve you made, mum?’”

Outreach development with child focus can be unpredictable; one cites effort to run ‘kid church’ on Sunday mornings alongside main service, uptake from inherited families good (“slightly more informal activities” and “they love it because they get fed”) but failed to engage Messy families from school hosting the sessions. Others agree hard to engage MES families with non-MES church stuff

- One cited exception is holiday club; “lots of little bitesize things... deeper for families because they’re having three days on the run hearing that message” in celebratory/fun/all-age context.
- Follow-up/continuity cited as important in all these

Very variable participants’ experience of “what happened to parents when their children have moved on from Messy Church”, as established ages of congregations vary widely. One even says it “hadn’t really occurred to me about the parents” in such post-MES-family considerations, but another claims “I do think the reality is that most of the time we lost the parents when we lost the children”

- Likewise variable attendance of all ages at each Messy Church (albeit with broad recognition that on the kids front across UK it substantively outperforms inherited churches)

**'Received'**

Pretty much all participants cite broadly (albeit variably) intergenerational attendance/engagement, including (again variable) development of these into helping roles; some highlight this as signifying MES maturity, where "it would be made up of people of all ages" who "grow in faith and discipleship within that congregation and would still be there in five or ten years' time"

- Where this works, bears unexpected fruits - all ages benefit from secure social exposure to those of other ages (e.g. old folks who "heard about it and they want some company" [a lady teaching kids French knitting], parents being surprised at level of kids' engagement/exposure to school/church learning/understanding, maintaining family regularity via "the children have pestered a slightly unwilling adult" to come along)
  - Several suggest strongest impacts here stem from simple acts of servitude: one says "some of the most profound conversations came out of foot washing, both with the adults and the children... talking about, yeah, their need to have their feet washed"
  - Likewise inclusive and appropriate participatory invitations cited by many as helping maintain older kids' engagement (esp. in less-regular big fun stuff, e.g. holiday clubs)
  - Many cited confirmations/baptisms (adults & children) arising from engaged families
- Where seems not to work reasons perceived/given often include over-emphasis on particular age group (e.g. "one of the 12-year-olds who's a regular at my youth group" stopped going to MES because in her words "it's just too young for me")
  - Although conversely this seems to be effective in engaging new families for particularly-reproduced outreach initiatives (e.g. toddlers) - but unreliable for actual retention of same people! (e.g. "starting a youth café, which we hoped some of them would move onto... but it's largely another group of young people who come to it")
  - One points out rough gender split here: past 9+ ages, girls largely happy to keep doing crafty stuff, boys largely risk getting bored without games/runabouts
- Some suggest intergenerational capacity for discipleship rooted to an extent in social/cultural memory - inferably parents whose "experiences of Sunday School were actually positive, and mean more to them than they thought they did... they want that for their children" (even if no substantive contact/engagement with faith in the rest of their adult lives)
  - Likewise the core values of MES universally accessible to a degree
  - Expressions of sending-church catholicity/support need to better sustain this kind of engaged remembrance; many cite missionally-stagnant elderly congregations

Numerous citations of on-the-ground difficulties maintaining all-age discipleship in MES context

- Because "parents tended to be too distracted by smaller children"... i.e. "it's not an ideal time to try and have that deeper conversation... when you're trying to chop up a child's food, stop them from running away from the table" or working out "where you've put that bit of glue"
  - Another claims this very atmosphere is what makes MES so potent for the kids; a place where they can have family fun "with nobody saying 'ooh you mustn't do that!'" and there unsurprisingly are many who don't listen - but same for adults
  - But crowdedness of circumstances can make discipleship opportunities "hit and miss"
- Cited by some as factor in development of person/context-appropriate extra-Messy relational times; "approach both parents [and] see if they would be interested in a kind of get-together, a social group over coffee and cake, over a drink in the pub, whatever" - strong emphasis on these being tailored around needs/conveniences of such families
  - Likewise several cite proactive/listening-minded invitation for parents to help working; one cites massive reliance on age-diverse help from sending-church & MES

- attenders, latter who “haven’t come to serve, they’ve come... to be part of the body”
- Such self-segregation occurs sort of organically, among newcomers - adults chat while kids participate in worship/activities. Counteract with pervasion by church families?
  - Several instances of MES families further seeking discipleship themselves (via Sundays etc); one story of quite small kids visiting grandparents in Bulgaria, their mum was asked “‘what is this Messy Church? They keep talking about it!’ [and doing so] in relation to their church there, so they recognise... it’s not just like going to a playgroup”
    - One suggests that signs of spiritual development are same in adults & children, i.e. just engaging in clear self-conscious way with content of biblical message
    - These stories more pronounced in contexts where MES team have community roots (esp. with schools etc)

Fairly widespread [acceptance? apprehension?] that past a certain age kids are hard to keep engaged: one says “they tend to leave when they’re about 10 or 11... they’ve probably got something else”, one says “they do move on to other things”; and this has knock-on family effects (cos of “perception that it’s a thing you do with your [younger] children” so an “‘oh well, that’s a phase’” mentality). Unclear dynamics; some teenagers do just “go off their families for a while” according to another or may be simply “too cool to come”

- Only reference where this absent couched in recognition that “we haven’t really experienced that yet” as began with v. young bulk of attenders’ kids - but “we’re probably... potentially getting close to that, if it happens”
- Abruptness of transience cited by some as confusing/upsetting; “you don’t know when their last month will be. They don’t say, ‘I’m leaving now.’ They just don’t come anymore”
  - Various potential reasons emergent from children aging; secondary school transitions, parents going back to work, etc
    - Interesting noting that in these anecdotes about Messy parents there seems to be an overwhelming majority of mums (apart from discussions about how MESs were rethink to be more men-friendly)
- One claims if you’re not aiming MES at all ages then those passing a given age may just leave. Another suggests “young people like to be given responsibility... it’s an acknowledgement that I’m not a child anymore” as insight retention, if they’re “willing to make that transition [into] being integrated” into the MES participatory/active teamwork
  - Another cites effective retained engagement here involving their contributing to the celebration time (after a brief age-segregated activity interlude)

Strange irony that many voice worries over average age (as in too olds) of their teams! This presents genuine concern on long-term staff viability of several MES (“literally we cannot physically run a Messy Church... we haven’t got the staff, we haven’t got the physical health to do it”)

## Hospitality

### ‘Given’

Broad common-sense consensus that providing free food was an effectual act of practical service in engaging families (esp. from busier/poorer backgrounds [“they know that their whole family are going to get a good homecooked substantial meal”] - views on solicitation of donations vary but as one puts it & is broadly agreed with, “nor would [this] be something that I would want to impose”) with church community. Normal everyday needs become soil for potent gestures: one says “simpler the better I think”, another - “for some of those children a dinner table’s a bit of a novelty”

- But does entail reliance on group of hopefully-reliable people to resource & cook stuff (several leaders cite gratitude at these people’s genuine willing enjoyment of such service)

- And access to adequate kitchen facilities - which some don't & get round it by doing snack-type stuff (sandwiches/puddings) instead
- And goes without saying is consistently resource-intensive (economy aspects)
- People generally eat 3 meals a day, so this becomes highly flexible aspect of community
  - Several do breakfasts/brunches, several late lunches or afternoon teas, several dinners
  - MES day/time practice varying depending on best fit for attender/team availability

Multiple highlighting of how eating together can pre-empt, provide or prompt organic relationship-building opportunities/capacities. Several anecdotally discuss how naturally this can then spill over into developing community depth outside structured regular MES events (and missional impacts of this when hospitality intentionality sustained: one family served with meal rota asked "why, nobody's ever - why have you done this for us?")

- One adds, "I guess the same'd be true about your pint in the pub or coffee and cake, whatever"
- Interesting structural role of saying grace as fostering collective prayerfulness alongside meals (also development in celebration/teaching of stories about Jesus eating with people)
- Couple cite ways of strengthening fun/participation by getting families cooking together

Hospitality refers to more than food:

- Space! A very practical consideration when Messy groups in small buildings grow larger - willingness to move cited as important
  - Also willingness/effectuality of whoever manages the space to consistently respect the service undertaken by MES (some cite too-cold or too-dark church buildings in winter). Leader adaptability in response to such hurdles inferably linked to creative problem-solving or opportunity-seising (e.g. "yeah... actually, during the summer we often have our Messy Church outside which makes it even more open... we got rid of the walls and everybody can come")
  - & facilities - "we need toilets and a kitchen... Definitely the toilets"
  - & social/relational capacities - enough team/helpers/growing-Christian-attenders for getting to know well as many seekers or faith-infants (my jargon. ≠ children) as can.
- Many also discuss the need for discernment/listening/inclusivity in way language is used when evangelising/discipling those from non/de-churched contexts. As one puts it, "it's like one of those games where you have to talk but you can't use a particular word or something".
  - Likewise cited as reason to be tentative/shrewd/accessible in giving answers to those questions directly prompted as 'why' of Messy kindness; "you're not going to say, 'well, because the Bible says' - you don't need to say that to do this... say something that says something about you... and about the people who are doing these meals and their generosity of spirit... we know [the biblical ethical underpinnings]'s quite central don't we, but other people don't... and it's not necessarily the right place to tell them"
- Also genuine creation of social space where anyone can join in (even people whose kids are busy or non-existent!) - one states generalised ideal answer to anyone asking can they come, "yes, of course!" & another adds "it needs to be the open door of the church, doesn't it"
  - Suggested implication here of potential avenue for older-kid/pre-teen retention: alter their participation; confer sense of valuedness/involvement if they seem to be getting 'too old to just come as a child' - "let them know you want them to come... you need them to come because we need you to do this for us, we can't manage without you"



**'Received'**

Multiple citations of [admittedly variable] mutuality in offering hospitality from helpers/attenders. Compare account "she can't hardly stand, let alone anything else... but she cooked it all... brought it all ready prepared, and the people in the kitchen just did the pasta" with "a group of ladies who will provide food for the tea, but sometimes it feels like squeezing blood from a stone" and another who provides cakes "when she remembers"

- Some discuss having found this easier to cultivate when making preparations of hospitality part of creative group activity (e.g. baking bread/cakes together)
- One hefty anecdote discusses encouragement of spontaneous community hospitality in response to losses/troubles within group; two suffering families both received strong/kind support from fellow Messy attenders (one lost a father & "other Messy Church families have just got alongside her and found ways to support her... phenomenal really... cooking meals and taking a meal round in the early days and having the children so she could go to the solicitor's or the coroner's... still being there now, six months on", another had an ill child & "people offered... you know, a decent meal, a heat it up in the microwave kind of thing, while he was having spells in hospital") - comments how this in MES was a wholly-voluntaristic process while in Sunday church "we'd just put a list up wouldn't we"

Consensus in attenders' valuing/enjoying the offered hospitality, albeit for wide array of reasons:

- For examples; tight domestic budgets, relief of mums' things to do, churchgoing kids just like hanging out eating together. One cites a dad who brought daughter but never ate at MES - when asked why not, he said "on [Messy days] I cook a special meal with my wife and we have a bottle of wine. It's our special evening"
  - Whatever driving motive, it has a potential for bringing about realisations of distinctly spiritual nature of Messy hospitality - one says, "they suddenly think 'hold on a minute, this is different from anything I've been involved with before'." This tied to relationality - MES teams' & leaders' own "willingness to give... our genuine relationships, that we made with intent through Messy Church but being authentic ourselves"
    - One given example of this being particularly important bridge-builder with any attenders who struggle more; "sort of lady with very low self-esteem... she says 'oh I don't know why I come... I don't bring anything' - well, [responds leader] it's your church, I want you to come... you can tell me what Jack might like"
- Suggested this cultivates adults' propensity to donate/participate (e.g. "so then we put a plate out for donations and sometimes it almost meets the costs and other times it doesn't")
- Children, it's broadly suggested, are more-or-less happy with what they're given

Several discuss instances of attenders bringing friends/relatives along to casual hospitality sessions which were less-intimidating entryway into Messy community than 'church service' - suggested value of responsive flexibility

Time/place of MES may make it more 'hospitable' & thus preferable for churchgoers (elderly mentions particularly) who struggle to manage timings in diminishingly-engaging parish presence. Such things also salient considerations in ability accessibility (e.g. "we had a lady on a mobility scooter... and it got to a point where she couldn't easily manoeuvre through to get round to the toilets or out for the meal... because there's so much on the floor")

## Celebration

### 'Given'

Focus on seasonal/festival occasions as opportunities for larger/accessible celebration

- Somewhat hindered by real life & obligations of church folk; “we always struggle in December to have a Messy Christmas because there is so much going on”
  - One did this “for the whole village... asking one of the schools to host it. To replace the carol service”. Several Nativities (“very interactive with kids dressing up and all the rest of it”) & carol sessions. Another had tentatively floated notion of “instead of having one of our regular Sunday 10.30 services, either morning prayer or a Christingle, we’ll turn our regular worship slot into a Messy Church”.
- Numerous account of involving sender-churches in such things; missional capacities even in events relatively obscure/idiosyncratic outside of churches (e.g. pancakes, Pentecost, Celebration of Light, etc), and particularly Easter (several have run events with inherited congregations on this; e.g. from ‘Slightly Messy Good Friday’ to an ‘Egg-stra’ Saturday fun-day)

Several describe situations in which they expressed pleasure at attenders’ coming along, implied help in establishing their enjoyment of doing so

Several suggest that gently laying options/possibilities of trying something new/fun before Messies or Sunday church may spur them into becoming engaged/moreso

- “y’know, sort of, ‘if you’d enjoyed this, you might enjoy the next Messy Church’ or something” (one cites having tried combining Messyish worship with Sunday structures, “with the idea that it would... give [MES attenders] an opportunity to come more than once a month”)
  - Has clear evangelical potential; “if you’re all saying - ‘oh, you should come, it’s really good’, then that’s quite nice” (esp. when kids doing this invitational side)
- Clear practical follow-on from this in MES is actually using something new/fun to engage those there; e.g. games & songs (esp. in holiday club context, where kids may be “spending a whole week immersed in teaching Bible stories” and “singing very Christian songs and we’re praying”)
  - Can be run as all-age too; “more teaching, because it’s over three days, it’s sort of more intense... it is deeper for families”

Several claim that celebration key space/time for talking about biblical truth in applied collective ways

- One says “most talk about discipleship... [happens] when you’re drawing it all together, pulling the themes together... it’s perhaps there that there’s a little bit more than just a question but more that asks... where you might share a little bit personally... so you’re sort of sowing the seed in that way, without using the word discipleship but sort of saying you know, for those people who are Christians or who want to follow - this is the kind of thing we do. And that tends to come out, I think, in the celebration time more than any other”
  - Another adds MES that congregation “kind of accepts that you’re going to talk like that in the celebration time” (non-alienating because of purposeful context/tone?) & this provides opportunity for gently introducing Christian terms/concepts into familiarity
    - Linguistic element still demands discernment; “we tell the story and talk about what - in a simplish way - what that means”
  - Some add that such times are perhaps not as fully spiritually-nutritious as needed for growing deeper disciples, and may require supplementation; “giving them more of a broader or wider experience of worship other than just the fifteen-minute celebration”

- One discusses holding longer celebration time in village hall nearby (more like a family service than MES, or “a hybrid, really... like an all-age talk with a theme, maybe... half an hour to forty minutes as opposed to fifteen”)

### ‘Received’

Numerous claims that fun helped kids engage with content more closely & apply understandings to discipleship through playful learning (one puts it, “if they kind of go... ‘well, actually, hey, it’s great fun to worship God’... actually I think that’s a really positive thing”)

- Examples of “using a game to teach in a practical way that I think the child could relate to”, giving earlier “a thought for them, that might then be referred to in celebration”, providing space & encouragement for kids to share back into time any reflections/questions/etc
  - Caveat here of whether they’re listening (which several cite as “definitely an indicator” of early discipleship)
- Closely tied perhaps to concern of one that “we are necessarily in the worship time there providing sufficient meat to fully feed an adult - erm, not - or a mature Christian”
  - But several references to team/attenders finding/being led ways into further exposure

Several citations of attenders who literally come along because they find it fun - e.g. “I had a couple of mums say to me once, ‘this is our night out, Messy Church’”, another cites “quite small children” who nagged relatives on holiday because they missed going to MES, one knows a woman who it is (apparently not unreasonably) suspected “goes to all the Messy Churches in the area... [she] just loves Messy Church... so she’s very enthusiastic about it, but I think then goes to lots and lots of children’s things in different churches”

- One suggests early attendance may be characterised by “a kind of novelty” (esp. at bigger one-off events with sense of “ceremony and family occasion about it”, though these do seem to be helpful in mobilising MESfolk into contact with Sunday congregation & uptake good generally) but these attenders may mature toward Messy becoming “kind of the norm in people’s sort of experiences”, as they grow into community. Another says “people walk into ours and they just say, ‘wow, what an amazing atmosphere’, you know”

### Creativity

#### ‘Given’

Several participants’ contributions imply flexibility/adaptability/creativity an embedded element of MES leadership/organisation in both social & structural considerations

- Resource intensive but collectively managed; “we all will muck in together and get our own bits and pieces... we’ve got a sort of, great big cupboard with things in because we need extra”
- One “there’s a formal version and a less formal version... or there’s a ‘you can write your own’ version”. Another says of a resource freely produced for MES services “if you don’t like what I’ve done, you can edit it”
- Celebration of helpers who do this well; “Martha’s brilliant... she’s got loads of ideas”
  - But suggestion of potential prescriptivism/overdependence on MES resources, infer from one participant’s outright surprise at another’s capacity for invention [re; science challenges] “where d’you get the -” “Oh we just make them up, or find it -” “You can make it up? That’s not written anywhere or in a book?”
    - Great partial quote on how-to-facilitate new stuff - “if you google”

Creativity sessions broadly acknowledged as being valuable times of biblical exploration & spiritual discussion; many utilise prompts/sheets with “an ‘I wonder’ question” or “the outline of what the

activity is and then the ‘talk about’ underneath” on the craft tables, from which “can sometimes bring on a conversation... finding out how they feel about something... not with any pressure but just ‘how do you think about that?’” - further linking in themes “can hone in a particular aspect of something” if explained/connected clearly, and tactile nature of creatively “making something or doing something [is] much more physical than just going to church and listening... [it] can help to explore stories in a different way... because it’s so much more engaging”. Themes generally connected to biblical stories as “a way of sort of introducing it”

- Subject again to having adequate team.
- Also discernment required to “make sure that the activities time... includes things that are appealing to children and adults of all different ages and abilities”. And genders (one gives e.g. of “calling to girls with a trayful of gloop... which they may enjoy, but” on other side of room “our boys need a challenge, there’s no two ways about it”)
  - Variety helps; offer “some that the older ones will [do] and don’t need to do all eight... they’re just gonna sit there... spend ages doing it and love the detail” alongside “quick paint whatever ones that the little ones can jiggle between”

One participant expressing difficulty with this as vehicle for spiritual engagement; “for me personally... I don’t know whether I wouldn’t find craft particularly my way in... I find that unsatisfying”

- Another cites value of offering alternatives in case attenders feel similarly, example of a café church which is “not Messy Church, but sometimes some of the things they do look a bit like it” & rather than variety of just crafts “you might well have a craft and an alternative”
  - e.g. “putting in growbags or pots to grow” plants to build on discipleship themes, or science/nature quiz challenge trivia for older kids to try to answer
  - Or providing more contemplative spaces (some still with craft tables but quietly) where focus on gentle conversation & prayer
- Though unpredictable how much people will/won’t enjoy something new to them; one cites unexpectedly enthusiastic uptake from Sunday congregation on Messy engagement quiz that “we did in church... sort of as banter between us”

## ‘Received’

Open-style creativity in way MES is planned/done allows much space for attenders to become helpful participants in range of unpredictable ways; many cite such offers/opportunities in running crafts

- One “researches what we’re doing... she’ll come with a craft and says ‘I’ve researched it on the internet and I’ve come up with these ideas”
  - This arguably fosters discipleship; “her knowledge is growing because she’s learning about what we’re going to do”
  - Another voices concern over maintaining such dynamic capacities, for fear that “you’d just carry on doing the same thing... cos you can’t be bothered to think of what else to do... [or] you’ve always done it that way”
    - Some cite MES-style activities going down surprisingly well in Sunday congregations.
    - One discusses how older children who’ve “sort of grown up with us... been with us a long time” seemingly become less enthusiastic about crafts, and so new activities are needed (e.g. group games, science challenges) which “the older ones love... the physical action challenge whatever that may be, that keeps them coming”
- Inventiveness-sharing commonly-recurring implication of statements (e.g. “we probably got the idea off you” - also mention of MES conference where much idea/experience-pooling was going around discussions), which leaves organisational space in teams for those

who may be (as some participants claim to [or attending children's parents might] be) "challenged in the craft department"

- Activities & resources closely connected, as is to here logistical side of craft-enabling

Alternative/variety things to do again cited as important for properly engaging diversity of attendees

- On age, "all the nine-pluses don't go into the nine-plus group" as has ("not entirely true, but on the whole") split by gender - "the lads are going into this other group and the girls are still happy tending to stay around the crafts"
- Prevalent assumption that crafts more for kids than parents but some anecdotes of grown-up engagement & loving it. Also tried at "an older people's group... it was great! They loved it"
  - Suggests helpers' inclusion of participants can unlock anyone's fruitful engagement; "it's not threatening and it's not complete chaos... you're not *not* meeting God - and actually if you can draw and you're creative, and you might be seventy-five, actually your response through art, you may meet God exactly the same way as whoever's standing at the front talking"

Creativity suggested by most as clearly bearing evidence of potential discipleship connections

- Loads of ways of engaging with narrative; "story is a great way of teaching or conveying a reality... people relate to stories" (e.g. craft, retellings, performances), and multiple recount being generally able to have good conversation/prayer emergent from such activities
- Also informs how participation encouraged/allowed in celebration times; interactive prayer may see kids "realise that we really would do our prayer as an activity... even if they're just gonna wave their hands or clap them or jump up and down or what have you"

Possibility of 'making too much'? - e.g. parents running out of wall-space at home going "[sigh] what am I gonna do with this?"

**Church Army's Research Unit**  
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