

### **Research Question**

Should the Fresh Expression known as Messy Church be regarded as Church, or would it better considered as something else such as a Christian community, perhaps with the possibility to become a Church in the fullness of time?

### **Introduction**

Since 2004, when the first Messy Church was formed in Portsmouth there has been increasing recognition of the contributions that these new forms of mission have in the Anglican Church, but what is Messy Church?

The Bible Reading Fellowship, the organisation behind the brand 'Messy Church' states that Messy Church is:

- A way of being Church for families, involving fun.
- A Church, not a craft club, that helps people encounter Jesus as Lord and Saviour.
- Found across the world.
- About being Christ-centred, for all ages, based on creativity, hospitality and celebration.
- Part of the Bible Reading Fellowship which believes, with historic Churches, in one God, who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit' ([messychurch.org.uk](http://messychurch.org.uk)).

It seems that Messy Church is different from other 'fresh expressions' of Church, not only in size with an estimated 500,000 people attending Messy Church but also in scale with over 3000 Messy Churches in 20 countries ([BRF.org.uk](http://BRF.org.uk)). Its virtues are that it is easily taken up and adapted to local needs, while being well supported by a variety of means including a vast array of online resources and materials, alongside a network of consultants to enable local Churches not only to start their own Messy Church, but to sustain it.

This rapid rise, though, is in stark contrast to the numbers attending traditional Church where they have been decreasing across Western Europe since the 1950s. The various

explanations for this tend to be levelled at a changing society and the rise of secularism, however other industrialising countries such as Latin America and Eastern Europe undermine the assumption that this is a global trend. So other factors seem to be relevant, such as the failure to pass on the good news of Christ to subsequent generations, which suggests that an environment that encourages engagement between generations is becoming particularly relevant in today's society.

Mission-Shaped Church outlined the idea that it was our networks of family and friends to which we feel predominant loyal, and that the neighbourhoods in which we reside hold only a minor place within this loyalty (Mission-shaped Church, 2004, p7). This seems to reflect the messier and less homogenous lives that families lead in this postmodern age, where Churches may see large congregations at Christmas and other key services such as weddings and baptisms. Yet this rarely transfers to regular Sunday attendance, since modern day lifestyles seem to expect Churches to accommodate people at their request in what has been termed the 'subjective turn' as argued by Heelas and Woodhead, resulting from the shift to the centrality of the individual and the importance of choice, as we increasingly become our own authority (Heelas and Woodhead, 2004, p4).

These social changes seem to have created a demand for something different from traditional worship. By providing a space for quality family time through the medium of a meal around a table, Messy Church could be seen as a reaction to our increasingly time-pressured lives. Offering an opportunity to belong to a community helps counter the isolation felt by many working long hours, or those living some distance from other family members. This is particularly relevant for single parents. Many of these families will have had little or no contact with the Church at any point in their lives, and perhaps by offering an easy entry point, Messy Church appeals to these groups, giving them something that traditional Church cannot.

As Messy Church claims that it is a Church which helps people encounter Jesus as Lord and Saviour (Messy Church Values, 2018), this raises some hard questions from the established Church:

- Is it really worship?
- Is it reaching people who cannot be reached through traditional Church?
- Will it 'bleed' even more people away from Sunday worship?

In many congregations there seems to be a fixed mind-set to imagining any other way of being Church than that of a Eucharistic service on a Sunday. Yet varied and different ways of being Church are central to the vision of 'Fresh Expressions' as in the Mission-shaped Church report of 2004, where the main diocesan strategy suggested was the need to develop and encourage fresh expressions of Church with the aim of 'proclaiming the gospel afresh to each generation' (Declaration of Assent 2016). This report went further in challenging the view that secularisation was inevitable and firmly placed much of the responsibility of the declining numbers for Sunday morning worship onto the Church of England and by association the Church of Wales, by failing to respond to the rapid changes in contemporary culture.

To aid the research, it may be useful to consider what a 'Fresh Expression' of Church is, and how it has been defined:

A Fresh Expression of Church is described in Mission-shaped Church as 'A new and/or different way of being Church in and for our changing culture', where the fresh expression is not seen as an additional activity or stepping stone for Sunday worship, but something with the potential to be or become Church for those who take part (Croft, 2008, p8).

Christian communities were defined by Michael Moynagh as:

- Missional – Through the Spirit, they are birthed by Christians mainly among people who normally do not attend traditional Church.
- Contextual – They seek to serve their context and fit the circumstances of the people in it.
- Formational – Their leaders aim to form disciples.
- Ecclesial – Their leaders intend them not to be stepping stones to an existing Church, but to become Church for the people they reach. The

community may be a new congregation of a local Church or, if it is not part of a local Church, a Church in its own right (Moynagh, 2012, p 3).

Since Mission-shaped Church has been published there has been a protracted and ongoing debate about what exactly constitutes 'Church' and whether Fresh Expressions such as Messy Church actually fulfil sufficient criteria to be called Church. With this in mind the following research questions were asked:

1. What defines Church?
2. At what point could a Fresh Expression such as Messy Church be considered Church?
3. What is the relationship between traditional Church and Messy Church?

The intention is to reflect on these points using a qualitative, non-empirical approach considering the major reports on Fresh Expressions alongside supporting literature. These were selected using Google Scholar in the form of a keyword search and a related article search, using the time period of 2004-2017 which corresponds with the publication of Mission-shaped Church which formally introduced the term 'Fresh Expressions' in 2004 up and the release of 'Holy Communion in Messy Church' by the Bible Reading Fellowship in 2017 which appears to be the most recent development in the fast-moving story of Messy Church.

This dissertation aims to consider the wealth of material which has already been published, where much of the content is quite polarised in view, before attempting to find common ground between widely ranging views and opinions which are not always helpful. Hopefully more points will be found where agreement may be reached from both the supporters of Messy Church and the more traditional worshipping community, so that these communities can work together and become truly Church for people in their community, whilst growing in numbers and contributing to the common good as identified through the three quinquennial goals of the Church of England:

- Contributing as the national Church to the common good.

- Facilitating growth of the Church.
- Re-imagining the Church's ministry (General Synod, Church of England, 2011:2).

### Literature review

After in depth research of the literature surrounding Messy Church the following issues were identified to form the framework around the question 'Is Messy Church, Church'?

*Is it worship?*

*Is it reaching people who cannot be reached through offering traditional worship?*

*How is will it relate to traditional worship?*

The literature review is organised in chronological order, as the debate regarding Messy Church is a fast-moving target with new developments occurring almost daily. Even in the course of writing this dissertation an order for the Holy Eucharist for Messy Church has been approved for use in England by the Bishop's council and it seems likely that the Church in Wales follow in due course.

There has been vast amounts written about Fresh Expressions since the publication of Mission-shaped Church report in 2004, which identified the concept of Fresh Expressions of the Church alongside the changing society in which we live and suggested that the Church of England needed to move away from a bricks and mortar structure to one that is able to meet the needs of today's highly mobile society. This built on a much earlier report 'Breaking New Ground' (Church of England, 1994) offered the recommendation that each diocese should encourage and develop fresh expressions of the Church, which should 'reflect the network and neighbourhood reality of society and mission opportunity' (Mission-shaped Church, 2004, p145).

By challenging the view that secularisation was inevitable, the Mission-shaped Church report enabled mission-minded groups to encourage other forms of ecclesial formation and commented that these fresh expressions should be regarded as legitimate Church, although they may lack many of the features of traditional Church. This has met with some resistance from different areas of the established Church, possibly most notably by John Hull in his work; 'Mission-shaped Church, a theological response' in 2006. Here

while sharing the hope for renewal within the Church, he raises the issues about the underlying attitude in offering these alternatives, suggesting that the Church may be acquiescing to consumerism of the pick and mix postmodernist culture, with a mission-shaped Church rather than supporting a Church-shaped mission.

At the same time Steven Croft edited a collection of thoughts from leading theologians in 'The Future of the Parish System', which considered the future of a Church in decline alongside the massive growth in fresh expressions like Messy Church. With worship evolving in different ways all over the country it establishes the necessity for a definition of these fresh expressions and the overarching 'question of unity in a Church in which liturgy has historically played such a major role in Christian formation and transmission of faith from one generation to the next' (Croft, 2006, p179-180). Although Mission-shaped Church has provided a starting point in this conversation, events over the last few years have placed increasing strain on the relationship between traditional Church and fresh expressions of Church with regard to their authority, accountability and apparent disregard of the sacraments, particularly the meal that Jesus gave us.

Some of these problems are explored by Mobsby in 'Emerging and Fresh Expressions of the Church' (2007), where he explores the theological implications of these fresh expressions of Church. He recognises the contributions they have brought, but also that more work needs to be completed particularly in their theology so that they may find their place within the Anglican Church in a post-Christendom and postmodern context. He uses the work of Avery Dulles on 'models of Church' where he describes five distinct types of Church:

1. Church as Institution.
2. Church as Mystical Communion.
3. Church as Sacrament.
4. Church as Herald.
5. Church as Servant.

Mobsby suggested that the postmodern ecclesiology of fresh expressions may be expressed best with regard to Dulles second model where the Church is described as ‘the Church of Mystical Communion’ (Mobsby, 2007, p54), which may be summarised as:

- Not an institution but a fraternity.
- Church as interpersonal community.
- The ‘I thou’ is no longer essentially a demanding, but a giving one.
- Church as a fellowship of persons – a fellowship of people with God and one another in Christ.
- Connects strongly with the mystical ‘body of Christ’ as a communion of the spiritual life of faith, hope and charity.
- Resonates with Aquinas’ notion of the Church as the principle of unity that dwells in Christ and in us, binding us together and in him.
- All the external means of grace, (sacraments, scripture, laws, etc.) are secondary and subordinate; their role is simply to dispose people for an interior union with God effected by grace (Dulles, 1991, p40).

This model set out to demonstrate both the significance of ‘ekklésia’ as ‘the body of Christ’, with the need to respond to social change in a postmodernist society. Dulles models of Church is not without problems, which have been highlighted by Steven Croft in both ‘Future for the Parish System’ (2010) and ‘Mission-shaped Questions’ (2008), about how we should describe or recognise these fresh expressions such as Messy Church and what are their relationships with the kingdom of God (Croft, 2008, p ix)? This suggests that although there is broad acceptance of the need for a mixed economy, many questions remain about the role of sacramental ministry and whether they can be both kingdom focused as well as mission focused?

The question of the sacraments is raised by Lindsay Urwin in ‘Mission-shaped questions’, who raises the point that although the sacraments are generally not a common part of fresh expressions, need this be the case? This question is further developed in ‘Fresh Expressions in the Sacramental Tradition’ (2009), which argues that the sacraments have



not sought to capture God, but to reflect some of his essence. Since fresh expressions began as an alternative to traditional worship, they have consciously rejected prior concepts of Church, exploring new ways of worshiping. Simon Rundell in 'Fresh Expressions in the Sacramental Tradition' (2009) suggested that our current worship is the result of much change over time, as the Eucharist we celebrate today is not the same as the Mass celebrated at the time of Hippolytus, or even that of Cranmer, but one that has adapted and changed over time. Within the Anglican tradition it has been customary for the sacrament to be denied to those who have not undergone some form of preparation, yet God wants to be encountered by all; perhaps this is the time to administer the sacrament freely and with grace and let God sort out the rest (Rundell in Croft and Mobsby, 2009, p133-136). This is now happening in the Church of Wales, where the sacrament can and are being administered to those who are baptised.

With the Mission-shaped Church report focusing attention on fresh expressions, could our traditional Churches be in danger of neglect? This seems to be a common fear within our traditional congregations; particularly those with falling numbers or aging members, often with few or no young people attending. This is perhaps particularly relevant when fresh expressions aim to be a Church in their own right and not a bridge from the fringe back into traditional Sunday worship. Andrew Davidson and Alison Milbank in 'For the Parish (2010), write an important critique of fresh expressions, raising significant questions in defence of traditional Church, arguing that the sector-led, choice-model of worship actually represents a step away from the mixed community of the parish, towards segregation. Alongside the abandonment of traditional values such as common worship and the collective nature of the parish system, with the parish Church at the centre, this has led to the feeling of disenfranchisement and disconnect between classic Anglicanism and the growth in fresh expressions (Davidson and Milbank, 2010, p ix). This work built on the report, 'Mission-shaped Parish (2009), reminds us that parish Churches could also act as springboards for the new in their own right, whilst acknowledging that the mission of God through the Church is far greater than what Christians do when they meet together (Bayes and Sledge, 2009, p viii).

Also in 2010 the Church Army released its report from the Encounters on the Edge series; 'Messy Church, Ideal for all ages?' which identified that the Messy Church is one of the best resourced fresh expressions, both in terms of consultants who are able to help local Churches start and maintain one, but also with a wealth of resources both online and books which contain the identity and philosophy of Messy Church, alongside a vast array of ideas and plans for events. It also recognises the problem that it is easier to start than maintain and it is much easier to attract attenders rather than disciples, which echo some of the concerns of Davidson and Milbank.

The publication of 'Messy Church Theology' (2013), identified a shift in Messy Church development; from a fresh expression of Church to actual Church in its own right, by attempting to tackle the challenges which this presented both in terms of theology and discipleship. George Lings reminds us that Messy Church is a Church plant rather than a development of an existing Church, following the idea proposed in Mission-shaped Church that fresh expressions of Church are about birthing new Churches, rather than an outreach ministry of an existing Church in attempt to boost numbers (Lings, 2013, p17).

This presents the challenge of meeting a defined criteria to become Church, although a proposed definition of Church had been agreed by both the Church of England and the Methodist Church in a report to the General Synod in 2012 (Fresh Expressions in the Mission of the Church, 2012, p181). Taking the five indicators from the Mission-shaped Church report (2004) alongside the doctrinal standards of both the Church of England and the Methodist Church the report attempts to identify common characteristics necessary for a Christian community to be considered a Church in an ecumenical policy statement. Furthermore, this one went much deeper than previous reports and considered the criticisms that had been made against fresh expressions, stating that:

*'the principle criticisms of fresh expressions do not provide convincing reasons to suppose that the mission strategy of the Church of England and the Methodist Church is seriously defective in its aim to develop a mixed economy of traditional Churches and fresh expressions. Nevertheless, these criticisms raise important issues*

*in relation to fresh expressions which cannot be dismissed. A number of practical safeguards are required in order to ensure that a mixed economy does not compromise the integrity of the Church'* (Fresh Expression in the Mission of the Church, 2012, p181-182).

The outcome of this report was a list of eight essential ecclesial elements by which a Christian community may be recognised as Church. More so it infers that any Christian community that lacks some or all of these elements cannot be considered Church, although this does not automatically mean that they lack ecclesial status, but it firmly states that they should not be considered 'Church for the people involved'. This seems a little rigid for an embryonic Church, when compared to the original vision laid out in Mission-shaped Church (2004), and one might wonder how many traditional Churches completely fulfil all the necessary elements to be regarded as Church?

In 2016 the Church Army released four reports resulting from a two-year study into fresh expressions:

- Who's there? The Church backgrounds of attenders in Anglican fresh expressions of Church?
- Sustaining young Churches. A qualitative pilot study of fresh expressions of Church in the Church of England.
- The Day of Small Things. An analysis of fresh expressions of Church in 21 Diocese of the Church of England.
- What happens after research? How do dioceses react to and utilise large scale research into their fresh expressions of Church?

These reports while not necessarily addressing Messy Church on an individual basis do introduce qualitative evidence of a bigger picture of fresh expressions, and as Messy Church is the largest of these at 33% of the total number, then the findings and conclusions will be significant in understanding if Messy Church can be considered Church. They also offer another view of what is required to be considered Church, suggesting that the report 'Fresh Expressions in the Mission of the Church' have set their boundaries for what is required to

be Church in a way which is far too rigid and does not allow space for the intention or aspiration to become Church. Noting that the first and second criteria set out by them about discipleship being lived out in the world, and people being sent out in to the world to engage in mission and service is far from fulfilled in many of our traditional and often long standing Churches (Lings, 2016, p20-21), which raises the question are we in danger of excluding anything which isn't traditional Church from being called Church?

The sheer amount of reports and books on this subject suggest that there are many views and questions on whether fresh expressions can ever be truly called Church. Many of the books or reports seem to be extremely polarised in view. Little I have found attempts to bridge the gap between traditional Church and fresh expressions such as Messy Church. Yet with the steady decline of traditional worship we have witnessed in the last century and the rapid rise in people attending Messy Church, can we afford to ignore people whom God has reached out to? Are we in danger of looking for a Mission-shaped Church, but only finding a Church-shaped mission (Hull, 2006, p36)?

### **Hypothesis**

Is Messy Church, Church or should it more properly be considered as a Christian Community with the potential to become Church?

### **Methodology**

The overall approach of this dissertation is to consider if Messy Church could be considered Church by exploring the defined Messy Church values in a library based qualitative research project with definitions of Church from Scripture and recognised models from Christian tradition including:

- Scripture.
- The Nicene Creed.
- The Thirty Nine Articles of Faith.
- The World Council of Churches (Towards a Common Vision, 2013).

Alongside the more modern definitions of Church as used by Fresh Expressions including Messy Church:

- Mission Shaped Church (2004).
- Fresh Expressions in the Mission of the Church (2012).
- Church Army Research Unit (A Day of Small Things, 2016).
- Messy Church Values Statement (2018).

Alongside investigating these value statements and definitions of Church, the intention is to analyse the work of contemporary theologians, both with those that are in support of Messy Church alongside those in defence of traditional Church values, by asking:

1. *What defines Church?*
2. *Should Messy Church be considered as Church?*
  - a. *How does Messy Church relate to traditional worship?*
  - b. *At what point could a Fresh Expression such as Messy Church be considered a Church?*
  - c. *Is Messy Church actually an Alternative Community?*

These works were selected using the technique of content analysis, using the criteria:

1. The dictionary definition of Church, including the Greek '*ekklesia*' and Hebrew '*kahal*' forms.
2. Keyword search using various computer search engines such as Google, Google Scholar and Amazon Books to identify relevant books and reports with the search terms:

- “Messy Church”
  - “Definition of Church”
  - “Fresh Expressions of Church”
3. A related works search on Google Scholar.
  4. Websites specialising in ‘fresh expressions’ particularly the Messy Church website (<https://www.messychurch.org.uk/>).

This produced an extremely large list of possible works to consider which was filtered and refined with the following criteria:

- Respected authorship.
- Known source.
- Relevant.
- Current, which for this project was taken to be post ‘Mission-shaped Church’ report of 2004. (Excepting the Bible, Creeds and Thirty Articles of Faith).
- Available, as some works identified where available at the time of writing or required substantial journal subscription fees.

The reason for selecting a library-based approach was the need to consider a large amount of historical data alongside more modern views to understand how our idea of Church may have changed over the years to reflect the situation and challenges at that time. Much of the recent material seems to be quite extreme in outlook, where Messy Church is seen as the next revival by some theologians. While other theologians are totally opposed to the concept and theology underpinning Messy Church. This leaves a gap of how Messy Church may fit in with the inherited Church, supporting the overall concept first purported by Rowan Williams of a ‘mixed economy of Church’ in the Mission-shaped Church report.

### **Limitations**

Any library-based research project is only as good as the material used, although there is a large amount of information, Messy Church like many fresh expressions is evolving rapidly. Which means that older material often relates to problems which no longer exist, whilst failing to address current problems that have since arisen.

The definition of Church is often divisive within the Christian community, along with agreement on the ecclesiology. There has been an ongoing debate and often heated discussion within the Christian community since the time of St Paul, so it is unlikely that a dissertation can possibly hope to do more than provide an overview of the current thoughts and trends, along with identifying areas of consensus.

The Author attends Messy Church with his family and therefore cannot be considered totally unbiased.

## Analysis

### 1. Definitions of Church

#### **The Bible.**

There is no neat definition of 'Church' in the Bible, instead it offers a range of images. The word generally translated as 'Church' is the Greek word *ekklésia*, formed from *ek*, meaning called out of or sometimes away from, and *kaleo*, meaning to call; which literally means 'the called out assembly'. However *Ekklésia* in the Old Testament is a translation of the Hebrew word *kahal* which may mean several things; a meeting for civil matters as described in 1Kings 2:3, for war of nations in Genesis 35:11 and a variety of gathering for religious matters such as Chronicles 20:5.

In the New Testament the word *Ekklésia* has been used to describe; a meeting at home as in Romans 16:5 or perhaps in a particular city, as found in 1 Corinthians 1:2 and 1 Thessalonians 1:1, or a much bigger area such as a region described in Acts 9:31. Yet the word *Ekklésia* at this time did not have religious connotations as along with *qahal*, they would have been generally understood to have meant a gathering. This interpretation has gained in popularity with modern theologians such as Wright who use this translation in the phrase, 'to the assembly of Thessalonians in 1 Thessalonians 1:1, rather than Church of Thessalonians (Wright, 2011, 415).

So it seems that nowhere in the Bible is the place where Christians meet referred to as 'Church', even the buildings used in this period would have been private homes or meeting rooms. If we take the translation further then it suggests that an assembly can only be considered an assembly when people are gathered together, which raises a question. Can a Church only be considered a Church when gathered together in a physical meeting? This demonstrates the sort of problems which the early Church faced, Jesus apparently did not leave his followers with a fixed set of doctrines. Rather the Bible illustrates a variety of ways about speaking the nature of a Christian community using many different metaphors which demonstrate the Church as a family all having interrelated roles.

#### **The Nicene Creed.**

The Nicene Creed is perhaps the most universally accepted statement of faith for the Early Christian Church, which affirms the Christian belief in the One, Holy, Catholic and



Apostolic marks of the Church, where if Christians are meeting Jesus then each of these dimensions of Church will always be present.

They are-expressed in more modern language as:

- An **'Up'** dimension, in connectedness to the Father, Son and Holy Spirit – a Holy church.
- An **'In'** dimension in fellowship and community – a Christian community that is at one.
- An **'Out'** dimension in mission, broadly defined – an Apostolic Church.
- An **'Of'** dimension – being part of the whole body of Christ, round the world and in the history – a catholic Church (Fresh Expressions, 2017, Going Deeper).

### **The Thirty Nine Articles of Faith (1596).**

The Articles of Faith were drawn up in 1563 as an inclusive statement of Reformation theology, condemning the Roman Catholic Church. In consideration of a definition of Church the Articles 19, 23, 25 and 34 are particularly relevant:

19. The visible Church of Christ is a congregation of faithful men, in which the pure word of God is preached and the sacraments be duly ministered to Christ's ordinance in all those things which are necessity are requisite to the same.
23. It is not lawful for any man to take office of public preaching or ministering the sacraments in the congregation, before he be lawfully called and sent to execute the same.
25. There are two Sacraments ordained of Christ our Lord in the Gospel, that to say, Baptism and the Supper of the Lord.

The Sacraments were not ordained of Christ to be gazed upon or to be carried about, but we should duly use them. And in such only as worthily receive the same, have they a wholesome effect or operation.

34. It is not necessary that traditions and ceremonies be in all places one or utterly alike; for at all times they have been diverse, and changed according to the diversity of countries, times and men's manners, so that nothing be ordained against God's word.

Every particular or national Church hath the authority to ordain, change and abolish ceremonies or rites of the Church ordained by man's authority, so that all things be done edifying (Church of England, 2017).

The Thirty Nine Articles cover a great deal more ground than the Creeds and they address many issues of the day, but are they still relevant? They have an historical value of course, but they are still part of our present as one of the foundation documents of the Anglican communion of Churches and changing these may mean separating ourselves from believers around the world.

### **The World Council of Churches, The Church towards a common vision (2013).**

The challenge in recent times is how to proclaim the Gospel of Christ in a rapidly changing world that has become particularly challenging to the Church's self-understanding. The emerging Churches which propose new ways of being 'Church' are finding ways of responding to today's needs in a postmodernist, post Christendom society. The importance of unity to the mission and nature of the Church is demonstrated by the need to recognise the authentic presence of what the Nicene Creed call 'one holy, catholic, apostolic Church', which is presenting a significant challenge for these emerging Churches.

A wide variety of insights are found in Scripture, which embrace plurality without denying the limits to legitimate diversity that are relevant to particular times and needs, which started with the acceptance of Gentiles into communion. The Church is centred and grounded on the Gospels of the Incarnate word of Jesus, yet the journey to the full realisation of God's gifts require Christian communities to agree on the fundamental aspects in the life of the Church:

1. **A Church in the Design of God**, where Christians believe and confess with the Creed that there is an indissoluble link between the work of God in Christ through the Holy Spirit and the reality of the Church.
2. **Mission**, in which the Church proclaims to all people, in word and deed the Good News of salvation in Jesus Christ.
3. **Faith**, where the Church is called to proclaim, in each generation, the faith once for all entrusted to the saints and remain steadfast in teaching, first handed on by the apostles. Which is to be lived out in active response to the challenges of every age and place.
4. **Sacraments**, in the way of Baptism and the Eucharist, where Baptism is the basic bond of unity and the Eucharist reaffirms that baptismal faith and gives grace to the faithful living out their Christian calling.

5. **Ministry**, although there is no single pattern of ministry in the New Testament, all Churches should look to Scripture to follow the will of the Lord concerning how ordained ministry is to be understood, ordained and exercised.
6. **The threefold ministry**, as all authority in the church comes from Christ and his eschatological promise to guide the Church to fulfilment in the reign of heaven.
7. **Authority**, the Church as the body of Christ and the eschatological people of God, is built up by the Holy Spirit thorough a diversity of ministries. Although specific structures have varied through time, all communities require oversight in order to maintain continuity in apostolic faith and unity of life.
8. **The Church in Society**, living as disciples of Jesus who cared for the blind, the lame and the leper. The Church needs to help those without power to be heard, becoming a voice for those who are voiceless (World Council of Churches, 2013, p7-40).

#### **Five Marks of Mission (1984).**

In response to a rapid rise in different styles of Church, from disillusionment with the existing Churches ability to change to engage with the diverse situation that is now part of our culture the five marks of mission was developed by the Anglican Consultative Council and adopted by General Synod as part of an understanding of these contemporary mission focused fresh expressions:

1. Tell: To proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom.
2. Teach: To teach, baptise and nurture new believers.
3. Tend: To respond to human need by loving service.
4. Transform: To seek to transform unjust structures of society, to challenge violence of every kind and to pursue peace and reconciliation.
5. Treasure: To strive to safeguard the integrity of creation and sustain and renew the life of the earth (Anne Richards, 2017, Anglican Consultative Council).

#### **Mission-shaped Church Report (2004):**

Alongside the indicators of the five marks of mission, Mission-shaped Church identified five further indicators, which were intended to offer a framework by which a fresh expression such as Messy Church could develop, alongside the common understanding of proclaiming the faith of the Scriptures as summarised in the Creeds:

- **A missionary Church is focused on God the trinity**, where worship lies at the heart of a missionary Church and all life and activity is guided by prayer.
- **A missionary Church is incarnational**, in which a Church seeks to shape itself in relation to the culture which it is located.
- **A missionary Church is transformational**, in that it exists for the transformation of the community that it serves, through the power of the gospel and the Holy Spirit. The kingdom of God is its goal and the Church is understood as a servant and sign of God's kingdom in its community.
- **A missionary Church makes disciples**, which is committed to the development of a Christian lifestyle appropriate to but not withdrawn from the culture in which it operates.
- **A missionary Church is relational**, when a community of faith is being formed it is characterised by welcome and hospitality. Where its ethos and style are open to change when new members join, and believers are encouraged to establish interdependent relationships with fellow Christians as they grow to Christ (Mission-shaped Church, 2012, p81-82).

### **Fresh Expressions in the Mission of the Church Report (2012).**

Although the Mission-shaped church report provided a broad standard of being Church, it was felt further work was required in a rapidly changing society, which resulted in 2012 of a joint report by the Anglican – Methodist working party. This report defined the ecclesial elements that together constitute the Church, suggesting that no new form of Church that fails to contain all these elements cannot be considered Church:

1. A community of people who are called by God to be committed disciples of Jesus Christ and to live out their discipleship in the world.
2. A community that assembles for Christian worship and is then sent out into the world to engage in mission and service.
3. A community in which the Gospel is proclaimed in ways that are appropriate to the lives of its members.
4. A community in which the Scriptures are regularly preached and taught.
5. A community in which baptism is conferred in appropriate circumstances as a rite of initiation into the Church.
6. A community that celebrates the Lord's Supper.
7. A community where pastoral responsibility and presidency at the Lord's Supper is exercised by the appropriate authorised ministry.
8. A community that is united to others through: mutual commitment; spiritual communion; structures of governance, oversight and communion; and an

authorised ministry in common (Fresh Expressions in the Mission of the Church, 2012, p181).

This report went further stating that criticisms made against fresh expressions do not provide convincing reasons to consider that the strategy of a mixed economy is defective, but raise important issues in regard to fresh expressions which cannot be dismissed (Fresh Expression in the Mission of the Church, 2012, p181-182).

### **The Day of Small Things. An analysis of fresh expressions of Church in 21 dioceses of the Church of England.**

The Church of England's research department defines a fresh expression as 'any venture that works mainly with non-churchgoers and aims to become Church' (Lings, 2016, p18). Using the framework that fresh expressions is:

1. Missional – it intends to work with non-churchgoers.
2. Contextual – it seeks to fit the context.
3. Formational – it aims to form disciples.
4. Ecclesial – it intends to become Church (Lings, 2016, p18).

The Church Army Research Unit in its report 'The day of Small Things' developed ten indicators to indicate the state of health and maturity of a particular fresh expression:

1. Is it a **new and further group**, which is **Christian and communal**, rather than an existing group modified, adapted or changed?
2. Has the starting group tried to **engage with non-Church goers**? There was an intention to create a fresh expression of Church, not do an outreach project from an existing Church. The aim was to help Christians sent out to start the fresh expression of Church to understand a culture and context and adapt to fit it, not to make the local/indigenous people change and adapt to fit into an existing Church context.
3. Does the community meet **at least once a month**?
4. Does it have a name that helps give it identity? An active search, not yet yielding a name, is allowed.
5. Is there the **intention to be Church**? This could be the intention from the start, or by a discovery on the way. It is not seen as a bridge back to 'real Church', but as Church in its own right.
6. Is it **Anglican** or an Ecumenical project which includes an **Anglican partner**? Meaning the Bishop welcomes it as part of the diocesan family and not whether it only uses centrally authorised texts or has legal territory (parish).

7. Is there some form of **leadership** recognised by those within the community and by those outside of it?
8. Do at least the majority of members see it as their **major expression** of being Church?
9. Are there **aspirations for the four creedal 'marks' of Church, or ecclesial relationships**: up/holy, in/one, out/apostolic, of/catholic? We see the two dominical sacraments of communion and baptism as a given consequence of the life of a missional community which follows Jesus, but not the sole or even best measure of being Church.
10. Is there the **intention to become '3 self'** (self-financing, self-governing and self-reproducing)?

The search for a definition of what determines the identity of a Church is a difficult question with many varying views, some of which are very demanding whilst others are more akin to guidelines or aspirations. Perhaps asking 'when is something Church' is perhaps like asking 'what is a fully mature adult' (Lings, 2016, p21), and should we be more open to considering that we are all on a life-long journey and the reality is that most people who go to Church may be anything from pew fillers to born again Christians, but not true disciples of Jesus (Watson in Lings, 2016, p21).

## 2. Should Messy Church be considered as Church?

This is a particularly emotive topic, which has split theologians, many like Martin Payne and George Lings are vocal supporters of fresh expressions like Messy Church, whilst several senior clergy have openly suggested that this type of fresh expression is a threat to traditional worship with books like 'For the Parish' (Davidson and Milbank, 2010), alongside those of general concern for the parish with 'Mission Shaped Parish (Bayes and Sledge, 2006). These alternate views although generally well-argued and much needed to support the ongoing debate, perhaps make it seem that we are being over critical of fresh expressions in general, when it seems that anything which encourages engagement with a living faith should be encouraged and not automatically seen as a threat.

To re-imagine Church requires a clear idea of what Church is as many existing forms of Church are so deeply ingrained that their congregations struggle to imagine anything different. Yet being different is central to fresh expressions of Church, as we cannot keep

doing the same thing, which is clearly not working in a post Christian world witnessed by dramatically falling numbers in our congregations throughout the United Kingdom. So we have to decide what we can change and what has to stay the same (Fresh Expressions, Going Deeper 4, 2018).

This appears to link with the Messy Church approach, which aims to be church for those with little or no experience of church, as part of a mixed economy approach to worship which respects the traditional worship congregation. Messy Church was started as response to the absence of families and young people in our congregations, so perhaps the fears that Messy Church will bleed people from Sunday worship is unwarranted as its target congregation is far removed from that of traditional Church, where Messy Church is growing into maturity with a clear identity and ethos for reaching out to those on the fringes of Church, the unchurched and de-churched through the use of clear values statements:

1. Hospitality.
2. Creativity.
3. All Age.
4. Celebration.
5. Christ Centred.

The first and perhaps overriding value is 'Hospitality' which Messy Church suggests:

- 'Reflects a God of unconditional love and is a Church for people outside Church, providing an oasis of welcome and a safe space in which to thrive. Messy Church is about hospitality, expressed most evidently by eating together – whether it's a plate of sandwiches to share, or sausage and mash' (Messy Church, Values, 2018).

Hospitality is talked about frequently in Scripture and reflects the 'In' dimension in the Nicene Creed with the ongoing offer of both fellowship and community, which has always been part of Christian identity. In the Old Testament Abraham offered strangers water for their feet and food for their bodies (Genesis 18:1-9), and this theme continues in the New Testament with St Paul in Romans 12:13 and St Peter in Acts 10:28. In monastic communities obeying the rule of St Benedict mission was expressed through hospitality to

both the rich and poor, as Bosch suggested in 'Transforming Mission'. The monastery was a centre for mission through piety, hard work and hospitality (Bosh, 2017, p235).

Yet this value seems to have faded away in the Middle Ages to the stage that in our traditional worship hospitality doesn't merit a mention in either the Thirty Nine Articles of Faith or the World Council of Churches agreed vision for unity. This is perhaps a little striking, but could this be related to the idea that hospitality as mission undermines the professionalization of ministry, as Jesus challenges us to take mission home? Almost in answer to this issue, the value of hospitality is seen as significantly greater in the less traditional sources for defining Church:

- Five Marks of Mission – Tend.
- Mission-shaped Church Report 2004 – Relational.
- A Day of Small Things – Engaging with non-church goers alongside the Four Creedal marks of Church.

Yet by sharing Christian hospitality, Messy Church is serving others in a way which has a very real effect on their surrounding communities which has largely been forgotten as a dynamic expression of a vibrant Christianity. Christine Pohl writes 'Meals shared together in Church provide opportunity to sustain relationships and to build new ones' (Pohl, 1999, p158). However it is not the perceived lack of food that Messy Church is dealing with, but the rising numbers of isolated people to get to know and build up a community. This trend gives rise to the reality that hospitality is indispensable to the mission of the Church if we want to reconnect the Church to our communities; reflecting the fact that most people live ordinary lives and will be reached by ordinary people.

As hospitality is central to Messy Church, the issue of pastoral care cannot be ignored although it may be in a much more informal manner than that experienced in and through traditional Church. This is because it resides less in the hands of ministers and more in the other members of the congregation of Messy Church, which has the consequence of deepening the community relationship. There are practical issues of training and safeguarding so that helpers feel confident in dealing with issues normally dealt with by a



Priest, along with the time necessary to build these relationships which enable those who need assistance to seek help within a group which generally meets monthly

The adoption of creativity as a value of Messy Church is surprising at first glance, quite different to the typical 'we value tradition' ethos of many traditional congregations. While this seems to imply an element of rebellion against the established order, it also reflects the way our education system has interacted with our young people for decades and perhaps a far more suitable way of being 'all age' than many of our traditional methods which have been in use for many years.

Messy Church extolls the value of Creativity as:

- 'Messy Church uses hands-on activities to explore Bible stories, to reflect a God of creativity and give a chance to play together' (Messy Church, Values, 2018).

George Lings states that 'in Messy Church the matter of making stuff is about turning the Church back into a creative, participatory, communal hive of spiritual life is a worthy goal that critiques much existing practice' (Lings, 2013, p161). Yes, at face value this may appear as a novelty due to the difficulty of defining creativity as Christian and therefore the contribution it may bring to the theme of a particular session. At the very least, though, it creates community through the togetherness of intergenerational crafting, and research shows us again and again that we learn best through play, throughout our lives (Payne, 2016, p77-78). There is an understanding that creativity helps to tackle the big questions which we often have no words for, affording us the opportunity to reflect the image of a creator God.

Creativity seems to have little grounding in classical theological heritage, but the creation power of God runs through the Scriptures, where God is seen as the enabler of our own creativity. Which is perhaps also reflected in the 'In' and 'Of' dimensions of the Creed's, as the time of creativity through craft promotes both fellowship and community alongside being part of the whole body of Christ when the Biblical themes are explored through getting messy together, adult and child in both a formational and contextual activity. This participation is turning the role of leader and servant on its head, we all

become co-creators and partners. Lings suggests that the unintentional lack of 'making' in any Churches is a denial of our being made in the image of God, resulting in passivity and pew-fillers rather than participating congregation (Lings, 2013, p161).

We can see parallels with the value of creativity in Scripture and the Creeds, but the value of group activity, rather than being led from the front seems only to feature in the Marks of Mission as under 'Tend and Teach' categories.

Being all-age is intrinsic to Messy Church as we cannot truly be a gathered Church unless every age is gathered in; many of the first Messy Churches were started as response to the lack of families attending traditional worship. Our inherited model of Sunday school no longer seems fit for purpose in many cases and shouldn't our worship be intentionally inclusive rather than exclusive?

Messy Church states that:

- 'Messy Church is for adults and children to enjoy together. Every element should be relevant and accessible to all-ages (Messy Church, Values, 2018).

Traditionally young people were educated or prepared for life through socialisation generally through the extended family or tribal community. This reflects the way in which faith was also passed on in both Jewish and Early Christian culture, which seems to have been changed to a segregated model around the time of the Reformation and we have inherited a tradition of passing the good news of Christ in age related groupings. Consequently, this has resulted in a ministry to children where the information is presented, rather than explored and discovered alongside them (Payne, 2016, p39-42). Which seems to approach the gospel in the 'us and them' approach, yet when the generational connections of a Church are broken then the message of Jesus can no longer be passed on. This represents a failure by nearly every definition of Church founded on the principle of the great commission found in the Gospel according to Matthew (Matthew 28: 16-20).

In Psalm 78:4 we are reminded to tell the next generation the glorious deeds and mighty miracles of the Lord, with the consequences of failing to pass the message on as a breach of

our agreement with God. Families learnt to pray alongside each other, meals shared and the generations learnt together. Messy Church reaches back to these traditions in a Biblical definition of extended family, celebrating the wider family, particularly to those who struggle with life, with a safe space and a generous inclusivity.

Intergenerational worship has been accused of offering shallow end discipleship, or Church light experience of worship. Yet Messy Church is often presenting the Gospel message to these new congregations for the very first time, providing the foundational experience of the Christian faith for all ages, which has been demonstrated to be reaching those who are either on the fringes or openly non-churched (Lings, 2016, p97). This form of worship is typical of the Early Christian Church, with extensive references offered in both Scripture and the Creeds, talking of the extended family including servants and friends experiencing worship and growing in faith together, revealing the importance of this style of Church which is now only really being rediscovered and utilised by reports such as 'Going for Growth' (Archbishops Council, 2010).

The challenge though is to truly be all-age as crafts and activities which suit some age groups and genders fail to reach others; colouring, gluing and sticking which seem to be the traditional Church activities often fail to reach males over twelve, the opportunity to be creative with tools or science type projects are increasingly being used, but then the connection to the Biblical theme becomes a potential problem. Yet perhaps this time allows the Spirit of God to enter into lives in a new and fresh way, enabling them to consider faith a possibility (Paul, 2017, p53).

Applying the name of celebration to the worship element is significant, as we identify celebration about marking something special such as a birthday or another joyful event. Interestingly it could mean a loss such as a death that is looked at as celebration is also looking to the past as well as the future. Messy Church can provide a safe space for families to come together, celebrating who they are in the story of faith with a loving God (Messy Church, 2018, Exploring Celebration). This value of celebration is expressed as:

- 'Messy Church reflects a God of joy who wants his people to have life in all its fullness' (Messy Church, Values, 2018).

This may lead people to the conclusion that this is the only bit that really matters as worship has become a corporate moment, with music, liturgy and listening. Yet in the Bible worship is not confined to one moment of time, but a whole life response to God. Our traditional Sunday morning model has compartmentalised worship into a few hours. That has resulted in the devaluation of all other worship activities outside of this time, leading to many accusations that Messy Church worship is just too short and infrequent to have real value.

Mission-shaped Church identifies the strategy of multiple congregations, which it suggests have already had a long history in our traditional Churches such as Evensong and monthly family services, so this reaction to Messy Church worship is perhaps surprising (Mission-shaped Church, 2004, p61). Although this may be a reaction to the struggle of traditional Church in trying to be intergenerational and therefore turn the tide of continued decline. Yet the Church is called by God to find new ways of faith transmission in an era of ageing congregations, so the torch of faith may be passed on to the next generation.

Church worship isn't necessarily the most suitable starting place for many people, while it may work well for those seeking to reconnect with the Church, those without any previous experience of Church culture may find the ritual and liturgy an impossible barrier to overcome. We can no longer rely on an attractional model of Church connection and need to become more missional in approach (Male in Nelstrop and Percy, 2008, p155). Messy Church with its more missional model of faith, connects with the unchurched.

The issue of the sacraments is a pressing question, as for many without Holy Communion Messy Church can at best be described as an outreach event. Yet this a larger problem due to the interdenominational nature of Messy Church, and although Anglicans consider these essential to worship, others including the Salvation Army consider Christ as the one true sacrament and do not celebrate the Eucharist, while Baptists consider the Eucharist as an ordinance since salvation is through God's grace alone. Alongside that fact

Messy Church worship is not just the responsibility of ministers but a matter for the whole congregation, giving rise to the majority of the leadership being lay people and therefore unable to lead a celebration of Holy Communion.

If Messy Church is seen as pre-evangelistic and a stepping stone to traditional Church, then the sacramental dimension is not so essential, but to be considered a Church by the Thirty Nine Articles of Faith, the World Council of Churches and Fresh Expression in the Mission of the Church report 2012, then the Sacraments of Baptism and Holy Communion are essential. This issue is far from unique to Messy Church, many other fresh expressions are dealing with the same problem, although Messy Church is supported by the Bible Reading Fellowship organisation which provides a sense of a whole family of Churches facing these issues together (Holy Communion in Messy Church, 2017, p1). This has resulted in an Order for Holy Communion or Messy Church being approved for Messy Church in Advent 2017 by the Liturgical Commission of the Church of England based on Common Worship.

The final Messy Church value is that of Christ Centred, suggesting that:

- ‘Messy Church is a Church, not a craft club, that helps people encounter Jesus as Lord and Saviour. Messy Church is part of The Bible Reading Fellowship which believes, with the historic Churches, in one God, who is Father, Son and Holy Ghost’ (Messy Church, Values, 2018).

This statement contains a lot to be unpacked, first by reinforcing the intention of Messy Church as being a Church not some sort of club. Which expresses an important requirement of an identity and intention found in:

- Mission-shaped Church Report, 2004.
- Fresh Expressions in the Mission of the Church, 2012.
- A Day of Small Things, 2016.

Secondly the aim to help people encounter God which is an ideal grounded in Jesus’ Great commission. Yet the Sermon of the Mount asks us to do much more. Stanley

Hauerwas argues that the Church needs to regain its social significance as a distinct society which is a community capable of hearing God's story as found in Scripture and living in a manner faithful to that story (Hauerwas in Nelstrop and Percy, 2008, p87). This is considered a requirement to be considered Church by the report 'Fresh Expressions in the Mission of the Church, 2012', yet this is exactly the area in which many traditional congregations and Churches are failing.

Thirdly, the unity of the Church with Christ at the centre is crucial, and the significant growth of Messy Church raises important questions of how it may fit in alongside traditional forms and structures of the Anglican Church. If Messy Church is to continue to grow and mature then it not only needs to move into financial independence, but to continue to remain demonstrably Christian as part of the mixed economy. The issues of accountability and leadership of Messy Church is still an ongoing conversation as currently much of its authority is received from the host Church or parish. Yet emerging Churches such as Messy Church often try to avoid the label of a particular denomination as the people they are trying to connect with have little or no understanding of these matters. This approach known as post-denominational gives a wider appeal to those outside of Church but causes difficulty in terms of leadership and accountability. The question for Messy Church seems to be does it want to be recognised as a Church within a given denomination or sit alongside them (Dakin in Paul, 2017, p180).

### Conclusion

Our post-modern, post-Christian society has pushed the traditional Church to the margins of society; worse still, the Church is complicit in this, by showing too little interest in community transformation. The question of whether Messy Church may be recognised as a church in its own right is not only, therefore, one of personal perspective; it is of vital importance to the Church if it is to be inspired to re-establish its contribution to building a mature and multi-faceted community. Fresh Expressions such as Messy Church endeavour to remain rooted in our contemporary culture, yet still hold on to the essential message revealed in the Gospels. This ecclesiology is a direct descendant of the message proclaimed and lived by Jesus. However, if the whole Church is to remain the body of Christ then there needs to be agreement of the key characteristics they need to function as a Church in and for the community alongside that of the more traditional forms of Church.

There are many contrasting definitions of Church, all claiming what is necessary to be Church, with the latest two from the Anglican Methodist Working Party and the Church Army in open disagreement; they do not agree on what is and what isn't necessary for something to be identified as Church. These reports should be commended for attempting to provide a solid foundation from which to discern whether a fresh expression has matured enough to become Church in its own right, yet where they fall down is their lack of flexibility. This inflexibility is evidenced by the fact that, when applied to traditional Church, that expression would, itself, fail to qualify as Church (A Day of Small Things, 2016).

That these Fresh Expressions be recast as parish mission ventures as suggested in 'For the Parish' (Davidson and Milbank, 2010, p227), seems to have completely missed the point of 'Mission-shaped Church Report 2004. The Church has an abiding need to reach out into our communities where they are, and these should not be seen as a stepping stone to traditional Church. The obvious success of Messy Church proves that this type of worship is self-contained and meaningful; issues surround liturgy and the sacraments remain, but these issues are being gradually overcome by, for example, the recent release of 'Holy Communion in Messy Church', a development hailed by the Bible Reading Fellowship. There is still the temptation for Messy Church to go back to traditional Church when seeking the sacraments of Baptism and the Eucharist, but this would be ill advised. Without even realising it, the traditional Church could undermine the distinctive character of the Messy Church congregation. Furthermore, these forms of traditional worship on a Sunday morning will be alien and unfamiliar, and they may feel excluded by an approach which is led from the front, turning them into recipients rather than participants. More importantly this could devalue the value of Messy Church to the communities in which they are rooted, removing the bridge from secular to sacred by which people connect with God in their everyday lives.

While it is not, therefore, Messy Church's conscious intention to change the Church, nevertheless it must be allowed to operate under its own authority. Indeed, it may be said that in some ways Messy Church is more scriptural than much of our current worship; in Messy Church, participation and hospitality are not just important, they are completely normative. This can lead to a growing relationship with God which is active rather than passive. Frequently the place of meeting will be somewhere in the community not considered to be a place of worship, and because of this it reflects more accurately the meaning of *Ekklesia*, which describes both the assembly of people and the Christian ideal of joining together as a community to worship the Lord. Messy Church is seen to be counter-cultural through its belief that the Church has an opportunity to demonstrate a better way of being community, not by arguing about what is wrong with society, but by encouraging families to come together. In offering hospitality, the practitioners live between the vision of God's kingdom and the hard realities of life in which too often the doors are closed to people and the needy left outside (Pohl in Moore, 2016, p304).

Messy Church, although strictly not fulfilling the requirements laid down in the Anglican Methodist Working Party Report 2012, is making great strides towards becoming a fully-formed Church and already satisfies the Five Marks of Mission alongside the criteria laid down in the Mission-shaped Church Report 2004. The major areas for further work relate to how Messy Church develops their own rituals of worship, which although they may look different from the traditional forms, still express the same corporate act of worship that has been passed down the centuries. Yet as Messy Church seeks to become a fully-fledged Church it must not lose those characteristics which makes it such a revitalising experience; just by being what it is, it serves to subtly query the missional character and structures of the traditional Church. By permitting the posing of radical questions it allows amazing answers to be discovered as a witness to what it means to actively live the mission which Jesus gave us in God's Kingdom (Paul, 2017, p187).

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