

# Findings from the Messy Church Momentum Listening Exercise

Brendan Research, February 2025

Overall research questions:

- Why do young people choose not to stay in Messy Church beyond 11 yrs of age?
- What will encourage them (and their parents) to remain involved and support them in their journey?
- For those who have grown up in Messy Church, what do they need to continue to be active disciples?

## Responses from 19 young people attending (or who have attended) Messy Church:

There were different views shared on whether 11+ should *only* come to help (or help *and* participate).

Volunteering is good training in understanding people, but it can get overwhelming at times, especially in chaotic moments.

Young people are reluctant to invite their friends 1) if their friends are not already Christians/interested in Christianity and 2) because they cannot give their friends their undivided attention when helping.

A parallel youth group was valued for being fun, sociable and a place where they can relax and not have to act as role models to younger children.

Almost all valued space to talk and the chance to debate issues and discuss Bible teaching from different people's perspectives.

Some felt that while Messy Church is confident with primary school age/stage, they can tell that some Messy Church leaders feel ill-equipped to deal with youth.

They were conscious of young children (or SEN children) needing a physically safe environment and teenagers can be boisterous. Zoning areas according to age was a common suggestion.

When helping, young people from one Messy Church described parents leaving their children unattended or capturing 'the moment' on their phone for social media rather than focusing on what their child wants to do.

Barriers to 11+ engagement: Fear of engaging with what is thought to be for younger kids, posters suggesting it won't be 'cool', not wanting to hang out with younger siblings (although some want to).

Ideas for 11+ engagement: leadership development, young adults taking a lead in the celebration time, outdoor/water activities, sport, TV/films, candle-lighting/prayer, bake-offs/bread-making, gardening, food/take-aways, music to reflect YP preferences, karaoke, resources to help leaders with youth.

## Responses from 7 parents/carers of young people attending (or who have attended) Messy Church:

Helping at Messy Church is a good opportunity for young people to enter a new phase of church life/civic duty. A parallel youth group enables them to move back and forth between separation and togetherness.

They observe their 11+ children helping but engaging in activities too. Or helping alongside an adult for some of the time but being with friends for another part of the time. By helping, they feel less silly doing activities.

The variety of tasks to help with are good (suited both confident and shy young people). However, it can be a challenge for 11+ to lead in the celebration to hold everyone's attention in an often chaotic environment.

It's good for teenagers to 'play' although they deserve space to do that in their own way. In urban contexts, parents are fearful of letting them go out and being on phones too much is not healthy.

Things change around 12/13 yrs of age. Some 13+ feel they can't stay because they don't believe in God. Some do not see church as a safe place. Faith conversations between parent/child become more challenging.

There were different views shared on whether parents who only come to Messy Church and don't help are really part of the church.

Some with younger children really appreciate separate children's activities on a Sunday - for an hour's rest.

A few friends of parents have expressed their wariness of helping at Messy Church because they believe that the church takes advantage of volunteers.

Common barriers to 11+ engagement: Sports, some young people don't like helping younger children.

Ideas for engagement: Ask for their ideas, camping, DofE, social outings, being in a church band, physical challenges (less craft), more adventurous activities, quizzes, food, interacting with other adults in church.

### **Responses from interviews with 20 Messy Church leaders:**

Where young people do stay engaged, they do so in relatively small numbers. Asking them to help in some way is the most common reason for their continued attendance, although attendance can be unpredictable.

Although the word 'discipleship' was mentioned only three times in the 9Dot Research responses to Qs 26 & 27, leaders in interviews talked of wanting to help young people deepen their faith in Jesus, discover their own gifts and develop holy habits for challenges ahead.

That Messy Church is for primary school stage of life remains a common assumption among many parents who stop coming when their children are 11+. (Observed in other all-age community initiatives too.)

Most teams need additional skills/resources to facilitate a gathering that really does cater for all ages.

Messy Church is energising but intensive. 'Chaotic', 'noisy', 'exhausting' were frequent descriptors alongside 'family', 'fun', and 'popular'. Some leaders are trying to recruit more team (often parents) to remain viable.

In an Anglican context, if growth in family engagement doesn't lead to involvement in Sunday morning services, who will eventually pay for the upkeep of church buildings that Messy Church rely on using?

The effects of COVID-19 are varied. Post-pandemic, some Messy Churches are struggling but others have had 'a new lease of life' or have begun since COVID-19.

This project's focus on engaging 11+ to stay involved in Messy Church highlights two important safeguarding issues 1) the Messy Church 'rule' that 11+ young people need to be accompanied when they may not want to be and 2) a few dioceses do not permit under 18s to lead/help to abide by Safer Recruiting.

Barriers to 11+ engagement: busyness of family life, split families, don't want to be the only +11 there, peer pressure, time clash with school buses/activities or weekend jobs, not providing age-appropriate activities, leaders not knowing how to do ministry with teens.

Ideas for 11+ engagement: celebrations to honour their volunteering, learning from Scouting/Guiding, time for questions, directing them to youth events run by other churches, visiting families of other Messy Churches, more ideas/resources for leaders to help engage young people.

### **Additional observations from the research:**

- The need for the 'all-age' value to be adapted for a local context came through strongly. Yet, participants found it hard to imagine what this might look like. Even the young people found it difficult.
- As well as all the positives, asking young people to help as the main (or only way) to stay involved does reinforce that Messy Church is for younger kids/families.
- The ways the 9-11s engaged with the research exercise compared with the 12+s, confirmed parents' observation about the marked difference between age cohorts. It was very difficult for the 9-11s to imagine what they would want or need to keep coming as teenagers.
- Where participants talked of a different approach needed for teenager faith nurture (compared with children), this reminds us of Nye who notes that Jesus interacted differently with children - just being a child was what mattered - whereas with adults, Jesus required radical change or invited a response to a life crisis. Nye R. (2009) *Children's Spirituality* London CHP p. 10.
- Do the challenges the team had in finding in-person visits for the listening exercise tell us something about wider capacity for Messy Churches to participate in pilots?

### **Suggestive analogies shared by participants:**

My hopes and dreams for 11+ young people's involvement in Messy Church feel/s like ...

... **a campfire** offering chill space and a chance to chat with adults they can trust who aren't their parents (P)  
... **a series of steps** ... of familiar but different stages ... deepening and stretching ... in both directions ... (L)  
... **stepping stones** of further faith engagement ... or steps floating in the air ... scary but fun (L & YP)  
... helping each other out like ... **climbing a tree** together (YP)  
... **a solar system** ... orbiting the cross ... gravity will pull the young people back at some point (L)  
... **a forest of different trees** with different fruits (L)  
... **a feast** with different people bringing different foods/culture/gifts/opinions to the table (YP)

### **Discussion questions:**

- Where do these findings resonate with your experience/observations?
- What does creativity or 'play' look like for 11+ aged young people?
- In your experience, what issues are similar or different across urban and rural settings?

*For the rest of our time together...*

- How do we start where Messy Churches are, not where we wish them to be?
- How do we support local contextualisation yet provide 'doable' frameworks?

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### **A note on methodology:**

Data sources: 5 online focus groups, 5 in-person focus groups between January and February 2025 plus responses to Qs.26&27 of 9Dot survey with Messy Church leaders (Spring 2024).

Approach: The CofE Research Ethics Panel were consulted for the U18s research. Within all focus groups, participants were asked to draw their responses to three questions before describing them to the group. Responses led to further discussion. Interview transcripts were summarised and survey responses coded.

Strengths of the approach: The first two questions gave much-needed context to the final specific question about 11+ engagement. This approach captured gut reaction followed by more considered response.

Acknowledged limitations: With a modest amount of data, it was hard to spot similarities/differences for young people who have grown up with Messy Church and those new to it. We gathered more data from leaders than young people and parents (more challenging because of local gatekeeper recruitment). Where young people and parents did participate, almost all were regular churchgoers.