

## **Some frameworks to explore Messy Church and discipleship**

We often hear Mike Breen saying that “if you focus on making church you won’t necessarily end up with disciples, whereas if you focus on making disciples of Jesus you are bound to end up with church.” The observation has also been made that Jesus said, “I will build my church” but commissioned us to “go and make disciples”. So my focus in this chapter will be exploring ‘messy’ as church through seeking to better understand discipleship.

Now we could start with one of Lucy’s statements in the first Fresh Expressions DVD chapter on Messy Church made in 2005. In recognising the challenge as to whether ‘messy’ was fully church, she said:

“I don’t see it as a stepping stone into Sunday services because I think that for a lot of people Sunday isn’t an easy day to get to church on. To have something once a month which is always there is very important and also if it is not a valid service in its own right then it is not worth doing. We do struggle with the fact that we get a lot of people here who are at different stages of faith development. Obviously in 10 minutes you can’t give a fully worked out biblical exposition which is going to challenge people and take them a lot further as you would like to in their discipleship. But like a Sunday congregation you’re trying to take everybody on from where they’re at so their faith journey progresses.” – Lucy Moore

Now this statement does give away our tendency in the western church to equate discipleship with communicating information and the sermon as a chief vehicle. I know that Lucy’s thinking on discipleship and that of the Messy team has always been wider than that and has got ever-wider as they have wrestled with this challenge. However, this does form an interesting starting point for the reflections I want to explore.

And I plan to use a two way lens for these reflections. First I intend to seek to see how some biblical and holistic perspectives on discipleship enable us to see that more discipleship may be happening in Messy Church than we might at first think. This should not only enable us to be encouraged but then to take a second lens and to explore how we could make more of these discipleship elements. How can we see ways in which much more discipleship could happen as we become more intentional and consciously develop these aspects further and also consider adding others?

But at the outset as we seek to use the lens of extending the discipleship and ecclesial reach of messy, we need to refer to two significant limitations already referred to in the literature. The first limiting factor is that it is an event and usually only monthly at that. The second is the scarcity of time that the team and volunteers are able to give above and beyond the already demanding events. For many of them although messy is a high priority, they do not see it as their church (a serious issue in itself) so that it competes for limited spare time with their other church involvement. This in turn, can be seen as

restricting either of the two broad options that I identified to enrich nurture and discipleship in messy church in my October, 2011 web paper on this subject ([www.acpi.org.uk/articles](http://www.acpi.org.uk/articles)).

The first option is to add to discipleship in the messy church event itself. And I see this being done either by increasing its frequency or by enriching the content of some of the events whilst preserving the ethos and respecting the expectations and trust of those invited. The second option is to complement the messy church events with other activities and groups. This has the advantage that only those participants ready to go deeper respond and it is not imposed on the rest. We shall explore here how these extra elements can be resourced either by the existing team, the invitees themselves, or through partnerships with other parts of the wider church (giving further legs to the mixed economy!)

Now the way that I want to take the twin lenses that I have described, is to use a number of frameworks or analytical tools to seek a wider and deeper understanding of discipleship and church as they are happening and could perhaps happen more in Messy. Most of these frameworks or tools can be represented graphically with diagrams or shapes. I shall be using four such frameworks and shapes in my explanation.

I am aware that this is only one way of thinking but in a visual culture they can be helpful. I also recognise that the categorisation implicit in these frameworks is over simplistic and that reality is more complex with overlaps and fuzzy edges. In fact much more “messy” and more like a spectrum. But with this proviso I hope they may prove helpful.

Some of these frameworks and diagrams are explored in much more depth in the literature but by relating them to what is happening and could happen in Messy Church this may be new. To try to understand the insights of these frameworks we shall first need to summarise each at some length. But we would encourage you to have Messy Church in mind as you follow the ideas and analysis. I would hope that you will quickly begin to make connections for yourself to the messy event, its key constituents and its DNA or foundational values. And see also if they expand your view of Messy Church?

### **The Structure of Culture – Kwast’s visualisation of its inter-related areas**

So let’s begin with our first framework...culture itself. Since we are in a missionary situation in Britain, we should perhaps do what good mission practice does and start with an analysis of culture and see how ‘messy’ is responding.

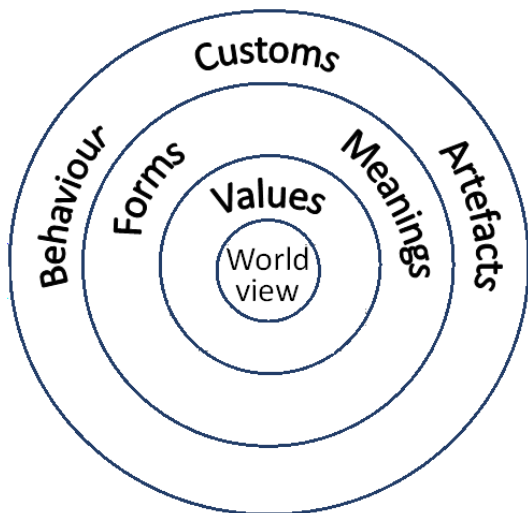


Figure 1. Culture and the 'Onion Rings' model of Kwast

Footnote: Lloyd Kwast, *Understanding Culture, Perspectives on the World Christian Movement*, 1981, Inst. Of International Studies

Whilst Lloyd Kwast himself asserts that culture is complex, multi-faceted and not neatly or uniformly organised, nonetheless I find his framework helpful which proposes a measure of order and structure like "onion rings" as per the diagram in Figure 1. What we experience and observe in everyday life is the outer ring of behaviour, symbols and artefacts. Now the way these observable aspects are understood is based on the relationship between forms and meanings. Every culture has its conventions and traditions about how these are understood. At the most evident level, language itself is a form (sounds) to which we attribute agreed meanings. And here we may note that whilst the idea and concepts of Messy Church are travelling well to Germany the word itself does not translate. They have no equivalent word for messy and the best they can come up with is "Kaos Kirche", which doesn't fully do it. But even this difficulty illustrates the limitations of our symbols and words.

Underlying outward behaviour and the meanings we put upon them are a cultures values ... what is seen as bad, good, better and best. The diagram further illustrates that our value system in turn flows from the core of world view.

Now historically weak and often misguided mission engagement is when the missionary focuses on the outer layer, the superficial things that strike one first. Whereas missional best practice is to find ways for the gospel to engage and challenge as near to the centre as possible. Ideally connecting to the worldview where the gospel can bring transformation which will then work outwards in a way that's authentic to that culture, to the values which in turn effect behaviour.

And traditionally the assumption might be that such engagement with worldview and values would be addressed with argument, story, and Christian conceptual truth. An approach to the mind. However, the really interesting thing emerges when we relate the approach of messy church to our western culture. A culture that is perhaps uniquely resistant to arguments of objective truth. For part of our

worldview is that all truth is relative and based on individual choice. So what has been described as understated and light in messy's short engagement with a Christian message during the service element suddenly may be seen as subtle wisdom and rather strategic.

What becomes even more notable is when one realises that where messy most strongly engages with worldview and values is precisely through modelling patterns of behaviour and experience, which themselves express counter-cultural values. Again this seems creative wisdom for our culture, which values experience over ideas.

In a culture that is shaped by a worldview of individualisation, messy models community and "together" in all its elements as George Lings has observed in Encounters on the Edge No.46 (perhaps weakest in the service element). In a culture shaped by a core of consumerism, messy models participation and co-production. In a culture with a market economy based worldview whose values primarily work financially and materially, messy invites us into a world where spiritual and social capital rightly return to prime place.

We can see the same approach in the mission and ministry of Jesus. His is a ministry consistently focussed on "the kingdom". In other words, a presentation of his alternative worldview. And in a culture unlike ours that was very open to the truth... he addresses his alternative kingdom in both story and principle to an oral culture. But Jesus also models this counter-cultural realm and its associated values in both his works of compassion, his community of followers, and his embracing of servanthood and worldly powerlessness. The crowds and the 12 and the 72 were all given a different experience by being around Jesus and observing and living his values.

Now as well as affirming the culturally sensitive discipleship that is already working out in messy, this framework also provides understanding and pointers to how that discipleship may be further enhanced. The analysis provides wider possibilities to extend the processes of discipleship beyond what may be possible in a once a month event centred messy church. With a culture that values experience over objective truth, there are possibilities to add other activities outside the event, such as baby massage and prayer, all-age family prayer workshops, training and resourcing for family rituals and traditions. Then in a culture that loves stories almost as much as in Jesus' day, what about equipping families in the art and skills of storytelling with biblical resources such as those found from [www.storyrunners.com/resources](http://www.storyrunners.com/resources).

This framework of culture also helps us explore how messy church may be adapted to different cultures within western society. It points to the question, how might messy church expressions be adapted in working class contexts (would the creating element draw more on **karaoke** than crafts?) or among the marginalised? Perhaps some pointers here could be found from the "No Limits" missional community in Deal which predominantly engages the handicapped. Whilst not using the messy label, it is all age and expresses all the four elements and all the messy values. This is still creating together and playing

together but to express the predominant disabled culture – these elements don't look quite like the Fresh Expressions DVD clip of Messy Church. The driving aim of the group is how the able and mostly disabled, all ages, learn together like Jesus, live and eat together like Jesus and respond together to God's grace like Jesus ... with greatly reduced emphasis on the verbal and conceptual and an increase in participation, facilitation and bodily expression. It is assuredly more messy than most that bear the name, but also puts the question that some are raising as to what is "pure messy" into a whole new perspective.

### Three Classic Processes of Learning

Our root meaning of discipleship comes from the Greek word *mathetes* which means learner. So to better grasp what's involved in discipleship we need to understand how learning works. From a presentation by Ted Ward, Professor of Education of Michigan State University, in 1990 we came to understand that there are three classic processes of learning. All three are extremely important for human development but each works differently and each has different strengths. Jesus made use of all three processes in his learning community of the gospels. The professor explained that these three can be related to one another in the triangle in figure 2. In this triangle, each process shares a key defining characteristic with the process at the adjacent apex. By contrast, each has an opposite characteristic to that which the other two processes share in common (indicated by the arrows across to the other side of the shape).

Footnote: Ted W. Ward & L. McKinney & J. Dettoni, *Effective Learning in non-formal modes*, 1971

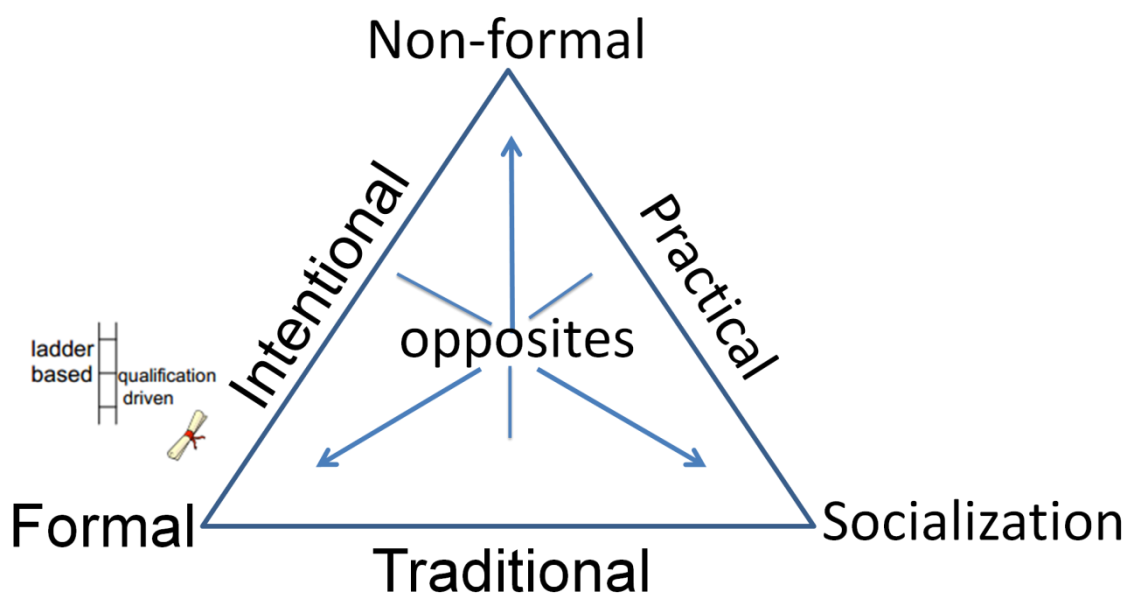


Figure 2. Three processes of learning

## **Formal Learning**

This is the learning process that most readily comes to mind. It is typified by the learning in schools, colleges, and by the sermon series or the Christian 'course'. The diagram shows us that one of two defining characteristics of formal learning is that we **intentionally** engage in a specific course of learning. Typically we study a subject and it tends to be 'ladder based'. In other words it works by building from one level to the next level, which in turn depends on the foundational level. Following the arrow in the diagram, it is contrasted with the other two learning processes as not being primarily rooted in practice or practically orientated. There may be practical exercises but the learning is in a dedicated context and hence its character is academic and its main objectives are developing theoretical understanding and enhancing the mind.

Whilst we don't have records of Jesus employing this learning process in a classic way, his Sermons on the Mount and the Plain and his final week discourses are in this category. In many ways Jesus was here building on the foundations of formal learning in the synagogues.

## **Socialisation Learning**

Here again as we summarise the characteristics we relate them to the diagram. As the name implies, this type of learning happens naturally and spontaneously in a social context of relationships. Hence, by contrast to formal learning it is **unintentional** (see the arrow). This illustrates that human beings are natural learners. Put us with others and we learn from them and the interactions between us and them. How we learn languages provides an excellent insight into these first two processes. I learnt English by socialisation. It was entirely **practically** based as each word, phrase and sentence was picked up to help me express myself and to make sense of what others were saying. On the other hand it was **unintentional** in that I didn't enrol in a course, there was no systematic plan, but rather I was immersed in it. By contrast my formal learning of English at school taught me the structure and science of the language as I learnt nouns and verbs this week, parts of speech and tenses next, and so on. The disciples of Jesus entered a three year process of socialisation learning as they were invited to "follow me" ... "where are you staying – come and see!" Each chosen "that they might be with him..." It wasn't forgiveness and conflict resolution this week; prayer and miracles next and servant leadership the next. Theirs was the living laboratory of faith and hope all expressed through love.

## **Non-formal learning**

The last of the three processes of learning was apparently the last to be identified, described and related to the other two in this framework. Lacking a more descriptive title it seems, the educators called it "non-formal learning" and the best example is the age-old practice of apprenticeship. It's the way that master crafts people passed on their skills and vocations like nursing were best learnt.

Using the diagnostic features of the professor's triangle, we see that, like formal learning a carpenter's apprentice **intentionally** enrolls and with the master, dedicates time to developing the knowledge and skills involved in the trade. It also shares the distinguishing characteristic with socialisation learning, that the learning is essentially acquired within a **practical** context as tables, chairs and drawers are made; and as measuring, sawing, planning and joints are performed.

Once again we see Jesus "apprenticing his followers as he involved them in everyday practical elements of his ministry. We see them instructed... "you feed them!"; directed... "sending them ahead of him into every town and village"; repeatedly giving feedback... "ye of little faith" and in turn they repeatedly asked questions... "why couldn't we heal him?" ... "teach us to pray?"

Now the last defining characteristic in the framework that the professor explained was the one that formal and socialisation learning share in common along the bottom of the shape. The word he used was **traditional**, explaining that what is learnt in the social context of the home, village, tribe re-enforces traditional patterns and world view values. And whilst formal learning processes also tend to re-enforce the understandings and values of those institutions, he asserted that non-formal processes opened up the most possibilities of change, innovation and new understandings. Even within predominately formal learning institutions like universities, it is in the non-formal relationship of professor: research assistant that innovation usually arises. Or it may be that someone even has to leave that institution to explore alternative otherwise rejected hypotheses.

Here again it is significant that the gospels show us so much of Jesus working with the disciples in non-formal learning settings as he sought to bring his radically re-interpreted vision of what the Kingdom of God meant, nothing less than "repentance", metanoia, a change of thinking, values, worldview.

We needed to summarise the insights of this second framework at some length before we could apply them to our twofold lens of applying them to messy church. But as a final point before we move on to this I would give my suggestion that whilst each of the three processes deliver complex outcomes with a degree of overlap, it seems to me that the most characteristic fruit of each would be: Formal – understanding, Socialisation – values, Non-formal – skills. We could also probably conclude that socialisation learning requires the longest time precisely because it's unintentional and there is less to make the learning explicit, much is absorbed intuitively. We could also say that formal learning is facilitated primarily by instruction, whereas socialisation learning occurs most through observation with support from execution and instruction. Then non-formal learning is enabled primarily by execution with support from observation and instruction.

As I have reflected on the insights of the three processes of learning as they relate to our mission and discipleship and that of Jesus, it seems to me that once a new paradigm has been discovered, the most effective way to propagate such transformation of worldview and values is to employ all three processes - as Jesus did. To use only one or two will disproportionately limit the outcome.

So the new paradigm needs a community living it into which others can be invited who will naturally, unintentionally learn through the lived values, practices and lifestyles being modelled in the practical activities together (socialisation). This will be powerfully augmented if those more experienced in areas that exemplify and apply the new paradigm pro-actively form a team with one, two or more assistants (apprentices) to deliver together their shared practices and aims. Then most powerful of all will be if out of these two elements comes a “school” which develops ways to intentionally propagate the understanding of the new paradigm.

Well as we have explained this framework, I wonder how you have related it to Messy Church?

First let’s take the framework’s insights and apply the lens to recognise more fully the discipleship and elements of church that are already present in the messy events. As an overall conclusion we may think that Messy Church is strongest in socialisation learning. We have already referred to George Lings’ comments that almost all the elements of the events are “together” - the coming, being, making, eating and celebrating. I assess the formal learning as probably weakest but note this is probably partly a conscious move away from a perceived over-emphasis in traditional church on the long presentational sermon and also part of All Age philosophy to do instruction in a way that the oldest can learn at the same time as the youngest.

One has to take more than a superficial look to appreciate the extent of non-formal learning in the messy event. First, at a general level the events are highly intentional as well as practical. Furthermore there is a measure of apprenticing that happens with those invited to the events. This occurs as there is intentional helping of parents make with and play with their children as well as passing on experience and skills of eating together as family. But a really important revelation comes when we recognise that discipleship isn’t just happening with those invited, but with the team and the volunteers. And its strong on non-formal learning as the team and volunteers are apprenticed in planning, preparing and serving, as well as modelling for those invited.

Also let’s think further about apprenticeship as we continue our quest to expand our understanding of the possibilities of discipleship through these three learning processes. Now back in 2006 when Lucy was sharing with us about the challenge of extending discipleship in messy church, we shared insights we had gained for a church in Denmark. They had concluded that the prevailing western church trend of local churches assuming the role and responsibility of discipling the children of church families was suspect. Rather they had concluded that the biblical responsibility for discipling the next generation was primarily that of the family and the home and based on mentoring and apprenticeship of the older for the younger.

As a church they had therefore shifted the emphasis to providing simple resources to support families doing discipleship in the home. This seems in fact to provide the potential to combine non formal learning with socialisation learning and doesn’t depend for delivery on team and volunteers. There is



the matter of providing the resources, but here again the team could look to other local churches or the wider church.

Using the focus of socialisation can sharpen the issues of discipleship and learning. As we have said, because socialisation learning happens best in spontaneous interaction in family and village, it takes most time and fits least with an occasional event. Thinking this through leads me to think that there is a progression from an event; to a process; to gaining a quality of community; to becoming a place of belonging and a way of life. Jesus' discipleship which led to his ecclesial community, followed this progression. Part of this journey is a move from attendee to participant to contributor to member. To illustrate we could see these progressions as follows:

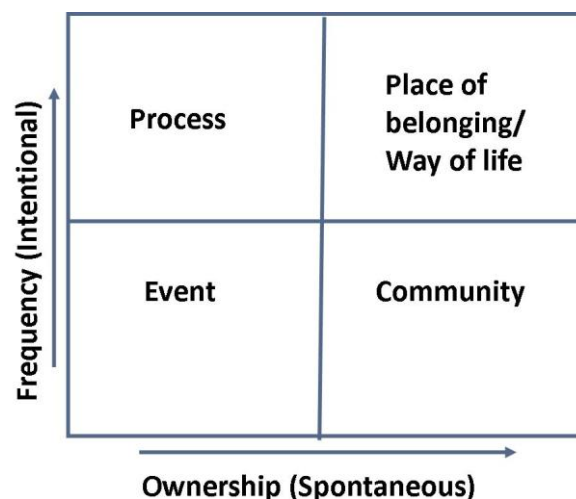
**Corporate:** Event → Process → Community → Way of life

**Individual:** Attendee → Participant → contributor → member

Here I would raise a potential loose comparison with and warning from Willowcreek and seeker sensitive church. This movement came to the UK in the 90's and gained significant following but is now in most cases only a memory or an occasional outreach event to enrich inherited church. The similarities are that as church Willowcreek was event centred. And a very resource and energy demanding event, which has parallels to messy, although the messy elements are very different with meal, craft and play as well as service. The crucial difference is that messy majors on involvement rather than the emphasis of presentation and spectating in Willowcreek. Nonetheless, there must be a warning here that unless the journey we are describing from event to community and way of life can be navigated, sustainability will be a bigger issue than the more theoretical question as to what extent event can be church.

Again a couple of diagrams may help to extend these principles. First the matrix in figure 3 illustrates that increasing the frequency of pre-planned events can develop it to a process with correspondingly increased potential socialisation and other learning. But it's the spontaneous relational elements that create a quality of community. And we would suggest that messy moves remarkably far in this direction for a monthly gathering. But messy's greatest limitation would seem to be in becoming a place of belonging and a way of life. Now these understandings can also point to how messy could extend itself and overcome the two stated limitations at the beginning of the chapter.

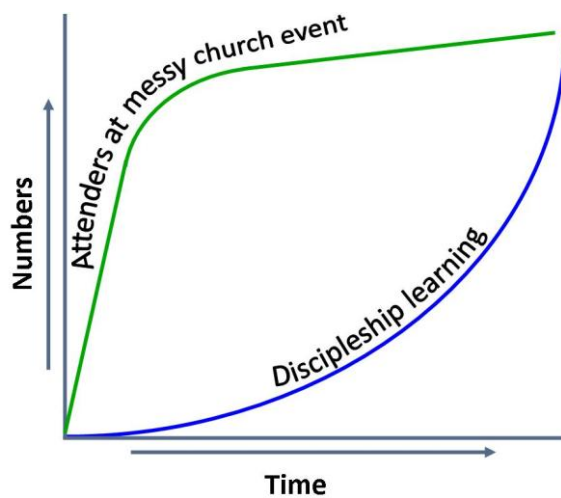
Figure 3. Matrix of developing socialisation



The second diagram in Fig 4 illustrates the fact that messy events by their nature are proving highly effective in quickly attracting significant numbers of de-churched and non-churched families. However, they do reach a ceiling due both to the high level of commitment and resourcing required to deliver the excellent events, and to the loss of the essential qualities that occurs above the ceiling.

On the other hand the line of discipleship learning goes the opposite way. Socialisation and non-formal learning take time that is limited by monthly gatherings.

Figure 4. Graph of two types of growth



Furthermore remembering Lucy's quote we started with on [page x](#), she referred to two constraining factors. First that everyone attending are at very different places on their faith journey and secondly that there is a limit to what can be achieved with a 10 minute formal input. Now on the first count, if all or most of discipleship is to happen in the messy event then one will have to move at the pace of the slower. If one responded to the few who happen to be ready and hungry for more, one would violate the trust of others who hadn't signed up for more and hadn't been led to expect it.

Firstly, if more frequent messy events are to be considered to move more to process, then enrolling the invited unchurched into the teams would immediately relieve the volunteer constraints. And we suggest they could be given responsibility in all areas of messy. Being part of the planning and developing the "spiritual" bits could be the best apprenticeship learning.

Secondly even greater strides can be made in moving to community and even a place of belonging, if the messy events are complemented by both other lighter weight events and programs, and by all sorts of more spontaneous engagement of invitees, team and volunteers at any other time. If the community of messy is to be further built to be a way of life, then there should be all sorts of invitations to one another's homes for meals and socials. Members can take part together in so many things outside messy events, Christians and not yet Christians together, family outings and all. Maybe precisely

because socialisation learning happens unintentionally, it's implicitly expected to happen most outside events. If so it may need to become an explicit expectation of messy church that's more than messy event. Is it reasonable to suggest, that if messy is to truly express church, then those involved will do all sorts of everyday stuff outside of the event - "together"? And this will be in all sorts of unplanned combinations and with no separation of leaders and rest; team and attenders?

Now other events and programmes can also be added but don't have to be resourced by the Messy team or volunteers. They could be run by those from any other church in the area or by the unchurched where appropriate. Examples could be "baby massage and prayer"; invitation to be part of social ministries in the area such as "Beesom Projects"; soup kitchens and support of the marginalised. And these can often be all age to be in harmony with Messy values, with children in their schools doing sponsored events to raise money, collecting clothes and sleeping bags which the family deliver to those in need. These activities develop the non-formal and socialisation elements and as Ann Morisey has observed, taking the non-churched middle classes outside their comfort zone alongside those with spiritual resources they may have discounted, may be the one way to open them to the gospel (she describes this as the invitational domain).

Reference- The Future of the Parish System p xx

Furthermore, as we think of the place of socialisation learning to convey conceptual gospel truth... then the relational strength of messy gives all sorts of scope for one to one conversations. Rather than presentational mode, there will be plenty of unplanned opportunities to give the reason for the hope in Jesus in spontaneous conversations or informal group discussions.

Focusing back onto non-formal learning, that is intentional and practically based, the messy events provide all sorts of opportunities to apprentice the invitees alongside core team and volunteers, rather than just seeing them as attendees. They may be apprenticed to the setting up and practical team; to the cooking team, the craft and games team, as well as the service team. Furthermore, they can be apprenticed outside the messy events in many other family oriented activities, particularly those outside their experience and comfort zones, as already mentioned.

And coming back to the most familiar process of formal learning based on instruction, let's consider further this element in the messy events. We entirely recognise the messy value of all age and endorse the principle that adults, teens and children can learn together when it's all done well. But as formal learning in messy is accessible to the youngest, there will inevitably be aspects of more complex understanding or mature experience that adults will miss. A partial response can be having parts of the formal learning in the messy service processed in different aged groups (not sending the children out!) And then some adopt the enhancement of the monthly messy event with the sorts of things like separate 'messy plus' for those older.

We observed at the outset, that in today's culture that is cautious if not resistant to presentation of objective truth, messy's formal learning is strong on story and applied truth. Extending the formal learning outside the messy event can involve courses. Again, obvious examples like parenting courses don't have to depend on overstretched team/ volunteers. But creative imagination of how all age family life in the kingdom can be further supported should come up with many ideas. Examples could include courses in family prayer; family rituals and traditions; conflict resolution and forgiveness in families; work: rest: recreation rhythms in families' etc. again drawing expertise from others, Christian and not yet Christian, outside the messy community avoids limited time and resources.

All through this chapter we have emphasised that Christian discipleship is not a one way process, done by the team and volunteer to the rest. Jesus made it clear in commissioning his disciples to go and make other disciples that it was in the context of genuine relationships of receiving and giving (Matt 10:7-13, Luke 10:5-9). In fact the way the gospel is best communicated is reflexively... we don't get to keep it!

So to conclude, as we have sought to look through the double lens of where discipleship and church are already happening in messy and how these can be enhanced, we have touched on four areas of human being and doing. First there is community (*belonging*), and to gain the fullest measure we have just begun to explore how the messy team and volunteers participate in forming community but also opening up the part that invitees can play.

Secondly there is understanding and conceptual truth (*believe*). And here again if we are to see discipleship and church grow most effectively we should imagine how Christians can all participate in imparting and receiving. Thirdly, there is action and creativity (*behave*). And just as thoroughly we have tried to open up how everyone in the messy enterprise and beyond can be involved as doers and done to. Fourth and last, we hope we have also opened the window on the human area of spiritual experience (*bless*). And here too we have tried to expand the possibilities in messy church (as in all discipleship and church) by recognising that "it is more blessed to give than to receive", and so again we must explore how Christians and not yet Christians can all discover more possibilities of blessing one another.