



Growing a Messy Church

Shanelle Manderson finds out how Portsmouth Citadel have taken family ministry into homes

DID you know there are 3,791 Messy Churches around the world? For several years Portsmouth Citadel's Messy Church has been welcoming families to the corps one Sunday a month to eat, celebrate God and, well, get messy!

A typical session includes: a welcome; a Bible presentation; a craft time for all ages to explore the biblical theme; worship, including singing; an opportunity to present their craftwork; and a sit-down meal together.

As the lockdown prevented families from meeting together, the Messy Church team made the decision to bring church to the members by posting – and, as restrictions eased, delivering – craft packs to families.

'In the early days of lockdown we saw a lot of churches doing different things, including sending out online crafts to print, but we thought perhaps we could take it to the next level,' says team co-ordinator Paul French. 'We wanted to make it as easy as possible for families to have fun. It's all very well sending out

something to make but then they need the glue, or something to cook but then they need to buy ingredients. In all those scenarios we thought about how we could best give them what they needed so all they had to do was enjoy.'

The team also felt it was important to maintain connections, explains Paul: 'A lot of families that come to our Messy Church are from the inner city, where poverty is quite rife and it's a struggle to feed their kids a lot of the time. We wanted to reach out to people and make them aware that we still cared and we'd not gone away at a time when they needed us more than ever.' 'We also saw Messy Church at home as an opportunity to grow and, hopefully in the future, get more people through our doors and to know Jesus even more.'

Using Facebook as a means of contact to spread the word about this new Messy Church at home, the team began at Easter with something small. Team member Lauren Wheeler created the first of many

fun how-to videos with craft ideas, which included things that could be made from items around the house, and some links to stories and songs, and posted it to the corps Facebook page.

Since then each month the team have put together craft packs and Lauren has created a follow-along video that children can watch. In May a superhero theme linked a Bible story to Jesus being the ultimate hero. Craft packs were sent in the post for children to take part in designing their own superhero masks, cuffs and bookmarks as well as other activities.

Feeling slightly more adventurous, June's Messy Church took on a food theme linked to the feeding of the 5,000. As lockdown restrictions lessened, the team delivered pizza bases, toppings and craft packs to families' doors, giving them an opportunity to have doorstep contact and conversations to find out how people were getting on. Soon, after





Corps officer Major Julian Watchorn and team member Lauren Wheeler prepare craft packs



encouragement from the team, waves of videos and pictures of the children enjoying the activities distributed over the past months were being posted to the corps Facebook page by parents.

'We had more than 300 photos saying how much the kids loved making the pizzas and how it had been a godsend to have a little activity and have someone come to the door,' enthuses Lauren.

'It was at this point that we needed a separate Facebook page for Messy Church as the corps page was being overrun with information,' adds associate officer Major Andrea Still.

The following month took on a fitness theme, focusing on being fit for life and running the race for Jesus. Packs included task cards with fitness ideas, stickers, a medal, a certificate, paper trainers to design and instructions on how to make a magnet. Lauren also took the children through an aerobics workout.

'We figured people would be out and about a bit more, so we thought we'd hammer home the health benefits of

fitness,' explains Paul.

August's Messy Church focused on the story of Jesus calming the storm. Children were shown how to make a paper boat and were encouraged to pray when feeling overwhelmed. September was linked to Harvest and the parable of the sower, and children had the

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opportunity to make scarecrow plates, a handprint tree and a thank-you cross. A chocolate bar and 'Thinking of You' cards were also included in the packs for the parents.

October's Messy Church will provide an alternative to Halloween, focusing on the light of Jesus.

Coming up with ideas for each month has been a team effort. There have been moments when it has been

challenging as everyone leads busy lives, but team meetings on Zoom have meant everyone has been able to communicate, plan and organise effectively.

While the number of families on the books has grown from 86 to more than 100 since Messy Church at home was launched, the most rewarding thing for the team has been seeing everyone enjoy the contact and crafts and appreciate all the effort they've made.

'We're a traditional corps,' says Paul, 'but the Messy Church element is as important as Sunday worship for our families because this is their church.'

'It's important to realise that church isn't the building, it's everywhere,' adds Lauren. 'Even though these are tough, unprecedented times, we've learnt you can make things work and still grow a church and community. Messy Church at home has just been about making those connections, even from home. It's been so important for our families to know that we are here for them.'

