



Denise Williams helps her son Daniel, 8, and her daughter Rose, 3, create faces at a craft table

Children thrilled by creative craft ideas

AS the door opens, dozens of children dash into the hall to find out what messy crafts they can do today.

They smear icing onto biscuits and add chocolate buttons to create 'cow biscuits'. Then they create covers for notebooks to turn them into prayer journals.

Other children are drawing round their hands to create a prayer reminder, and then eagerly draw their own designs onto old t-shirts using fabric pens.

This is Messy Church in Petersfield, which attracts between 50 and 140 people each month. It's an ecumenical project that involves all 11 churches in the town, and happens in Petersfield Methodist Church.

Today's theme is Hannah, and after an hour of craft, the Rev Dominic Clarke from St Peter's talks to the children about what they've made and why. They sing a couple of songs and say a prayer before everyone sits down for a hot meal.

Emma Dean from St Peter's and Helen Mason from Life Church started Messy Church in the town two years ago after watching a Fresh Expressions DVD that featured the original at St

Wilfrid's, Cowplain.

"We'd already done something similar for Easter and Pentecost and we thought: 'We could do this every month'," said Emma. "We visited Lucy's church twice to see how it's done.

"Most of the people who come don't go to church. It allows us to build on the contacts we make each year at the ecumenical holiday club.

"The craft is a brilliant way for helpers and parents to engage with the kids. And the meal is a special part of Messy Church, as that's where you build relationships. We're working our way through Lucy's second book, but I think we'll have the confidence to think of our own ideas."

Emma Childs, whose sons Adam, 8, and Mark, 6, are regulars, said: "They really enjoy all the activities. And we end up with mountains of craft at home."

Mum-of-three Denise Williams said: "People talk about it at the school gate. Both my boys love the craft and visit every table."

IT started with a group of worshippers at St Wilfrid's, Cowplain having a bright idea. Now it's a worldwide phenomenon.

Messy Church is the name given to a network of congregations, each of which meets for families to try art and craft with a spiritual theme, eat together and engage in a simple act of celebration.

There are now 360 Messy Churches across the UK and further afield – the concept has also been launched in Denmark, New Zealand, Australia, Canada and Ireland. Anglican chaplains in Portugal and Spain are also keen on the idea.

Little did Lucy Moore (pictured below) and her team at St Wilfrid's realise how big it would become when they dreamt up the first Messy Church six years ago.

"There were a group of us concerned about the needs of children in the church, and we got together to talk about the best way forward," she said. "We felt that holiday clubs tended to address children in isolation, so we wanted something that would take the whole family on a journey, where adults could investigate faith with their children.

"After a lot of listening to God and to people around us, our core team came up with the idea of Messy Church. It should involve a welcome, some craft, a chance to celebrate and a meal. It would be on a Thursday, after school, once a month. Our Sunday congregation generously gave their time to help, and we have around 30 volunteers involved now, aged from teenagers to someone who is 90 years old."

In a typical Messy Church setting, 10 or so creative volunteers each come up with a different art or craft idea, all linked by a common theme such as

Easter, one of Jesus' parables or the Holy Spirit. Children and their parents go from table to table, making paintings, models, collages and sculptures – and usually creating a lot of mess!

Many Messy Churches provide a hot meal, but some offer



Families love a messy time



aprons, tumblers, postcards and other branded merchandise was created.

And 18 months ago, Lucy, who was already part of BRF's team working in churches and schools, became a full-time Messy Church team leader. She helps train people who want to launch or improve their Messy Churches, organises 'Messy Fiestas' when Messy Churches come together, and equips regional co-ordinators across the UK to enthuse about the idea.

"I already had a job with BRF in which I went around the country doing training for church leaders as well as schools work," said Lucy. "I realised I was getting more and more invitations to talk about Messy Church, so it was a great relief when BRF got funding for

me to go full-time and start to develop a network of regional co-ordinators."

Her role has taken her to the Shetland Islands, Denmark and Ireland, and last month she led a day-long session, where stories and skills were shared at the Christian Resources Exhibition in Esher. And one of the regional co-ordinators has even taken the concept to rural Zimbabwe, where 300 people took part in an inaugural Messy Church.

"Once people have seen Messy Church in action, they realise that it's not just a children's club, but somewhere where they can be themselves and listen to other people on their Christian journey," she said. "It can take time for people to realise that it's for families, not just children. It's also good when Messy Church is seen as a

separate congregation in its own right, not something that channels people into the Sunday congregation.

"It's influenced the rest of our church in the sense that it's taught us about the joy of eating together, of all ages working together and hospitality. We've learnt that church shouldn't be about what we want, but about helping those outside our churches to come closer to God.

"It's also taught us about how we can try to give things to God and he gives us buckets and buckets back! We started this for ourselves and it's become something happening around the world, and in Anglican, Methodist, Salvation Army, Baptist and URC churches.

"None of it is rocket science, but it gives churches permission and the con-

New Messy Church brings in crowds

IT was the first time St Peter's Church in Titchfield had run a Messy Church. Organisers had no idea how many might turn up – which made catering quite difficult.

Nine tables were scattered around the church and hall, each with different art and craft activities. Coloured balloons were tied to the chancel arch and lectern, and 20 helpers were poised to spring into action.

As parents and children from local congregations and Titchfield Primary School dashed excitedly into the

building, it became clear how popular the event might be.

Seventy adults and children were welcomed and given the chance to try making miniature kites, creating candle holders, and making proper paper aeroplanes. The theme was the Holy Spirit, so craft activities symbolised the Pentecost flames, the roaring wind and the new languages spoken by the disciples.

Mum Holly Dawson said: "My daughter normally does swimming and Rainbows on a Tuesday, but she really wanted to come to this. I

think it's lovely."

Her children, Bae, 5, and Henry, 3, were smearing coloured icing on birthday cakes – to denote the Church's birthday – as nearby a group of boys enthusiastically splattered paint on a table and created pictures by blowing it through straws.

Meanwhile children twisted tissue paper onto tiny kites as their parents explained the spiritual significance of making windmills.

After an hour of craft, the Rev Jane Richards led a 15-minute celebration at the

front of church.

Families used some of the items they had created, and heard the story of Pentecost. Jane used a birthday cake with a candle that didn't go out and encouraged families to shout out praise in different languages.

Then families settled down to spaghetti bolognese followed by cakes – all provided free of charge.

The church will hold further Messy Church sessions on the second Tuesday of June and July, from 3.30pm-5.45pm.



Louisa Abbott with her daughter Sophie Alley, 7, at St Peter's

Four generations work together

IT'S truly a family affair when crowds flock to the home of the original Messy Church. Babies, toddlers, teenagers and adults fill St Wilfrid's church hall, but helper Lesley Baker has a personal interest in some of the venue's regulars.

Her mum Doreen, 80, originally ran an activity table and is still involved each month. And Lesley's daughter Kathryn also comes to Messy Church with grand-daughter Molly, 3, and grandson Josh, 1. That makes four generations of the same family involved.

"My mum loved running a table where she would help children make things," said Lesley. "She can't do as much as she would like these days, but is very much a part of what we do each month.

"I've seen people come along, perhaps reluctantly, but once inside the door they are amazed. The atmosphere is great, and doing something across the generations is seen as returning to traditional values where people sit down and share a meal together, chat to one another and care about each other – no matter where



(l to r): Kathryn, Molly, Doreen and Lesley at St Wilfrid's they're from and whatever their age. This is a special place, for my family and for many others because it speaks of God and shows the love of God in action. To me, that's got to be church.

"It's a huge joy to be sharing something like this with not only my Christian family

but also my mum, daughter, and grand-children.

"My prayer is that Molly will know the Lord, and know that he is with her through life. I want it to be her decision to follow him, not just because four generations of her family happen to come together in the same place at the same time."

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