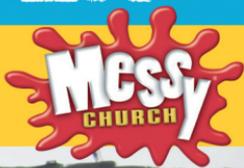




MESSY PRAYER

DEVELOPING THE PRAYER LIFE
OF YOUR MESSY CHURCH



JANE LEADBETTER

CONTENTS

Introduction	7
The spirituality of Messy Church	15
Getting started.....	21
Prayer ideas for the activity time	27
Creating a prayer space.....	37
Prayer ideas for the celebration time	51
Liturgical prayers for the celebration	55
Prayer ideas for the meal time.....	83
Prayer ideas to use in the home	89
A Messy Church session on prayer.....	91
A quiet day: praying with your team.....	105
Messy retreat: going away together	113

APPENDIX

Recipes	122
Templates.....	124



INTRODUCTION

‘Hands together, eyes closed. Let us pray.’

How many of you remember the first time you were invited to pray? How old were you? Where were you? Who were you with? Were you being instructed, prayed for, or responding with ‘Amen’?

Picture this: a six-year-old girl moved house to another area in Derbyshire along with her parents and younger sister. Her mother took her to the local church Sunday school one afternoon. She had not yet had time to make friends, she didn’t have any wider family close by, and she didn’t know anyone in the Sunday school. At the end of the session, she was invited to listen, along with other children, to a prayer being read from a prayer book held by a Sunday school teacher, and then to respond with ‘Amen’.

That young child was me. I can still picture the face of the Sunday school teacher and the large book in her hands. Unfortunately I cannot remember her name. But she wanted me to agree to what she was saying to Jesus on our behalf. I remember thinking at the time, ‘How odd! Why is someone I only met today speaking to someone I have never met, on

MESSY PRAYER

my behalf? Will I ever find out who this Jesus is? When will I meet him? Will he be coming to this Sunday school? Will I be able to talk to him myself when he does?’

Of course, I had no idea that Jesus already knew me. I had no idea that I actually had a best friend there with me on that first day in Sunday school. I had no idea that that best friend would be there for me in the good times, the ordinary times and the worst times. I had no idea that when I grew up I would become a Sunday school teacher and encourage children to say ‘Amen’ at the end of prayers.

Times have changed. Yes, you did read it right: the Sunday school I first attended was held in the afternoon. I am that old! There are very few UK Sunday schools held during the afternoon now. The Sunday school movement has changed hugely and we need to pray for its future.

I have very happy memories of the various Sunday schools and Junior Churches I attended. I can still picture the Sunday school cupboards, smell their woody mustiness and count the pencil crayons in old food tin tubs. Those crayons always needed sharpening. I can remember the box of story Bibles and the prayer books with curly corners and loose spines, their aged appearance indicating years of being held by children searching for their favourite pages. If you’re like me, you may still have some of these books about the house or passed down through the family. You

INTRODUCTION

may also have Messy Church cupboards just like this. These days the cupboards are probably made of metal, full of glitter and googly eyes instead of erasers and hymn books, but those old cupboards were suitable for their time.

As the years move on, we adjust to changes and embrace different learning styles, resources, group names, group leader names, venues, times of the week to meet, numbers in attendance and leadership support. But something has never changed. Something has never been locked away in a cupboard from one week to the next. Something is out there right now, and it is powerful and amazing—prayer.

We cannot halt prayer in any of its forms. It is yours, mine and everyone's, for any time. We can pick it up and share it, write it or shout it, whisper it or think it, touch it or hear it, sing it or say it, create it or borrow it, sign it or imagine it. Even those who are incarcerated because of their Christian convictions can silently pray. Someone is always listening: 'Then you will call on me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you,' says the Lord in Jeremiah 29:12.

An ex-colleague once shared a story with me, which I shall never forget. A very young child went to visit her granny. Granny lived on the ground floor of a sheltered housing complex with a central communal garden. It was a newly planted garden. There were borders of green-leafed shrubs, small grassy areas and a pattern of shingle paths encircling

MESSY PRAYER

some rose bush islands. In the centre of all this was a large, pink-flowering Queen Elizabeth hybrid rose bush. On the day the child went to visit, it was the only bush in the whole garden that was beginning to bloom. It had one huge pink flower, and the beauty of that flower shone across the garden.

The young child went out into the garden to play. At first she ran around the shingle paths as fast as she could. As Granny watched from her kitchen window, she could see her granddaughter sitting on the lawns, picking the daisies, throwing them up to the sky, then watching them fall to the ground. Then Granny saw the young girl suddenly stop and stare at the beautiful pink rose bush in the distance. It was only a momentary pause in her otherwise speedy exploration of the garden (a garden that the grandmother was very fond of), but Granny sensed an unexpected change in her granddaughter's behaviour.

As the little girl raised herself to her feet and began to walk towards the bush, Granny darted for the kitchen door. As the child gained speed on her journey towards the central bush, so did Granny increase the length of her strides, and as the little girl reached the bush and took the full bloom in her hands, Granny reached out to protect the flower from being plucked from its stem—only to hear the little girl say, 'Well done, God!'

INTRODUCTION

Assumptions—we've all made some. Are we assuming that the Messy Church families we love and care for are praying? Are they praying every day or just when we invite them to do so? Is there a pattern of prayer in their lives? What about the Messy Church teams? Do we assume that they have a praying habit? Or are they waiting for someone to help them along? When do people pray? How can we encourage all ages to pray? And the biggest question of all: why should we pray?

God loves us and cares deeply about us, and he calls us into a relationship with him. Even more than that, he wants us to have a deep and long-lasting relationship with him—a friendship. For healthy friendships to develop, you need to communicate frequently, build trust, and share your concerns and joys. Prayer is a way we can communicate with God. We are commanded to pray ('Pray continually,' says Paul in 1 Thessalonians 5:17), and we must respond.

This book will explore some engaging ways of praying as individuals, as teams, as families and as gathered congregations. It is a challenge, but the Messy Church network is the best sharing network I have ever belonged to. God seems to be blessing what we share and we rejoice when we hear about prayer being answered.

We will look at the fun ways of praying, as well as the quiet, respectful ideas. We will look at including prayer

MESSY PRAYER

in the craft and activity times, creating prayer spaces and quiet rooms, preparing prayer activities for the celebration time, and praying for teams and all-age congregations. We will encourage the use of imagination and look at ways of becoming reflective.

We all love practical tips and lists of ideas, and you probably have your own. You may have found a children's prayer that an adult engaged with, or an adult piece of music that brought a response from a baby. You may have tried a prayer idea that didn't work very well and another that worked so well, you use it often. We need to encourage each other to keep trying different ideas, to encourage all ages to pray and to pray often and in faith.

Our Messy congregations may be already praying, but, if we need to introduce them to prayer, let's make it an enjoyable and worthwhile experience. And let's not make any assumptions. We can be risky and bold for God. We can create channels of prayerful chatter between our Messy Church families and God. God is so amazing that he can hear all of our Messy chatter, all at the same time. That must sound very messy!

I pray that we stay humble in our Messy prayers, because our attitude is important. Can we encourage our prayers to come often and naturally, rather than from a sense of

INTRODUCTION

duty? Are our Messy friendships supporting each other's spirituality and growing deeper with love and respect?

For prayer is nothing else than being on terms of friendship with God.

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CREATING A PRAYER SPACE

How can we invite our Messy congregations to engage in prayer activities when our space is limited? Prayer spaces can be created in loud bustling rooms and quiet annexe rooms.

At L19: Messy Church in Liverpool, we have an annexe room in the church hall building. We did not make use of the room for the first two years of our Messy adventure, though, as we felt that the team members would rather be in the main room, enjoying the whole atmosphere of Messy Church, than isolated in a room on the side, looking after the activities there. As our average monthly attendance grew to 180, we had to rethink our use of space, and then something happened one November when we had a Messy fireworks session on the theme of 'Jesus is the light of the world'.

After the outdoor fireworks display, I was challenged by some parents who had children with special needs. We had called our session 'Messy Fireworks' on the flyers but we had not advertised the fact that actual fireworks would be set off. Some children had apparently been very distressed

MESSY PRAYER

by the sudden noises and bright lights, and the parents had not had time to prepare their children for the event. Well, we were mortified! How could we be of help to these families in the future? We asked if they had any advice for us in planning our future programmes.

This was the time when we developed our annexe room into a quiet room. Initially we created a chill-out space for the families who had advised us, but we have discovered how much we all need such a space. Purchasing and borrowing Christmas lights, lava lamps, cushions, blankets, beanbags and CDs of peaceful music was one of the easiest and most unexpected pleasures in our Messy journey so far. We have enjoyed prayer candles in trays of sand, torch shadow prayers, bubbles, floating prayers on water, prayer trails and prayer trees, sometimes linking activities from the hall to the annexe room too.

Creating prayer spaces in busy halls and churches during activity times can be challenging, but we can pray in a variety of ways. God is so amazing he can always hear us. We can enjoy creating a prayer tent or corner or table, for instance. Set out your regular prayer space with a cross made in a previous activity time, easy-to-read instructions and simple activities. All ages love being invited into a 'special' space. If you explain that you have created the space just for them, then it will work.

CREATING A PRAYER SPACE

Keep it simple. Make a prayer tree from large branches or twigs, supported in a bucket or container of sand and stones. I once hung a prayer leaf on a special prayer tree that someone had lovingly painted gold. Or you can purchase wooden prayer trees, such as the Messy Church tree available at www.inf.co.uk.

Borrow a small tent and attract all ages inside with a simple prayer activity, such as using a finger to write 'sorry' in a tray sprinkled with a light layer of dry sand. When you shake the tray from side to side, the word disappears—a sign that God has forgiven you.

Create prayer spaces using music to draw people to the activity, or collect used headphones so that people can sit in a busy room, yet listen to peaceful music in the middle of the noise. Reflective printed pictures on the theme of the month can be displayed nearby or placed in a folder to browse.

EXAMPLES OF THEMED PRAYER SPACES

I love prayer spaces, because you can set them up anywhere—on tables, on the floor, balancing on chairs, in boxes, in cafés, in schools or in parks.

One particularly successful prayer space I visited was a rainforest tent. The theme of the session was ‘exploring how we can look after God’s world’. A gazebo was covered in green and brown strips of crêpe paper and fabric, hanging from the canopy to the floor. Outside the tent were sheets of information about endangered species and maps of the world. On a table were animal and bird shapes on which people could write prayers. Music and recorded sounds from a rainforest were playing in the background and, after pinning our prayers to a hanging piece of rainforest, we were invited to make a simple endangered parrot that could be balanced on a finger.

Another idea would be to provide small pieces of fish-shaped paper, pens, an explanation of how the disciples felt when Jesus told them to ‘fish for people’, and instructions about writing a prayer asking God to help each of us to be disciples of God. Perhaps the fish prayers could then be taken to another activity space and placed on to a sea collage or blue wool weaving loom or in a small paddling pool. The fish could be hooked on to a piece of netting or a blue towel or fabric sheet.

CREATING A PRAYER SPACE

The two themes on the following pages were used at 'Messy Quiet Prayers' sessions during the Hand in Hand Children's and Family Ministry Conference in Eastbourne, in 2013 and 2015. The first theme, 'You are special to God', was created for those who work for God in their churches. The session was set up in a bistro area on tiny tables, for just 30 minutes. It was so popular that we had to push people out at the end, before the next seminar began. The second theme, 'God loves you', was appropriate for Valentine's Day, and families from the community were invited to join in. This time, a much larger room was available to us and we could spread the activities out on larger tables.

Stand-alone instructions for each activity can be printed on paper and slotted into perspex A4 or A5 menu holders. You can then step back and invite people to participate, with music playing in the background if possible.

MESSY PRAYER

THEME: YOU ARE SPECIAL TO GOD

John 3:16

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

You will need: assorted beads; cross foam beads; chenille sticks or beading cord (all available from www.bakerross.co.uk)

Make a bracelet or key fob to wear, to remind you how much God loves and cares for you.

St Augustine of Hippo

God loves each of us as if there were only one of us.

You will need: a large heart-shaped piece of paper; pens

Look at the space within the giant heart shape. In a space, write the name of someone who still needs to know that God loves them. How will you let them know?

Job 34:19

[God] shows no partiality to princes and does not favour the rich over the poor, for they are all the work of his hands.

You will need: flower shapes pre-cut from paper (see template on page 125); pencil crayons; bowls of water.

CREATING A PRAYER SPACE

Each one of us is special to God. Colour the paper flower petals and write your name in the middle. Fold the petals over each other in the centre and crease well. Place on the water and watch your name being revealed to God. God created you!

Song of Songs 2:4

Let him lead me to the banquet hall, and let his banner over me be love.

You will need: pieces of A5 paper; pre-cut people shapes; white wax crayons or candles; paint colourwash; paintbrushes

Choose a piece of A5 paper and stick a people shape at the bottom of it. Write your name on the figure. Use a white crayon or candle to write 'Jesus' above the figure, and choose a paint colourwash to brush over the wax writing. Remember that he is always with you.

1 Peter 5:7

Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you.

You will need: plastic disposable cups; dried rice; small food bags; medium-sized balloons; scissors; permanent marker pens

MESSY PRAYER

Follow these instructions to make a stress ball. Half-fill a plastic cup with rice. Pour the rice into a food bag. Twist the bag and fold the excess plastic over, to form a ball shape.

Cut the neck off two balloons of different colours. Stretch one balloon over the rice bag, then stretch the other balloon over it, hiding the hole. Decorate with permanent marker pens.

Whenever you need to share a worry with God, use the stress ball while you talk with him. God is listening.

1 John 3:1

See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!

You will need: a Scrabble board and letter tiles

Use the Scrabble board and tiles to declare how you feel about God's love for you. Link the words if you wish.

Jeremiah 29:11

'For I know the plans I have for you,' declares the Lord, 'plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.'

You will need: balls of play dough (see recipe on page 123); small food bags

CREATING A PRAYER SPACE

Take a small piece of play dough and form a shape (whatever shape you choose) to say 'thank you' to God for everything he does for us. Put your shape into a bag to carry with you. Re-form your shape whenever there is a moment when you feel thankful to God for something.

Jeremiah 1:5

'Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart; I appointed you as a prophet to the nations.'

You will need: cross tattoos or funky wrist tattoos
(available from www.bakerross.co.uk); damp sponges

How amazing it is that God knew us even before we were born! Whatever we wear, or however we change ourselves, God only sees the real us. Put a cross tattoo on to your arm. When you look at it, remember that, however we look on the outside, God knows us because of what we are inside, including our strengths and weaknesses.