

Ideas to consider for restarting Messy Church in a COVID-19 safe way

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The following ideas and practices were shared by Messy Church leaders from different denominations and churches across South Australia in July and August 2020.

DISCLAIMER: Stay cautious. Follow your government and denominational regulations/restrictions/advice.

PRIORITY: Keep your focus on how to stay in contact with families and maintain relationships, even just a simple email “we’re thinking of you and if you need anything we’re here.” This requires keeping up to date and accessible contact records/details.

Questions for reflection:

- What could we do next?
- What is the need?
- What are families wanting? (We encourage contact with families to discuss what works best for them, particularly around if Messy Church was to restart face-to-face.)

What Messy Churches have been doing and might do next if unable to meet:

- Emails to families with links to BRF at home materials
- Email the link for the Sunday morning Children’s chat video (filmed separately to whole service) to Messy Church families weekly
- Connect online via Facebook or Zoom with families and lead all-age activities, such as a scavenger hunt around the house...
- Messy Church in a bag
 - Own team’s creativity or adapting BRF materials
 - “We did 100 bags that were tailor made for each kid and their age.”
 - Movie night in a bag with a bag of popcorn, quizzes, prizes etc... Everyone was encouraged to have their movie night on the same night whilst each family chose their own movie (from their own DVD collection or streaming/rental service). One church offered a prize of a free pizza delivered to the family. For example send a family photo of everyone dressed in ‘onesies’ or pyjamas or costumes. Guess the number of jelly beans or popcorn pieces in the jar. SMS photos or answers to a leader’s phone and/or upload to a private Messy Church facebook group/page to win the prize.
 - Brainstorm generic activity ideas for bags that encourage families to do things together and have activities that are all-age. Also generic activity ideas that are easy to adapt, such as here’s an idea and here’s lots of ways you could do this in your home depending on what you have/your tolerance for mess... use Lego, playdough, recycle materials, sand...
 - Some churches added in a few extra craft supplies for families with multiple children or limited resources/finances such as extra sticky tape or glue or a packet of pencils along with the activity materials. Let’s be generous and consider the needs of particular families.
- Messy Church in a car where families stay in their cars, drive around the local (rural) town and do different activities. At some outdoor locations, have a few tables set up so family groups can do an activity or two and have a Messy Church leader present to manage numbers, materials and cleaning between groups.
- Picnic in park – outside, open air, keep to family groups, BYO food/water bottles etc. One church planning this idea have possibly 6 or 7 family groups at a time so that keeps this manageable.

If we meet face-to-face, how do we do things differently?

Overall COVID safe plan:

Contact your denominational office and clarify their expectations. They may have created information sheets and documents that outline the steps that Church Council's need to take before reopening any programs. It has been difficult to get information about children's programs from the state government to clarify some of these things.

Complete a COVID-plan for your church and update your risk management with COVID listed as a risk and how you will address it. In South Australia you also need to have a COVID Marshal to ensure restrictions are being met.

Once you've done your plan and your Church Council and Child-safe coordinator has approved your risk assessment, you could always run your plan past your denominational office (Child-safe unit or COVID safe response unit) in case they have any extra suggestions.

For example, one denomination has a restriction that means over 65year olds with a pre-existing condition aren't allowed to volunteer at the moment so that's most of their Messy Church team.

Practical safety measures for overall gathering:

- Limiting contact between households is the priority so plan for appropriate spacing re seating and limiting movement.
- Keep a record of who attends for contact tracing, perhaps have a dedicated sign in person to manage this, include all team, leaders, helpers and anyone on site.
- Hand sanitizer at entry points
- Signage and reminders about 1.5m social distancing where possible
- Encourage people in vulnerable age groups or with pre-existing health conditions to discuss with their doctor about attending, either as a helper/leader or participant
- Remind all families/leaders to not come if unwell
- Roster regular cleaning
- Organise gathering for a shorter time eg only one hour
- Use a large hall, with open air access...(outside air and extra space)
- Seat everyone in a big circle and/or seated in family groups (limit movement/minimise shared equipment)

Shared resources/materials for crafts/activities:

- Lots of hand sanitizer everywhere and disinfectant wipes
- Steer clear of play dough
- Consider what is all age but doesn't need resources and things to touch, such as Simon says...
- Organise "family bags" of scissors, textas, sticky tape. Or simplify your activities to not include any/as many of these items.
- Have each family sit at one table together and use just their bag of supplies, rather than moving around the room to different tables. Or activity supplies could be brought to families at their table so everyone is doing the same activity at the same time.
- Consider interspersing activities with some all-in 'upfront' type storytelling or celebration in some way, eg breaking up the Celebration into bits to weave between different crafts/activities.
- Organise a leader to be at each family table or moving between 2-3 family tables (keeping social distancing requirements).

Be aware of individual family needs, for example some families rely on the table leader to guide their children and engage in faith conversations. Some families use Messy Church as a bit of a break from the 24/7 engagement with their children.

One church leader commented, “We have a few single mum families and a lot of mums that come without dads and with multiple kids for whom having to sit with their own kids and help them solely for the hour would be very difficult. The beauty of Messy Church has been the intergenerational relationships and ‘village’ vibe and its hard thinking through how to translate that post-COVID when the encouragement is the stay in household groups and maintain social distancing. Although maybe we will see an increase in family leadership from parents as they have been having to work through activities at home with their kids during lockdown. It’s hard to say yet how that will have changed families! I can’t wait to see what the Spirit has been doing in hearts and homes.”

Food and drinks:

- Denominational policy may prefer you to not serve food or drinks at all or it may be too complicated to follow requirements.
- Use only disposable cups and plates or use an industrial dishwasher to sanitise cups, plates etc.
- Have servers so people aren’t repeatedly touching serving tools – no buffet style meals.
- Provide pre-packaged food.
- Invite families to bring their own picnic. Sit in family groups and eat their own food.
- Provide a snack instead of a meal eg a small pack of crisps/chips that is pre-packaged.

We acknowledge this doesn’t have the same feel as the hospitality vibe of normal Messy Church but it might be a safer option in the short term.

Consider the Godly Play approach where the feast is talked about as being less about the food and more about the spirit of the gathering and the people we are sharing with. Perhaps use that idea to say “we aren’t eating a whole meal together at Messy Church just yet, but we are sharing time and fellowship and a moment of eating and drinking to remind us that God provides for all our needs and we share the same needs in our humanity.”

This connects to Communion and our value of hospitality of welcome, shared experience and celebration. You can celebrate without singing or Communion, because the most important part of Celebration is the spirit in which it is entered into.

An adapted program example from a Messy Church that has started back face-to-face:

Arrive – sanitise and sign in

Activities – in hall, previously would have had 5-7 activities, now have 4 crafts plus a science table, with no chill zone (puzzles, games etc) which used to be in the centre of the room so this creates more space around the activity tables. No food crafts at the moment. Using long trestles for more space between people, with wipes on table and parents are responsible for wiping materials before use.

Celebration – in main church auditorium, spaced out around the seating and invite children (not adults) forward to participate in particular activities. Use video/audio and have speakers up louder so people aren’t singing as loudly.

Meal – one person does all preparation and is very cautious. Served baked potatoes with stuffing and instead of people serving themselves the Messy Church team served particular toppings. Families seated in family groups with no more than 6 to a table (unless household larger than this) and everyone used hand sanitiser again. For dessert served boxed raisins and LCM bars (all pre-packaged).