

**Matt (Team Vicar) and Kirsty Houghton (volunteer Children's and Families leader) Messy Mornings at Cloverfield LEP Church, Thetford.**

Our church is located on a 30-year-old housing estate on the edge of Thetford. Apart from a nursery we are the only community facility on the estate. Our church building is used by many community groups during the week.

During the summer of 2021 and having arrived in the town during the pandemic, we decided to trial a group for children and their families. This trial took place on two mornings over the summer. It was a great opportunity for families to come together for play, craft, a bible story, song and prayer.

This was also a perfect opportunity for us to begin building relationships with families on our housing estate and to trial this new group. The feedback we received from families was positive and there was a great enthusiasm from the community for 'Messy Mornings' to become a regular mid-week group for under 5's. We gained a sense of hunger following the pandemic of a need for re-establishing community, especially for those with young children who felt they had missed out on important social interaction.

Our vision was not to be a regular 'toddler group' but to pioneer a new 'church community'. This was about intentionally sharing faith and being church but not about necessarily seeking to integrate people into traditional Sunday church. Also, having first-hand experience of children with additional needs, we wanted families to find a safe space with us, where they are cherished and can thrive. Our vision was for 'Messy Mornings' to offer a safe place of belonging alongside an opportunity to explore the Christian faith in a non-threatening environment.

'Messy Mornings' began in November 2021, with each session including messy play craft activities with usually one of them being sensory and based on the bible story for that day. We have outside activities (when the weather allows), baby and toddler toys and a range of refreshments to include those with dietary needs. Following refreshments, we have a together time. This includes a song where we welcome every child individually, interactive bible story and a 'good news' rug with an opportunity to share something good that has happened in our week. This is open to adults to join in too and then we take all our good news and pray, thanking God for it. We finish the session by celebrating birthdays and with bubble blessing written to the tune of a nursery rhyme. This is very much church, on a Tuesday for under 5's and their families.

Since we launched, we have been able to build a team of helpers, including one from the Salvation Army. We have been working with the Sports Factory to collaborate with ideas and will be starting a weekly after school club in September for children in Reception and Key Stage one.

We learnt very early on about the importance of spending time investing in the relationships within our community and it is only now we are beginning to see the fruit from that. We often find, for example on social media, individuals and local organisations sharing our posts and recommending us as a place to come too. Our local supermarket happily donates goods to us when we are running a community event and you also know something is going well when parents stop you in the street for a chat or the children excitedly shout your name in the supermarket! Having time for people, taking the time to really listen and make people feel valued is what makes all the difference in building community.

Here are a few personal stories; the first of a mum who was struggling in the later stages of pregnancy. She had also had a toddler and was just feeling exhausted and wrung out. After being asked how she was, the tears started to flow, and we were able to encourage and support her. She left feeling cared for and reassured.

Another mum was struggling with her little girl who was going through a difficult phase. She got up and was about to leave the group when we asked if she was ok. She explained what was going on and we were able to play with her child while she had a break for a few minutes. We sat and told her what a great mum she was. After the session she sent an email explaining just how much that meant to her and she has been able to share what is going on in their family and we have in turn been able to offer support and prayer.

We also have another family going through a very difficult time with a child who finds things a real struggle. We have been able to support her, suggesting agencies to get in touch with. We have also worked hard to ensure her child's needs are met within the group wherever possible and she now has the security of knowing we are not there to judge her, but to love.

We are beginning to form a community where people are honest about their lives, when they feel they are struggling they will reach out for support. At times we may need to refer people to other agencies for specific support, but they know they are valued.

Conversations are ongoing with church leadership team and Thetford Team staff around vision and future strategy. We are engaged with our local Churches together group.

We regularly have conversations with our families about improvements we can make to create a space in which families can thrive. With the cost of living increasing, we recently ran a clothes swap for children, at the family's request and were inundated with donations. We encouraged 'giving away' rather than selling but some were determined to give a donation which they insisted went back into the work of 'Messy Mornings'. We even had a gentleman from the community come to us one morning and say, 'I am so glad you are doing this group, it is really needed'. He then handed over an envelope and hurried away. Inside was £100 with a note 'For Messy Mornings'. The wider community are behind us too and often if we are need of toys or equipment, it only takes a message on our community social media page, and we are provided for.

We have found it be vital to continue to be invitational and always have the next event to invite families to. Having sadly said goodbye to our four-year-olds who will be starting school in September, this term we are looking to begin a Messy Saturday for families once a month. This will again include craft activities, a short time of worship and a family meal together. We are already planning our 'Light night' for the community on 31<sup>st</sup> October and an outdoor family Christmas event in December.

Alongside our new proposed Saturday Messy and the new After School club, we are exploring the possibility of running a family Alpha course, giving further opportunity for families to explore the Christian faith. This is currently being pioneered amongst churches in Norwich. We are also seeking to respond to needs such as parenting courses and possibly an additional needs support group for parents and carers. However, we are a small church, we can only do so much with volunteers and resources. Our ethos is to let these things grow organically as the community develops and as the needs change of those who are part of it. We try to seek where God is at work so we can join in!