



Seriously Messy

Making space for families to talk
together about death and life

**Joanna Collicutt, Lucy Moore,
Martyn Payne and Victoria Slater**



The Bible Reading Fellowship

15 The Chambers, Vineyard

Abingdon OX14 3FE

brf.org.uk

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 **DIOCESSE of OXFORD**
A Christ-like Church for the sake of God's world



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Why we wrote this book

What's this? A book about death! A book for parents and grandparents... and children? You can't be serious!

Well, yes, we are. So, let us attempt to tell you why.

Talking of death and dying is one of those conversation topics most of us prefer to avoid – and for good reason. No one wants to be reminded that our life has to end one day. It's something we assign to the distant future – as far away as possible, in fact, so we can conveniently and hopefully forget that the day will ever arrive.

Even within church circles, Christians are often strangely reluctant to talk about death. This is especially odd when Christianity has as its central symbol the cross, which forcibly reminds us that 'Christ has died' and challenges us to 'take up our cross' – our dying – so that we might live. We can't get around this by simply spiritualising those words and thereby hoping to overlook the reality of the deaths involved, both for Christ and ultimately for us.

An awareness of our inevitable death and our attitudes towards it ought to have a huge influence on how we live our lives now. We can't have life without death, and ignoring or denying questions about death and dying is not only unhelpful but is an unhealthy response to God's gift of life to us all. When St Benedict wrote his monastic rule for his followers in the sixth century, he included the line, 'Keep death always before one's eyes.'¹ This was not because he wanted them or us to be morbid killjoys but because by facing up to the natural boundary to our earthly life, we would be much more

likely to use our time well and become daily more dependent on Christ, who holds ‘the keys of Death’ (Revelation 1:18).

Nevertheless, in western culture in particular, we prefer not to talk of death; ageing and terminal illness are largely off limits. In our increasingly secular society, death is viewed as a defeat and a failure – a cause for despair, not hope. By contrast, the Christian faith does not give physical death the last word. Faith in God offers eternal life that goes beyond our bodily death, so there is hope. To talk about death before the end finally comes, whenever and however that happens, is therefore definitely part of our Christian discipleship, and this book offers the theory and the tools to do just that.

Is this a specialist book, then? Is it just for those facing terminal illness or dealing with bereavement?

NO. While the book may be helpful to people (adults and children) for whom death has come close, it’s aimed at everybody. It’s about bringing the reality of death in a healthy way into the everyday life of the whole church family – young and old, sick and well, fit and frail – so that we can live more fully now.

Okay, but you also claim that this is a book for families with their children? Is the subject matter really appropriate? Surely if any book needs an 18 certificate, then it is one about death and dying, whether the readers are Christian or not? And what’s more, you offer this to us with Messy Church sessions on the theme – activities and celebration ideas on death for all ages together: have the authors lost the plot?

On the contrary, the authors firmly believe that an intergenerational setting, such as Messy Church, is exactly the place to talk about the hard questions of life. It is far too easy at such church ‘family’ gatherings simply to stay with the cosier and relatively easy stories linked to our faith – ones that don’t ask awkward questions or open up the big issues of existence. And are we not surely in danger of

being unfaithful to the gospel if we play down or, even worse, cut out all the hard sayings and difficult themes that are present in almost every Bible story? If the good news is simply reduced to statements like 'Pray and all will be well' or 'Don't worry, God will make it right again', we are being dishonest in our ministry and mission. It will mean that our children and their parents will grow up with an incomplete understanding of Christianity – one that has Photoshopped out challenging questions about suffering, pain, death and dying.

It is as if we think that God isn't big enough to cope with our doubts and fears in these areas, or even that faith is no longer relevant when things turn out badly and the people we love aren't healed but die. The truth is that those are exactly the moments when we need our faith to carry us through, yet that can only happen if we have been honest enough to talk about these things beforehand. Death and dying need to become part of our shared conversations whenever we meet to celebrate God's presence and when together we determine to listen to what God is saying to us. As we do this in an intergenerational setting, such as in Messy Church or similar shapes of all-age worship, we are truly discipling each other and helping young and old into a mature faith that will last.

Thankfully, attitudes are slowly changing and it is encouraging that talk of death, in both secular and sacred settings, is becoming increasingly more common than it has been in the past. Bereavement support groups and 'death cafés' are being set up to address issues that formerly have been a social taboo. Even so, our new conversation places in the west have often been constructed with only a particular age group in mind – usually those who are older and for whom matters of life and death are looming larger. The fact that questions of death and dying can be relevant to people of all ages has been forgotten and needs to be recognised and recovered. It was there in the past when communities were smaller and more inward looking. Indeed, some cultures continue to function in an intergenerational way when it comes to talking about death, such as the all-age experience of the

wake in Eire or family groups gathering in graveyards on 'the day of the dead' in Central America or the Far East.

The authors of this book are convinced that this all-age perspective is vital if we are to help each other talk about death and dying and face up to the big questions that these issues provoke. These are not just the concerns of older people but of the very young too, who ask the same questions but often in their own unique and sometimes very direct way. As Christian communities, we should not shy away from these conversations but provide opportunities to think these things through with each other – something that will grow both our own faith and the faith of those we talk with, from the youngest child to the most elderly great-grandparent.

Okay, we can begin to understand the importance of talking about death and dying intergenerationally, but where are the resources to do this well?

Well, this is exactly why we have put together this book!

Seriously Messy brings together Christian thinkers in the area of death and dying as well as those with a wide experience of intergenerational ministry to make such resources available. We planned the book carefully together but each wrote different parts and our individual stories and observations appear throughout. The book is in three parts. The opening chapters offer an easy-to-read overview of the issues of death and dying, and why this is such an important topic for churches. These chapters cover contemporary thinking and attitudes to the theme, and they unpack biblical references to death and dying. The case is made for the importance of shared conversations in this area between disciples of all ages, with practical suggestions as to how this can be done appropriately and sensitively when young and old are present. The important point is also made that many of us carry our own unresolved grief and questions in these areas, so we are making ourselves vulnerable when we enter into this sort of shared conversation. This is all

the more reason to prepare well, and we urge readers not to skip the chapters in Part I before launching into the practical sessions. Leaders and Messy Church teams need to read these together and talk through what is being shared before they go on to listen to and come alongside those in their congregations.

Part II consists of a series of five short theological reflections. Traditional images and the language that Christians have always used when talking about death are explored. These five chapters are organised around the themes that form the basis for the practical sessions that follow in Part III, so it is a good idea to read the relevant one for the session you are planning. These themes are both natural and profoundly biblical:

- Remembering
- Saying goodbye and hello
- Sleeping tight
- Being loved
- Finding safe spaces

Each of the five Messy Church sections in Part III can be a stand-alone resource, offering material for a two-hour all-age service followed by a meal together. As with all traditional Messy Church sessions, there are ten activity ideas that prompt intergenerational conversations, as well as suggestions for a gathered time of interactive storytelling and prayer. At the end of the book is a list of further resources, which readers may want to follow up.

There is a huge wealth of material here for both Messy Church and traditional church leaders to use in a variety of settings. For example, many churches now hold annual bereavement services, where families come together to remember loved ones who have died. Material from this book will be helpful in this context, providing ideas for prayer stations, creative activities that can provide a focus for sensitive interactive worship, and stories from the Messy celebrations that can be woven into the liturgy. Similarly, hospital

and hospice chaplains will also find resources to draw on when talking with families, particularly those facing the loss of a loved one. Working together on perhaps one carefully prepared activity from this book can help create a safe place for meaningful conversations to emerge and flourish. In this way, our hope is that the book will be widely used – not just in Messy Churches but wherever any church intentionally decides to bring together different generations to talk about what Christians believe about death. This is such an important but often marginalised dimension of our Christian discipleship.

Children are natural questioners – it is part of their spiritual nature and surely one of the reasons why Jesus offers them to us as model disciples. Among those questions will be those that relate to pain and suffering, death and what happens afterwards. For example, children very often ask questions about heaven, as all of you who work with children will have experienced! We shouldn't back away from these questions but be ready to talk about them with children, not as those who have all the answers but as fellow seekers, prepared to acknowledge our uncertainties and questions honestly. As we do this together, we will discover, as did the two disciples on the road to Emmaus, that Jesus will come and walk alongside us, to help us understand the mysteries of life, death and resurrection.

We offer you this book with the prayer that it will help resource shared conversations between young and old about the things that matter, enabling all of us to grow into mature followers of Jesus Christ, who said, 'I am the resurrection and the life' (John 11:25).