



**Liz Townsend** is the Children's and Families' Worker at **St Mark's United Church, Great Tattenhams**. A joint Anglican–Methodist church near Epsom Downs, St Mark's has a strong commitment to building wider community relationships. Liz left nursing to go to Bible college mid-career and has been at St Mark's for over eleven years...



## THE STORY begins...

'I didn't ever expect to be a children's and families' worker; I'd never worked with children before, but I absolutely love it. I love the creativity of the work, and I love the challenge of trying to describe, express, explain and teach faith to a generation of children with very little, if any, knowledge of the Bible or of Christianity. Above all, I love the fact that I'm nearly always working with parents and children together... There's a double challenge of presenting to the children and, at the same time, giving their parents a little bit more.'

Much of Liz's week is taken up with preparing for and running a monthly Messy Church and weekly Messy Munchkins, a kind of homegrown, preschool little sister of Messy Church. She also goes into school once a week and helps with Messy Play sessions in the reception class. But where does Holy Habits fit into all this?

'I was introduced to Holy Habits when I went to the Messy Church International Conference and heard Andrew Roberts speak. I bought the original *Holy Habits* book,\* read it and then kept saying to my vicar, Des Williamson, that he had to read it too.'

**Personally, I've found that working with Holy Habits has really had an impact on my own spiritual life: it's changed my personal practice.**

'He now does a preaching session on Holy Habits in church, once a month, and we're picking it up in one of the house groups as well – we're only a small church but we've got two really thriving house groups – and we're also doing Holy Habits in Messy Church.'

So how do Liz and Des 'do' Holy Habits in these various settings?

'In house group everyone has been encouraged to buy and read the book, and we follow the habits in the same order as Des covers them in church, but that's a different order to the one we're following in Messy Church. Des tries to connect each habit to the church year, but in Messy Church we don't follow the church year, other than at Christmas and Easter.'



**Pin the halo on the angel: children's activity from the Christmas Gladness and Generosity service.**

'When Des preaches on Holy Habits, we make sure those sermons are always recorded and turned into podcasts so people can catch up if they miss them. Then, having heard the sermon or listened to the podcast and read the relevant book chapter, we'll discuss the habit at the next house group.'

'One of the links he made last October was to tie in the habit of Fellowship with Harvest. He encouraged people to hold harvest suppers based on the supper club I started at a low point in my life. I've only got a little flat, but I gave people a theme and got them to bring different foods to make up a meal. It's all incredibly informal because there isn't room in my flat to sit round a table. People come in and help themselves and sit where they can, and it works really, really well.'

**I'm as much a learner as everyone else. We all wear 'L's on our name badges.**

\**Holy Habits* (Malcolm Down Publishing, 2016)

'So, Des suggested people practised Fellowship by holding harvest suppers just like that, for friends, colleagues and neighbours outside the church, and now he keeps reminding people that they could do the same again. He wants to encourage everyone to put what they've learned about each habit into practice.'

Liz is particularly struck by the way Holy Habits and Messy Church work so well together.

'It's because they're both about discipleship... Because our Messy Church has been going such a long time it's now, finally, feeling like "church" – like a congregation in its own right. I believe that means we need discipling, and Holy Habits is helping us to do that. We're all learning together – I'm as much a learner as everyone else – and we all wear 'L's on our name badges.'

'It's helpful to have a habit theme for each session. Because I am enjoying the theme, my enthusiasm helps me to communicate with the families that come, including in the handout that I always write to give the families when they leave Messy Church. I'm quite open – I speak and write about the things that don't work as well as all the things that do, and about my own personal experience too. It's about being honest, a whole person and having integrity. Personally, I've found that working with Holy Habits has really had an impact on my own spiritual life: it's actually changed my personal practice.'



Map linking individual Holy Habits with locations in the parish.

'It's still early days, but I'd say that a lot more books are being borrowed from the Messy Church library, so people are obviously interested enough to follow up the habits at home. I had a note left on my desk the other day, from one of the mums, who said she'd borrowed a graphic Bible for her boys.'

'I want and hope to grow our involvement in the local community – I don't want to be too church-based: it's often comfortable and easy in church, but I don't think that's the answer for church in 2020 and going forward.'

We hope you've enjoyed this Holy Habits story! **HH**

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# HOLYHABITS