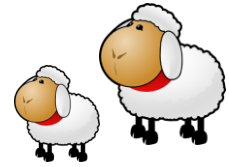




Home and Overseas Paper September 2014
Messy Nativity - The Sheep Trail



Note: We first had a paper about “Christmas Sheep” some time ago, and at the same time Sr Glenys and friends had decided to “have a go”. I asked her to write this paper to show how the Sheep Trail really can work in practice! Christmas 2014 is coming...

Naomi Hancock

I'm sure you have all had the same thoughts as you do your Christmas shopping - where is Jesus in all this? We have Santa's Magical Kingdom and Winterfest but barely a crib scene to be found. We have Christmas decorations of all types: robins, penguins, snowflakes, puddings, stockings, Christmas trees of all shapes, sizes and colours festooned with baubles, tinsel and lights, Santas, reindeer, elves and sleighs but not a sign of Jesus anywhere. TV and the internet advertise seasonal events, special offers, ideas for Christmas presents and food. Everywhere the real meaning of Christmas seems to be being squeezed out.

So with these thoughts in mind the Messy Nativity Project was born to promote the Nativity Story in Liverpool.

Linked to the Messy Church idea the Messy Nativity involves three elements:

- The Messy Nativity Sheep Trail
- The Messy Nativity Crib Journey
- The Messy Street Nativity

My friend and I have run Messy Church sessions at our two churches for the past six years and are always looking for new ideas. Neither church was able to run a project on such a large scale but we certainly thought that there were elements we could use, so we settled on the Sheep Trail. The shops in Dukinfield are too wide spread so it had to be nearby Woodley with its small local shopping precinct with a wide variety of well-used shops. The Woodley Operation Christmas Child knitters were called into action and produced 6 sheep for our trial.

The idea is to ask shopkeepers to adopt a sheep in the run-up to Christmas, choose a name for it and display it somewhere in their shop. The children, accompanied by an adult of course, have to find the sheep and fill their names put their names onto the answer sheet. All correct answers were put into a draw for the prize.

We already use two shops to advertise our Messy Church, the community café, and the handyman shop, so we approached them first. We took along a small poster for their window and a sheep; we explained that once they had named the sheep and put it on display with the name clearly showing they shouldn't really have to do anything else. The Handyman named the sheep immediately and insisted that they had the sample sheep because it had character- truer than you might think as an ear had got lost in transit between knitter and sewer up! She decided it should be called (F)earless! We picked out the shops which we felt might just get a little extra trade from the visits - the butcher, the greengrocer and the chip shop. All were really enthusiastic and happy to take part. Our last visit was to the Iceland Supermarket. We were very doubtful about this but the young deputy manager was again enthusiastic and named the sheep and told us where it was going to go almost before we had time to finish our explanations.

At the end of the Christmas Messy Church the children were given a Sheep Trail booklet which included the Christmas story, pictures to colour in and the instructions to make their own sheep from two pegs, some card and cotton wool.

Over the fortnight of the Trail we visited the shops to check they were still happy and they weren't finding it too much of an imposition. We were relieved to find that they really entered into the spirit of the idea. Some even requested more copies of the booklet.

Whilst we only got a dozen completed answer sheets back we felt that it was a success. The children who took part went with mums, grans and aunties and loved it. Even Reid, a 9 year old who is difficult to motivate was seen to be bounding round in his enthusiasm, determined to be the first to find all 6 sheep.

After the closing date all correct entries were put into a draw and the winner and runner up were awarded book tokens. Another bonus was that one of our Messy Church families came to our Christmas Carol Service and brought along their completed entry forms.

With thank you letters in hand we went to collect the sheep, some were reluctantly handed over and all said they would be more than happy to do it again next year.

It was a small beginning but next year (2014) we plan to include more shops and do a little more publicity. Somehow the sheep seem to capture the imagination and in the bigger shops in Liverpool there were in-store competitions to name the sheep, sheep which travelled round the store each day, one store even dressed the sheep up.

Last year at Dukinfield Sr Susan Flint started a modern version of the Mexican Posada, the Nativity Crib Journey. A Crib Set is passed round from family to family in the run up to Christmas encouraging fellowship between families and a reminder of the first Christmas. Next year (2014) we hope to include a small knitted Messy Sheep for each family to keep as a token of what our Christmas celebrations are really about.

Here is what a couple of children said about following the Sheep Trail: *"It was good fun finding the sheep. I liked the one called George."* (Isla Whitelaw)

"At first I wasn't very keen to do the Sheep Trail because I thought it would be too easy and what's more it was raining very hard, Isla, my sister, had done it the day before with Grandma, and she really wanted to do it, so I agreed. Once I started I realised it wasn't that easy and enjoyed looking for the sheep. They were stuffed toys and looked very funny. The shopkeepers made us welcome and were pleased when we found their sheep. Each shop had given their sheep a name eg Fella and George. Isla kept wanting to show me where they were but I wanted to find them by myself. The one in Iceland was the most difficult because the shop is so big. It would be good if there were more to find next year."

To finish please could we ask for your prayers for all the children and their families who attend Messy Churches around the world that they may be drawn nearer to the love of our Lord, and for the leaders and supporters of Messy Church that they may receive God's guidance as they try to bring the love of God into their communities.

Glenys Marshall and Jacqueline Sharples