**Messy Church SEND…**

**a place of acceptance for families with disabled children or additional needs.**

**Introduction**

Adeyfield Free Church, Hemel Hempstead provide a monthly expression of church for families with additional needs, many of whom have experienced a sense of isolation within their community and even their family due to their child’s disability and perhaps challenging behaviour. Some parents are emotionally wounded by unloving words and attitudes of people, even people within a church setting, who may have little or no understanding of disability and the many forms it may take.

We believe that all people, including those with disabilities, are made in the image of God (Genesis 1:27) and we welcome, accept and value every disabled child, sibling, parent and carer, encouraging them through love in action to have a personal relationship with Jesus.

We are a group of ordinary every-day Christians that have caught the vision for an ‘all-inclusive’ community and are trying to live by faith to see those on the fringes of society be able to take their place in God’s kingdom.

**Our aim** is to introduce Jesus, and an opportunity to encounter Him, to disabled people and their families from our local community.

**Our objectives are to**:

* enable all to experience church in a vibrant, non-threatening way;
* give families a genuine, warm welcome;
* offer a safe place of belonging, acceptance, love and support;
* engage with individual’s preferred learning styles through use of appropriate multi-sensory activities, materials and resources.

**Our values are:** Christ-centred, Celebration, Hospitality, Inclusivity, Creativity.

**Activities: We offer:-**

* ‘Creative’ time: an opportunity to use age-appropriate Bible-themed art activities, edible crafts, tactile play, multi-sensory toys, puppets and materials with different textures e.g. fibre optics, black-out tent, sensory ‘hut’ (on loan from local toy library), LED lights, squidgy toys, vibrating cushions, shiffon scarves, play dough, cornflour, dry pasta, dried leaves, kitchen foil, bubbles, sponge, scrubbing brushes, glow balls, lava lamp, crafts from Yellow Moon or Baker Ross catalogues…etc
* ‘Celebration’ time involves percussion/bells/tambourines and musical instruments and 1 or 2 mainstream/secular songs e.g. ‘Old Macdonald…’ plus 1 Christian children’s song
* ‘Interactive story-time’ with a Christian message.  Usually using a story book with pictures plus Makaton signs.  We include a tactile bag of objects related to the story for one girl who is blind.
* Activities are supplemented with makaton sign language, pictorial communication cards (using Picture Exchange Communication System - PECS), ear defenders, laminated signs with text and picture etc, while free drinks are served and parents can chat.
* Finally, we offer a sit-down buffet meal altogether as one big family, whilst being conscious of particular dietary requirements e.g. gluten-free pizza, sandwiches, salad, crisps, cakes, fruit, drinks

The project takes place once a month on church premises on a Sunday afternoon for two hours. An average of 12 families (35+ people) attend each time (8 minimum, 17 max). Over 20 volunteers assist each time, around half of whom are under 16 years old. This ‘congregation’ of 50+ means it feels very much like a family.

**Parents comments:**

“For us it’s a very enjoyable time, a chance for both our children to play with others without us having to stress about their behaviour being judged.”

“We love the atmosphere – friendly, lively and fun. Great to be able to take the children with Special Needs somewhere where their differences are celebrated and accepted. Also lovely to meet other parents and carers and chat over a cup of tea.”

“Couldn’t improve on it.”

**Conclusion**

The church is open to visits from people in other churches who want to see it in action to initiate something similar with their own congregation. This has already started to happen resulting in a group starting in a church in Northamptonshire.