

Sharing our story: Bolton Lighthouse



Setting up a community garden from scratch, God's way

The difference between this community garden and one that might have had a TV-style make-over is that this one is the product of prayer. As a result, it's taken a lot longer to develop than a garden which has been professionally landscaped; but what has emerged is something pretty much out of this world!

'Carla, you have to get down here', my friend and fellow garden volunteer Catherine recently rang to tell me, 'It's like God is in the garden'.

Residents from the Deane area of Bolton join Catherine on the allotment once a week to plant and harvest vegetables grown in the community beds and, at the same time, share their life stories and talk about God. Not only are the plants growing, the people are too. The ground being landscaped, so is the atmosphere.

This is the journey of Bolton Lighthouse, an end-of-terrace house, turned into a prayer-house in a deprived area of the city. It's the story of how it became involved in the emergence of a vibrant community allotment, seemingly from nothing, God's word and prayer have become a distinct reality.



CASE STUDY

Around 2013, a group of people from 'PFJ Ministries' (a church and charity in Bolton) regularly used Bolton Lighthouse for prayer meetings. They began to pray for a way to reach out to the local community.

Three years later, in 2016, Carla heard that a community centre in the area was in danger of closing unless volunteers could provide some of the previously council-funded services. She offered to provide coffee and cakes once a week at the Willows Community Centre with the help of her friend Catherine. The owners of the centre, a housing association 'Bolton at Home', helped her access some start-up funding and a local Christian charity offered to pay her one day a week to run it.

An English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) group was also using the centre and soon, students were staying behind after class to attend the café. Two of these students were Dharma and Damanta Thapa, from Bhutan, who spent 20 years in a refugee camp in Nepal before coming to the UK.

When a nearby allotment belonging to the housing association became available for the centre users, Dharma offered to grow vegetables on it and Damanta offered to cook and serve them at the café.



An ESOL class taking place at the centre.

Whilst initially praying around the area, Carla sensed the word 'nursery' invisibly written over the centre and guessed that mums at the café might start bringing their children along. She hadn't anticipated that 'nursery' might refer to plants! Searching for greater insight in scripture, she landed upon Isaiah 61:3 'A planting of the Lord for the display of His splendour.' Then, it suddenly made sense why asylum seekers and refugees were the principal volunteers, since the scripture continues: 'Foreigners will work your fields and vineyards'.

The prayer walks from Bolton Lighthouse, just a stone's throw from the community centre and allotment, was now supplemented by the intentional invitations to people from the community to believe in Jesus. A weekly Bible study for any interested were offered, using simple language English versions of the Bible.

CASE STUDY

By the start of the national lockdowns due to Covid-19, about 50 people benefited from the ESOL lessons, café, art, self esteem and photography classes. Biannual large scale community barbecues had become a highlight. After the first wave of the pandemic, when small groups were allowed to meet outdoors, erecting an outdoor shelter on the allotment proved to create the perfect hub to continue many of these activities.

We have a prayerful hunch that the next season will see us venturing more into social enterprise, helping local residents find their way into work and innovation. The next part of Isaiah 61 provides a bit of a clue: *'You will feed on the wealth of nations and in their riches you will boast'*.

Our story is one of God's word at work, creating something from nothing. From a budget of £15 a week for tea, coffee and cakes, to a current annual income of £13,500 (largely from community grants), is certainly more than the 'double your portion' of Isaiah 61! The money is merely a countable sign of the immeasurable work that He is doing in the lives of people who live in and around Bolton Lighthouse and the community allotment. May God do for you what He is graciously doing for us, in Jesus' Name, Amen.



Landscaping work
at the centre.

CASE STUDY

Words from Carla and Catherine

'The development, or rather, the emergence, of the community garden, has taught me to believe in the power of prayer. When I compare the desolate-looking streets, where we began prayer walking, with the variety of ways in which people's lives are now being enriched, I feel a fresh impetus to pray – and especially to pray for the land – with increased faith. Experience has revealed that when the local land receives prayer, not only is the community planted, somehow, there is a ripple effect influencing other portions of land across the world. For example, when the news of the Taliban's take-over emerged in August 2021, two ESOL students were reading the Bible and praying for another ESOL student whose family was in Kabul. They actively checked which borders were open between Afghanistan and their own countries of origin (Iran and Pakistan). They offered their families as contacts to facilitate an escape!'

Carla

'It's a small community and its strength is that it models family for people that have been taken away from their family and friends. I felt like I wanted to help asylum seekers and refugees but didn't really know where to start so, every week, I turned up at the community centre and tried to be useful. All of this is sometimes awkward: there's miscommunication and sometimes rejection, but I think Jesus has called us to this space, not so that we can feel as though we can fix things but so that we can simply join in with what God is doing and allow Him to speak to us – and He will transform us.'

Catherine