

God guided us to work with Asians

WHEN God called Ros and Robin Holley to live and work with the Asian community in Bolton, their lives were turned upside-down.

They moved from leafy Hampshire to a terraced street in an industrial town where they initially knew no one. They lived among immigrants, refugees and young people in bedsits.

But on their first day in Bolton they introduced themselves to their neighbours. Within months they had organised a Christmas party and began making good relationships in the community. And after four years the groundwork was sufficiently established for the parish church to launch a church plant.

They were among the first 'missionaries' sent to serve communities within the UK, and pioneered cross-cultural mission in the 1980s. Now they worship at Christ Church, Totland, where they are still active – they've led reflective worship and organised ecumenical events there.

"It was hard to move to Bolton where we knew no one, but what made it easier was being confident that God had definitely called us," said Ros. "One of my gifts is being able to talk to anyone, so I was always happy to make new friends. But God brought us into contact with the right people."

Ros, who is 76, and Robin, 77, have been married for 52 years. They were both involved in Sunday School teaching, youth work, and leading house groups before training in the mid 1960s for mission abroad – Ros at Capernwray Bible College in Lancashire, and Robin at the Bible Training Institute in Glasgow.

The Overseas Mission Fellowship (OMF) decided not to send them overseas as missionaries. Robin therefore continued teaching and Ros continued nursing.

During 1981, a friend said he would pay for them to go to Asia, so the next February they flew to India, Nepal and Bangladesh to experience mission life and culture there

first-hand. That summer they went to a houseparty led by mission organisation Interserve and heard a speaker who was working with the Asian community in Southall. They came home feeling called to serve Asians in the UK.

They wrote to Interserve's director, and their letter arrived on the very day the organisation met to consider working with Asians in the UK for the first time. They went through the same process Interserve used for sending people overseas, as it had no structure for selecting people to work in this country. For three years they weren't employed by Interserve but would continue in secular jobs, which gave them credibility with neighbours as they served the Asian community.

They felt God calling them to Lancashire, but that involved finding a house 250 miles away and both of them switching jobs at the same time as their children were sitting A-levels and O-levels.

God gave Ros a vision of the house they should buy – a five-bedroomed, and slightly dilapidated house

which would be too big for them, but would allow them to give hospitality. An attic flat accommodated other Christian workers from time to time, initially a couple of trainees from the Christian organisation Youth For Christ, who worked with young people in the wider community.

God enabled them to find such a house in Bolton, and to find similar jobs locally, via a series of events that confirmed he was calling them there.

On her first day, Ros said hello to a Muslim neighbour and their involvement in the community started from there. They organised Christmas parties in their home and outings for all the children in their street, plus a street party to mark a royal wedding. Ros spent time with the women, sharing cookery skills, and they started an Asian Christian fellowship group in their home.

In their 13 years there, they also started and ran Holiday Bible Clubs with up to 100 attending, did Christian assemblies in schools and organised

schemes in partnership with the local council.

"There were a few people who converted to Christianity, but our aim was always to approach people without any strings attached," said Robin. "We wanted to build relationships and show them God's love. We were very sensitive about other people's faith and took the time to listen to them. They were keen to talk about religion, and we were ready to share our faith when asked."

"In a way, they could relate to our experiences of having moved into the town not knowing anyone,

they were already in their late 50s. Ros later worked as warden in a sheltered housing home for the elderly and manager of an Age Concern day centre.

They both retired and eventually moved to the Isle of Wight 10 years ago. Since then Ros has organised a family fun day for Churches Together in West Wight, and produced and directed two Roger Jones musicals in Freshwater's Memorial Hall.

She has also been involved with prayer, women's ministry and youth work. Inspire Magazine

my faith

They've been serving God for their entire lives in various ways. But Ros and Robin Holley particularly remember how God guided them to serve the Asian community in Bolton in the 1980s

as many of them had done it themselves. One Muslim family asked us to pray for their ailing father and commented on how often those prayers were answered. When he died, I was asked to take some photos to send to Pakistan of him in his coffin, while his family openly grieved all around him."

By 1986, the vicar at St Luke's, Halliwell, had invited them to start a satellite congregation in their part of his parish with a small group from his church. They held Sunday morning services in a day centre for the elderly.

There were family services, informal worship and a weekly children's Bible club. Hindus and some Muslims joined.

In 1996, Ros needed major heart surgery after becoming very ill. She was diagnosed with 95 per cent blockages around her heart and needed five grafts.

She recovered quickly and in 1997, they moved to Balham in London, to act as house parents in a medium-term hostel for homeless young people. It was challenging work, as

presented Ros with an award for her work at a ceremony in Parliament in 2016 after worshipper Jenny Baldwin nominated her.

Robin set up a weekly house group and a monthly group called Reflections which enabled more informal worship to take place. He led Sunday morning services in a local hotel with other churches and has led Churches Together Lent groups most years.

They have also been able to help their daughter Sarah to look after their grandchildren after Sarah's husband Roy Bromley died of cancer in 2014. Roy had chaired the PCC in Brighstone and been chairman of governors at Brighstone C of E Primary School.

Meanwhile, Robin was diagnosed with stomach cancer in 2014, which involved major surgery to remove the whole of his stomach.

"The miracle was that they found it so early," he said. "It was a single tumour and the surgery cured me. But the scans hadn't shown anything, and they were just removing the endoscopy tube when they spotted it."

"The fact that we have both recovered from potentially terminal medical problems suggests that God still has work for us to do."



Robin and Ros Holley