

BAPTISTS

Summer 2018

# TOGETHER

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## Creator God

### Awe and Wonder: Justice and Care

News Interviews Prayer Comment Events  
The magazine for the Baptist Union of Great Britain

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## “It makes space for awe and wonder”

Forest School is helping primary school children connect with and care for nature. Baptist church member **Sarah Lawfull** is one of its most compelling advocates

“I’m passionate about children’s wellbeing,” says Sarah Lawfull. “And I’ve seen time and again the wonderful impact Forest School has on both children - and their teachers.”

Forest School is a specialised learning approach increasingly used by primary schools across the UK. It offers children regular opportunities to spend time in a woodland or natural environment. It is learner-centred, with roots dating back to early years pioneers in outdoor learning.

Sarah, a member of **The Ladygrove Church**, a Baptist/Anglican Local Ecumenical Partnership in Didcot, now teaches others how to lead Forest School. She saw how well children learnt outside earlier in her career as an early years primary school teacher. But post Year One, she also experienced the impact of increased testing and targets, a more restricted, classroom-bound culture, and a subsequent drop in pupil enthusiasm.

“My favourite part was the way we could be free to do things independently”  
Harry, aged 9

One summer she discovered Forest School through the Earth Trust, an environmental learning charity in Oxfordshire. “It was amazing. I loved it,” she says, “and I thought: I’ve got to teach this.”

A number of factors make it so appealing, Sarah explains. One is that it builds a safe space, and helps to create community. All participants are viewed as equal, unique and valuable. The children need to rely on each other to get things done. Stories are told around a campfire.

It also offers a connection, in many cases a reconnection, with nature. “Playing in the woods and playing in nature is so freeing,” Sarah says. “The way our lives are lived now, we don’t do enough of it.”

Photo: Corin Lawfull Photography | corinlawfullphotography.com



Forest School leaders are not there to disseminate information as they would in a more traditional nature walk, but to ask sensitive questions to encourage an appreciation and wonder for and an appropriate response to the environment in which they're in. It enables participants to be creative, and fosters independence. There's space simply to be, too.

With the support of her then school, Sarah trained to be a Forest School leader, and subsequently became one of the first trainers to be endorsed by the Forest School Association. She led Forest School training for Oxfordshire Forest School Service, and became involved at national level, helping to write national qualifications and standards. Forest School became an official association in 2012, and Sarah is a director. More recently she launched a social enterprise, *Where The Fruit Is*, which offers accredited Forest School training as part of its wider mission to engage, enable and equip educators, vulnerable teenagers and disenfranchised young families through nature connection.

Over the years Sarah has seen Forest School positively impact thousands of children. She's witnessed how children with special educational needs have blossomed in a Forest School environment. How socially awkward, clumsy boys become 'heroes' because of what they can bring to a Forest School session, such as their strength.

**"I learnt how to be trusted without the teachers knowing what we were doing!"**  
*Molly, aged 10*



Forest School trainer - Sarah Lawfull



Photo: Corin Lawfull Photography | corinlawfullphotography.com

**"Forest School had an immediate positive impact on his behaviour"**  
*A teacher*

She's watched children's understanding of their environment grow. "At the start of each session, we always make clear that we are going to care for ourselves / our wood / and our world. They begin to understand that their actions have consequences, and we help them make informed choices. In this way we are helping young people to learn to care for the planet."

She's also seen how Forest School has benefitted teachers, giving them time and space in a natural environment away from the demands of the classroom. She has worked with vulnerable teenagers and disadvantaged adults too, and all have benefitted from Forest School. (One aim of *Where The Fruit Is* is to reach more of these groups.)

While Forest School is not a Christian movement, everything about it in terms of respect for each other and the wider world chimes with Sarah's understanding of spirituality and the Christian faith.

**"I don't have ADHD when I'm out in the woods"**  
*David, aged 14*

"God repeatedly says children are to be treasured, that they're a gift. We've got to think very carefully how we teach them. Forest School ethos is that each individual person matters. It makes space for awe and wonder.

"Whether you believe in God or not, part of you is created to be in nature; to think about things that are bigger than us. I love it. I've been blown away by its impact."

**"It has been lovely watching her confidence grow"**  
*A parent*

**At Forest School all participants are viewed as:**

- » equal, unique and valuable
- » competent to explore and discover
- » entitled to experience appropriate risk and challenge
- » entitled to choose, and to initiate and drive their own learning and development
- » entitled to experience regular success
- » entitled to develop positive relationships with themselves and other people
- » entitled to develop a strong, positive relationship with their natural world

For more about Forest School, visit: [www.forestschoollassociation.org](http://www.forestschoollassociation.org)  
 For more on *Where The Fruit Is*, visit: [www.wherethefruitis.co.uk](http://www.wherethefruitis.co.uk)  
 or [www.facebook.com/wherethefruitis.oxon](http://www.facebook.com/wherethefruitis.oxon)

