

PARTNER PLAN

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Dear friends in Scotland,

Happy New Year 2016! Warmest thanks for journeying with us in prayer in this coming year and the ones to follow. Please expect these letters from us at least four times a year. We'll also be more regularly updating a prayer website at <https://joelandfiona.wordpress.com>, and if you click "Follow" at the bottom of that page, you'll receive every new post by email.

We'll open each letter with a summary of our **Top Five Prayer Requests** (more detail to follow at the end of the letter). Right now, we'd be thankful if you would pray for:

- * **Protection of our emotional, physical, and spiritual health.**
- * **Patience and joy as we adapt to the day-to-day challenges of life in Nepal.**
- * **Wisdom as we help our sons adjust to life in a new country – especially Caleb, our eldest.**
- * **Good Nepali language learning for us both.**
- * **An end to the Nepal-India border blockade which is devastating the country.**

Not-Quite-Home For Christmas

We had originally planned to arrive in Nepal by late November. In the end, after various delays, we flew in a mere eleven days before Christmas. Thankfully, our various boxes and trunks all arrived in Kathmandu by 22 December, so we were able to unpack our holiday kit in time and decorate a corner of our new living room for our celebration – with a local red bougainvillea bush standing in for the more traditional Christmas conifer!



Nepal is a country we love, and in which we have deep roots. Our parents worked for UMN in the 1980s; Fiona was born here, in a mission hospital. In 2000, revisiting Nepal as young adults, we met for the first time since childhood, sparking a friendship that eventually turned romantic. In 2012, we visited Nepal for a month with our son Caleb. Joel returned for work in 2014 (with the Christian charity Tearfund) and his conversations eventually resulted in an invitation to serve with UMN.

It's a wonderful privilege to return now, and we believe we're following God's call in doing so – but of course it's not as simple as

“coming home” to our childhood roots. We were married in the UK, and London has been our home for most of the ensuing ten years. We've now left that home, moving away from our church and family. And Nepal is much changed from the country we grew up in; many of the places we

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lived and went to school are unrecognisable now.

When we were children in Kathmandu, there were still rice fields between many of the houses, and you didn't have to travel far to find open green spaces. Now the city (home to a million people, with at least three times that many in the greater Kathmandu Valley) is so densely built up that finding a house with a back garden is a challenge, and the urban sprawl extends to the edges of the Valley. The air is smoggier than ever, especially during this cold season when people heat their homes with wood fires and there's no rain to clear the sky. Our lungs have definitely felt it – none of us has quite recovered from the colds and coughs we brought from Britain.

Many other changes in the last 25 years have of course been positive. It's far easier to access many services than it was in our childhoods, from health care to water quality tests to the internet. Mobile phones and new roads have brought rural areas that seem impossibly remote into regular contact with the rest of the country. Nepali Christians were harassed and persecuted when we were growing up here; now they are free to worship throughout the country, and the Nepali church is vibrant and inspiring. The profound warmth, courtesy, hospitality and friendliness of the Nepali people remain unchanged, as does their deep affection for children.

And while much of Nepal's glorious natural beauty is hard to see through the haze of Kathmandu, we enjoyed reacquainting ourselves with it during a short post-Christmas breather in a nearby hill town called Nagarkot. Joel recalls a trip up there as a four year-old and being shown Mount Everest through a telescope. On this visit, Caleb saw his first sunrise there, with the sun coming up just a few peaks away from Everest. Our days there were a wonderful chance to catch our breath as a family after the marathon of moving.

Meanwhile, we've already experienced many blessings and answers to prayer. We were able to move straight into the house where we will be living long-term, rather than having to house-hunt on arrival like many other newcomers. A former Tearfund house, it came furnished and includes a robust water filter and backup solar/battery electricity system — hugely helpful in a city where the mains water doesn't reach much of the population (including us), our well water is thick with bacteria, and we get "city power" for only a few hours a day and a few more at night.



We live in a neighbourhood with many helpful neighbours, who have helped us immeasurably with the transition. Most importantly from the perspective of our sons Caleb (4) and Isaac (1.5), our new home came with their first pet dog – a friendly white Japanese spitz named Muffin.

Both boys have so far done really well in their transition to Nepal. Not least, they've already acquired a taste for two Nepali staple foods: *momos* (steamed dumplings, usually filled with buffalo meat or chicken) and *dal bhat* (rice with lentils), as well as the "Nitti-Gritti" multi-grain porridge that Fiona and Joel remember fondly from childhood breakfasts. They enjoy ambling around our neighbourhood and have already befriended several children living nearby. Caleb regularly tells us how much he loves it here, and while he misses friends and family overseas, it helps to be able to Skype with them and see their faces – another thing that was unthinkable when we were kids!

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Earthquake and Blockade

We've also, sadly, been seeing and hearing the effects of the many disasters that struck Nepal in 2015. The earthquakes of April and May didn't hit Kathmandu itself as hard as the worst predictions had led us to fear; most of the buildings built in the last 40-odd years stayed up, including some unbalanced-looking ones that Joel was slightly surprised to see still intact after his 2014 visit. Many of the cracks (in streets and buildings) have by now been filled in, the rubble piles cleared away, the garden walls rebuilt. We do still see some damage around us, but at a level that Caleb seems to find interesting rather than alarming.

We know that out in the rural areas, however, many villages were flattened, and far too many of the survivors are still living in tents and makeshift shelters through the winter. Some held off on rebuilding their houses because they were told that would make them ineligible for official reconstruction assistance – which has yet to arrive. We're looking forward to getting more directly involved with UMN's rebuilding programme when we finish our initial months of Nepali language study and cultural orientation.

But the greater disaster, in many respects, is the ongoing closure of the India-Nepal border. Nepal is a landlocked country, and relies almost entirely on India for trade goods. The two countries are currently at odds over several provisions of Nepal's new constitution, and India has lent support to protests by alienated southern Nepalis, shutting off trade across the border.

The results of this blockade are most visible when it comes to fuel. Petrol and diesel queues at the official pumps can last for days; there's a booming, tolerated black market in (often adulterated) vehicle fuel. To keep public buses on the road, the laws prohibiting passengers on the roof racks have been suspended for the duration of the crisis, and nearly every bus we see has dozens of people perched precariously up top. The most recent price we heard for a cylinder of cooking gas was 9000 rupees (about £57), in a city where vast numbers of people won't earn that much in a month. The price of many daily goods, foods, and medicines has also shot up, pushing innumerable Nepalis back (or deeper) into poverty.

The economic damage from the border blockade is already estimated to be higher than the damage from the April earthquakes, because it affects the entire country (rather than the fifth that was shaken by the quakes). As UMN director Mark Galpin said at the office Christmas celebration, 2015 has been a year of extraordinary hardship for Nepal; we can all pray that 2016 will be a year of extraordinary recovery.

Prayer Points

Please pray for:

- **Protection of our emotional, physical, and spiritual health during this transition time.** We went through many hurdles in our last few months in the UK, and are grateful that things seem to be getting smoother – please pray that this continues, and for the deferral of the inevitable stomach bugs!
- **Patience and joy as we adapt to the day-to-day challenges of life in Nepal.** Needless to say, many aspects of life here take more effort than in the UK... whether it's navigating broken pavements in our buggy, making sure the barrel of earthquake supplies in the back yard is properly stocked, or washing all fruit and veg in the proper solution to kill off the parasites. It takes plenty of energy; please pray that it doesn't sap our joy.

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- **Wisdom as we help our sons adjust to life in a new country – especially Caleb, our eldest.** Pray comfort where comfort is needed, excitement and joy in discovery of new things and people, and adaptability to cope with the many changes.
- **Good Nepali language learning for us both.** We began today, and will be focusing on becoming reasonably fluent over the next 4 months.
- **An end to the Nepal-India border blockade.** And reconciliation within Nepal between people from the border areas and the hills.
- **Green space nearby.** One of the changes we feel most painfully is the loss of all the parks that surrounded us in London. Happily, our Australian neighbours have a grassy back garden much bigger than ours, and welcome our boys there; we also know of some hotels and restaurants in the area with green space that we can enjoy when we drop in there for coffee or lunch. But please pray that we keep finding green spaces where the boys can play freely.
- **Strong new friendships** – especially for Caleb and Fiona to find kindred spirits, and for close Nepali friends for us all.
- **Fiona's Mum, Dad, and sister**, who helped enormously (and exhaustingly!) in getting us out the door. Please pray rest and recovery for them.

Thanks again – we rely on your prayer support and encouragement for our work here.

Blessings,

Joel and Fiona, Caleb and Isaac