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Malcolm & Cati Ramsay - Nepal April 2016

c/o United Mission to Nepal
PO Box 126
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Nepal

Dear Friends

Cati writes: With only two weeks until we leave Nepal, the prospect of so many preparations, both physical and emotional, in the midst of continuing to fulfil our role in UMN, feels daunting. There is sadness at having to say goodbye alongside excitement at the prospect of seeing family and friends back home. There is the challenge of creatively and honestly sharing these past four years at numerous presentations during our deputation. And there is the awareness that our future is uncertain. Yet even as I write, we are conscious of a calm serenity that can only be explained by knowing we are in greater hands than our own.



One of many bandha roadblocks en route to Tansen

When we arrived in Nepal on 7 February 2012 we had little idea then of what lay ahead of us. Those next four years proved to be considerably more eventful than we could possibly have envisaged. Within just a few months of arriving we saw Nepal going through a Constitutional crisis that virtually paralysed the country as a result of frequent 'bandhas' or strikes impacting heavily on transport, businesses, schools and daily life for everyone.

Almost exactly a year ago the country was thrown in turmoil by two successive earthquakes in April and May 2015, killing over 9,000 people and leaving some two million homeless. Attempts at helping people in remoter parts of the country were seriously hampered by damaged roads and bridges; and tragically still today many thousands of people continue to live in temporary shelters due to bewildering obstacles put in the way of reconstructing homes by the government.



The local fire station after the earthquake

While the country was still reeling from the effects of the earthquakes, another crisis developed towards the end of 2015. The government finally drew up a new Constitution that provoked bitter resentment among the Madhesi people living along the border with India. In protest the border points were blockaded and for the next five months, the implications of Nepal's utter dependence on India for fuel, cooking gas and other essentials became starkly obvious for everyone. With no gas, people were forced to look for firewood to cook on; in plummeting temperatures homes, offices and schools had no means of heating and we relied on layers of clothing 24 hours a day to keep warm. With no fuel, businesses were forced to

close, and transport costs soared to compensate for black market prices where fuel could be found. School buses were unable to take children to schools so education paid the price, sometimes with serious implications for those taking important exams. Food prices too became

PARTNER PLAN



Furniture amidst the remains of someone's home

unsustainable for those with minimum financial resources. Queues for petrol could be seen sitting stationary for days on end and the overall effect was crippling across all areas of life.

Constitutional decisions continue to cause anger and dissatisfaction now as the government's attempts to rule this country limp along from one week to the next with little to show for any real improvement in people's lives. And yet everyone perseveres resolutely and adjusts to the abnormal becoming normal.

Alongside major events in Nepal during our time here, we also had the momentous celebrations in 2013 of seeing both our children, Megan and Angus, married and later have had the joy of them coming to Nepal for a holiday together with Tim and Hannah. The ache of missing them has never eased during our time here but the times when we have been able to get together with them have been unbelievably special! We have been profoundly grateful to all four of

them for their support and love and prayers buoying us up at times when distance has felt most acute.



Any potential container queued to wait for the water tanker after the earthquake

Malcolm writes: It has been a huge privilege for us to spend these four years of our lives serving in Nepal in the role that we have had of giving Pastoral Care and Support to expatriates here, both within UMN and also in other organisations working in Kathmandu. Perhaps the most vivid way of illustrating this is to explain that every expatriate serving with UMN is invited to conduct with us an annual 'Personal Review,' and on departure an 'Exit Interview.' Newcomers also complete a 'First Six Months Review.' We reckon we must have conducted almost 200 of these interviews. Each conversation usually lasts well over one hour, and all that is said is confidential. In this way, along with countless informal chats, we have had tremendous access and insights to people's joys and burdens, their celebrations and

struggles.

Of course those expatriates who volunteer to serve in a county like Nepal do not represent a 'normal' cross-section of society in the countries from which they come. Only a self-selected group even apply for this kind of work. The vast majority of them are very determined - sometimes forceful - characters. This can lead to some degree of tension and friction, especially when they are thrown together in isolated and remote places of work. But it can also lead to a refining work in people's characters, to great self-giving, and in some cases to inspiring examples of sacrificial service.



Cooking on firewood with a cheerful attitude!

What are the burdens of those who choose this way of life? In our experience they are often the same as those they had in their home country, yet vastly magnified and intensified. The friction of working relationships. The susceptibility to being clinically depressed. The sadness and loss in accepting one

may never get married, or be a parent. The worry over ageing parents. The joys and heartaches of raising children. Then on top of these normal 'Western' struggles there are the additional ones of serving in a developing country. The 'revolving door' of people coming and going, with the

PARTNER PLAN



Beside what used to be their home

emotional drain of regular goodbyes to those who have become close friends. The endless frustration with trying to learn the local language. The realisation that worship in a foreign language and culture is often a slog rather than a joy. The missing of adult children. The impotent rage that can build up over issues like the complete free-for-all that so often bedevils Nepali traffic. The despair when one realises how corrupt, incompetent, and indifferent the country's leaders can be.

Malcolm continues: Our time in Nepal has thrown up one completely unexpected and very special gift. Through a wonderful Jesuit priest here we have been introduced to the Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius, and over the last three years or so this approach to Christian spirituality has become a very important part of our lives.

This priest Father Cap is originally an American, but he has served in Nepal for 57 years so far. His total commitment to Nepal and its people is shown by the fact that many years ago he gave up his American citizenship and took on Nepali citizenship. What a self-renouncing act that is, and what a contrast to the way that so many people, including us, want to improve (as it seems) our lives and our lot.



Fuel shortage leads to crowded transport

Best of all Father Cap is a profoundly humble, gracious, and grateful man. He is one of those rare people from whom one learns as much or more simply by who they are, rather than by what they say. We have received so much from him. He has been a gift from God.

Like many others we had heard previously of the Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius, but it has been a rare privilege – and exactly what we needed – to work through them under the guidance of a man like Father Cap. In essence they are a way of soaking in Scripture, of letting one's assumptions and attitudes be steadily changed as we expose ourselves again and again to the life-changing implications of the coming of Jesus. None of this is an intellectual enterprise. The best analogies for this process come not from the class-room where students cram for exams. Rather they come from the cellar where fine wines improve vastly as they are exposed to time, darkness and the miraculous and mysterious processes of maturation.



Life in the shanti village along the banks of the Bagmati river

Along with this daily marinating in Scripture go an array of other practices which I think of as the Ignatian 'scaffolding' around this fundamental practice. Of course it should be said that Ignatian spirituality is not for everyone. It suits those who are naturally contemplative and reflective, and demands a determined daily commitment of time over very many months. But for us it has been a life-line. It has become a central feature of our lives here, and one which we hope to pursue further once we are back in Scotland.

Cati writes: What has Nepal and its people taught us? We have been living here for just over four years, and without doubt have learned much from those around us whose lives are so often immeasurably more difficult than our own. We constantly have to be careful of water usage in our home to cope with prolonged periods of dry weather and water shortages; yet most Nepali people don't even have the luxury of running water in their homes. We feel frustrated by long periods every day without electricity and rely solely on a gas ring for cooking; yet many Nepali people, with persistent gas shortages, have to walk long distances to collect firewood before they can even begin to cook for their families. We

PARTNER PLAN

struggle with the relentless cold in winter and then the oppressive heat in summer, yet many Nepali people right now don't even have a house in which to live.



Interminable wait for gas refills, outside a hotel in Kathmandu

However the most powerful lesson we have learned here has been that of realising that we always have a choice of perspective through which we can see our lives. There have been challenges and times of emotional struggle when daily life feels more than we can cope with. Yet we only have to look around us to see that by comparison with others we have absolutely nothing to complain about. It would be easy to make excuses for our complaints about frustrations and difficulties. It might be possible to quietly ignore or even deny them. But such approaches risk blinkering us to see ourselves and our circumstances

only from a self-centred viewpoint. So often it is these very experiences which can serve to change us quite profoundly if we choose to see them from different angles or perspectives. Hopefully through this process we can be transformed slowly but steadily by God's Spirit into people of compassion, tolerance and humility, with a positive gratitude for all the blessings we enjoy in our lives.



One of many temporary shelters in Sankhu, awaiting government help

Malcolm concludes: We return to Edinburgh in mid-May, and will then be doing deputation work in Dunkeld and Meigle Presbytery from 20-30 May, and in Duns Presbytery from 3-13 June. We will also be praying for discernment in knowing where God is calling us to serve him next. We hope in due course to send out one final letter to update you once we have discovered what our future holds, and - very importantly - to thank you all so very much indeed for your prayers, interest, correspondence, and encouragement over the last four years.

We come back to Scotland with the words of Dag Hammarskjöld in our minds: 'For all that has been – Thanks. For all that shall be – Yes'.

With love and prayers,
Malcolm & Cati

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A special friendship with Father Cap