

PARTNER PLAN

Malcolm & Cati Ramsay - Nepal September 2012

c/o United Mission to Nepal
PO Box 126
Kathmandu
Nepal

Dear Friends

Cati writes: When we last wrote we were on the cusp of completing our five months' full-time language training. That landmark was celebrated with a few days' holiday in Pokhara, a bus journey of 7-8 hours from Kathmandu. We had invited one of the Tansen doctors from South Africa called Ansie to join us and we all relished the time for conversation, reading, swimming and walking. We had also anticipated catching up on a lot of sleep!

However sleep was to prove impossible for reasons we could never have anticipated! Our daughter Megan's boyfriend phoned us unusually from Canada, and to our delight asked for our blessing before planning to propose to Megan!



Monsoon rain outside our home, seen through spaghetti junction of wires!

No sleep that night!

The following day felt interminable because we had to resign ourselves to waiting all day before hearing anything, given the thirteen hour time difference between Canada and Nepal. Towards midnight we were woken by the mobile ringing. It wasn't Megan; rather it was our son Angus, sounding uncharacteristically tongue-tied before telling us that he had just proposed to his girl-friend, Hannah!

By this stage everything was beginning to feel almost surreal...and once again sleep was impossible!

Megan's excited call to announce the news of her engagement came a few hours later while we were on the long bus journey back to Kathmandu! The end

result of this extraordinary weekend was that both our children managed to get engaged on exactly the same day and, within their respective time zones, at the same time of day; and without any collusion!

We are both absolutely thrilled by the parallel family drama and are now preparing for two family weddings in 2013! It feels like a real answer to prayer. Leaving for Nepal carried with it the inevitable pain of being separated from our children and that continues to affect us now. However we were reassured by the knowledge that both had someone special in their lives when we said goodbye. Now we rejoice that they are both simultaneously preparing to get married to that someone special whom we are delighted to welcome fully into the family!

Malcolm writes: After seven months here we feel it is time to give you some of our reflections on Hinduism. This is a colossally big subject, and what follows carries the caveat that is only our

121 George Street • Edinburgh EH2 4YN

t 0131 225 5722 f 0131 226 6121 e world@cofscotland.org.uk w www.churchofscotland.org.uk/worldmission
Charity Number: SC011353

PARTNER PLAN

beginners' attempt to begin to grapple with something that is very complex, but absolutely central to the life of Nepal.

Until 2008 Nepal was the last Hindu kingdom in the world. In that year, when the monarchy was established, it was declared to be a secular state. Now, like so many other countries, the sacred and the secular march side by side. In general terms Hindu customs, such as the red dot on the forehead for women - the 'tika' - seem to be observed more in the country than in the city, and more by the older generation than the younger.

The many stories of the Hindu gods and goddesses seem bewildering to an outsider, not least because the gods seem regularly to drop one persona only to assume another. A key facet of Hinduism is the caste system. Everyone is born into a system which classifies them irrevocably as a Brahmin at the top, down to an untouchable at the bottom. For many years it has been illegal in Nepal to discriminate against untouchables on the grounds of caste, but in practice some discrimination still exists. The gross injustice of this is obvious. What is much more subtle is the fatalism it breeds. Many Hindus will not question their lowly status or menial tasks. In a belief system of reincarnation, being low caste in this life is an inevitable outcome of misdemeanours committed in a previous life.



A Hindu worshipper brings his offering to the Monkey god at Durbar Square

The most obvious manifestation of Hinduism in daily life is in the numerous wayside shrines that exist almost everywhere. These vary in size from monumental to very small. As Hindus go about their business they will pause at the shrines to make an offering of flowers or food, or a simple bow, to the stone statue of the god who is housed there. To a Westerner some of this seems very alien: for example smearing the lips of the monkey god with butter in an attempt to please or placate him. Yet the boot could easily be placed on the other foot. To an Asian, I imagine Europe would seem paranoid about removing all mention of the sacred or the divine from the public square, or from political life. And when it comes to worship what is more worthy of our energies and attention? Is it the Asian shrine which tries to speak, however inadequately, of the Transcendent? Or is it the Western shopping centre, through which we swarm to make our offerings in an attempt to please or placate our own desires and egos?



Religious and secular side by side

Cati writes: In the midst of our involvement in ever-expanding roles here, we have had the privilege of discovering a very special Nepali church. Imagine a young man about 25 years ago living in a rural part of Nepal, newly married and expecting their first child. Tragically he fell out of a tree and severed his spinal column, resulting in total paralysis from the waist down. His parents immediately disowned both him and his wife, knowing that he could no longer be of any practical use to them in the future. However he was cared for in a UMN hospital over the next three

years and during that time became a committed Christian. Once discharged from hospital he and his wife and son migrated to Kathmandu where he founded a church called Sundar Doka: translated from Nepali to mean Beautiful Gate. (This name comes from Acts 3:2 as the place

121 George Street • Edinburgh EH2 4YN

t 0131 225 5722 f 0131 226 6121 e world@cofscotland.org.uk w www.churchofscotland.org.uk/worldmission
Charity Number: SC011353

PARTNER PLAN

where the crippled man is healed). Not only is this church filled to capacity with Nepali folk whose lives have been marginalised from society as a result of various disabilities; but they have also extended their welcome to anyone coming into Kathmandu from outlying villages of Nepal. Specifically these are disabled children whose plight has been discovered by UMN and partner-organisations, and for whom the dream of life-changing surgery has been made a reality by means of donations from various sources. Coming into Kathmandu from some of the remote villages however can be a bewildering experience. This church has established an invaluable service, whereby they welcome any disabled child and parent, accompanying them to and from hospital appointments, providing them with basic accommodation and giving them meals every day until they are able to return home. The difference this makes requires little imagination! Vulnerable people are welcomed into the church family irrespective of their own religion, and are protected from the fear and confusion caused by impending surgery. Each time we have visited this church we have been struck by the warm, friendly atmosphere created among people who have been given back their dignity as a result of total acceptance, love and hope for the future. Being among them has been profoundly humbling and inspirational. What a tangible expression of Christian love in action!



The relentless task of widening Kathmandu's streets!

Cati continues: While Nepal remains in a somewhat alarming limbo of being without a government, there is nevertheless a law currently in place whereby all the streets of Kathmandu have to be widened. Ubiquitous teams of men and women work long hours every day to painstakingly knock down walls of homes, shops and offices alongside the city's streets and to build replacement walls about a metre behind. No machinery is used and the streets are regularly left with piles of debris that remain there until another invasion of people arrives to remove them! The result is wide evidence of destruction and, as yet, no actual improvement in the state of the roads. Yet still the people continue with the task, uncomplaining and with a remarkably cheerful, dogged determination.



A Nepali waits to have his trousers repaired on the pavement

Malcolm writes: Recently I have spent two afternoons, with others, checking and updating the equipment in one of UMN's 'earthquake huts.' Nepal is worryingly prone to earthquakes. The last 'big one' which straddled both Nepal and India occurred in 1934 when 30,000 people were said to have been killed. Numerous small earthquakes have occurred since then. People cheerily remark the next 'big one' is overdue. To prepare for this UMN insists that its expatriate staff live within walking distance of each other, and that each 'walking group' has a store with supplies to survive the aftermath of a devastating earthquake, (or civil unrest). The huts contain drinking water, medical supplies, and food. Once a year all the contents need to be checked. Those items that have passed their expiry dates are disposed of and replaced.

121 George Street • Edinburgh EH2 4YN

t 0131 225 5722 f 0131 226 6121 e world@cofscotland.org.uk w www.churchofscotland.org.uk/worldmission
Charity Number: SC011353

PARTNER PLAN

I found this task to be sobering, but in a way reassuring, as maintaining the huts means we are doing what we can to cope with what we hope and pray will never happen. As I mentioned above the whole basis of Hinduism leads to fatalism, which in turn leads to passive acceptance of one's lot, and inaction in the face of it. But Christian faith should never be fatalistic. Christian faith means trusting in God, *and also* taking whatever action we can to make a bad situation better, not only for ourselves, but also for our neighbour. So with that last thought in mind, we stocked our earthquake hut with more than we think the numbers in our group would strictly need.

With love and prayers,

Malcolm and Cati

amalcolmransay@gmail.com

catiransay@gmail.com