

PARTNER PLAN

Malcolm & Cati Ramsay - Nepal December 2013

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

Dear Friends,

Cati writes: This month's partner-plan letter is primarily to wish you all a very special Christmas in whatever way you are planning to celebrate it. We imagine you'll all be bracing yourselves for some cold weather perhaps huddling around a fire as soon as darkness falls. We hope you'll be able to see family and friends at some point during the holiday period.

Scotland feels very far away from here and this is going to be our first Christmas in 27 years without either of our children. A difficult reality to get used to but we give thanks for both their marriages this year and all the joy which this has brought them already. We hope to share Christmas at a distance by Skype, working around the time differences between Nepal, Scotland and Canada. I still find it incredible being able to make instant contact across thousands of miles without any extra cost: tremendous compensation for being apart at this time of year!



Some of the beautiful wildlife
in Nepal

In Nepal there is of course almost no visible evidence of the coming of Christmas, in stark contrast to all the festivities in the UK and sometimes frantic preparations. We think nostalgically of the gradual build up in church of the spirit of Christmas, time spent with family and friends, the beauty of freshly fallen snow, mince pies, decorations, carol-singing and laughter around the kitchen table. The prospect of our approaching Christmas with almost no tangible emotional or spiritual preparation felt extremely alien to us both a month ago. So we decided to offer to lead an Advent retreat for any other folk here who might value setting time aside to reflect in fresh ways on the coming of

Christ and his impact on our day-to-day lives.

Twenty-one people got together from various different backgrounds, ranging from those who have worked and lived in different parts of Nepal for over twenty years to others who are only living here for a very short time as volunteers. Not only did we cover a huge age range but we came originally from many different family backgrounds scattered across the globe. We are working here for different organisations, some of us single and some with families. Yet in spite of the differences between us we all share the same faith and through this were able to talk about our personal experiences in ways that sparked recognition and a common foundation.

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For several hours we focused on the theme "Watching, Waiting and Walking", interspersed with singing, sharing and suggesting ways of introducing rhythms into our life; punctuating familiar busyness with times of quiet and intentional reflection. By the time we brought everything to a close and shared a meal together the unfamiliarity between us had been replaced with an ease of conversation and laughter that suggested that hopefully the morning had proved worthwhile to others as much as it had to us.

To celebrate on returning home, I spent the afternoon decorating our sitting-room for Christmas and even without the familiar Christmas tree we now feel much more attuned to the spirit of Christmas, and are enjoying the cozy atmosphere of what is definitely now our home.



Monkeys lining the road waiting for any offerings thrown from passing cars!

Malcolm writes: When we wrote our last Partner Plan letter, the General Election here was imminent. I am glad to say it passed off without violence, and the turn-out was high. But the results, as they began to trickle in, caused a sensation. The Maoists, who had been the majority party and who formed the previous government, had been trounced. They had now been pushed into third place.

Most commentators interpret this result as the voters expressing their disillusionment with the record of the Maoists when in government. Unfortunately the Maoists themselves are reacting very differently. They blame their defeat on widespread vote-rigging, and fraudulent vote counting, - in spite of the fact that the official international observers of the Election have pronounced it largely fair and free. The Maoists now are threatening to boycott the new Parliament. Given that one of the chief tasks of that Parliament is to frame the new Constitution, the Maoists and their supporters will then be able to claim that any new Constitution lacks legitimacy as they (the Maoists) were not involved in framing it.



Deserted streets during the week-long pre-election strike imposed across Nepal

To a Western mind this line of argument seems illogical. But we have to remember that Nepal is a new democracy. The common assumptions that most Westerners have about how a democracy operates – and which are often unwritten - are not in place here. In his 'A History of the World' Andrew Marr makes a comment about democracy which could have been written with Nepal in mind. He says: 'Democracy is not a system. It is a culture. It is based on habits, attitudes, long-established divisions of power, ingrained belief in law and absence of systematic corruption and cynicism. You can import a system and set it up, and get it working. You cannot import a culture.'

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Because of these assertions of vote-rigging, and because of foot-dragging over other matters even by the political parties who won first and second places, very little actual progress has happened since the Election. Indeed as of now, almost one month after the Election, no new government has yet been formed. The people of Nepal are crying out for decisive leadership on practical matters based on what is good for the nation as a whole. But whether or not that is what the recent Election will bring remains to be seen.



An unending line of people carrying loads towards a footbridge over the main river

Cati writes: One particularly memorable week of recent months was a visit to UMN's other mission hospital in Okhaldhunga. This is considerably more remote than Tansen and involved a long trip by jeep of almost fourteen hours, taking us through infinitely varied landscape that we had never seen until now. At one point the 'road' came to an abrupt end on the banks of a large river where there was no longer any bridge for vehicles to cross over.



Innumerable folk patiently carrying goods towards a swinging footbridge across a wide river

Innumerable folk thronged around the jeep offering their services and were employed to carry all the contents of the jeep, ranging from hospital supplies to equipment for staff at the hospital and our own luggage for the week. The single vital piece of equipment for the porters was a headband attached to rope whereby both men and women managed to lift baskets piled with heavy boxes and other paraphernalia onto their backs. Like human pack-horses they proceeded to wade across one tributary of the river and across a high swinging footbridge to another jeep waiting on the other side. To make a living from day to day armed only with this

single headband or 'Namlo' we were humbled to witness their positive spirits and determination, accepting the equivalent of barely £2 before turning round and repeating the process with successive vehicles waiting on the other side again.

Once safely across we were driven for several more hours towards Okhaldhunga, stopping *en route* for a glass of sweet black tea in a mud-walled tea-shop, lit by candlelight because of the all-too-familiar power cuts. The journey thereafter involved tortuously slow negotiation of winding, boulder-strewn rocky tracks up the mountain slopes. At times we could have walked alongside the vehicle and made faster progress!



A welcome cup of sweet tea en route to Okhaldhunga

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We finally reached the hospital at around 9 pm to a warm welcome from four Norwegian staff who work in Okhaldhunga. Never has a bowl of hot soup with warm homemade bread tasted so delicious! During our days there we were introduced to the commitment of different staff working in this only other remaining UMN hospital. I particularly enjoyed spending one afternoon with a group of young women who had travelled many miles to give birth in the hospital and were being cared for in one large dormitory until their babies were due to be born. Almost all were accompanied by their husbands or another family member who would be able to care for them and cook for them while in hospital. During that particular afternoon, I found myself a part of an entertaining and eye-opening discussion about the novel notion of possibly having their husbands present at their forthcoming delivery!



Visiting their local church in Okhaldhunga with our Norwegian host

Okhaldhunga is situated in a very poor area of Nepal and some of the patients we saw during our time there left us feeling acutely conscious of the indescribably difficult lives that some are facing day in and day out with stoical courage. How fortunate we are if we take time to realise afresh how

much easier our lives are compared with that of so many in the world. I hope we were able to make some little difference to the lives of these four Norwegians who are serving UMN in Okhaldhunga by simply spending time with them in their very isolated situation. They gave us an extremely memorable introduction to life in another part of this varied country that is Nepal.

We send you our warm good wishes for Christmas and for 2014!

With love and prayers,

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