



A study leave report | Nepal

Ian Guy

24th March – 10th April 2017

Members of the Aashish Church - Joao Petreceli in the centre



The Wakatipu Community Presbyterian Church is building a strong relationship with the Aashish Presbyterian Church in Nepal; by which we are sponsoring the establishment of two new congregations in remote areas of Nepal; helping train their church planters and pastors; and looking to develop other areas of co-operation.

At the same time, in a small way, we have been supporting homes for children and teenagers in Nepal for the past three years.

The study leave enabled me to visit the Church and the homes, with the aim to bolster relationships; explore opportunities for greater co-operation; deepen my awareness of the culture and of the actual needs and thus be better equipped to serve.

Two of the Community Outreach Workers (COWs) with their families



My priority was to spend time with the Church Planters and if possible to visit their home towns and join with them in their fellowship gatherings. In doing this I hope to better understand the challenges they face and thus be better able to support them.

A secondary objective was to visit the children's homes with similar goals in mind. An added benefit was the opportunity to visit the family of, and church of, a recently arrived member of our church here in Queenstown.

For 2 weeks spanning 24th March to 9th April I visited Nepal, accompanied by one of our elders, Dr Deborah Bower, and associate pastor Rev João Petreceli and a group of 10 others from Brazil, Chile, and the USA. These others are likewise supporting, or considering supporting, other church planters of the Aashish Presbyterian Church.

The Wakatipu Community Presbyterian Church first formed a relationship with the Aashish Presbyterian Church in 2013, after an initial visit by the Rev Joao Petreceli, and then in September 2016 we entered a 5-year financial commitment by which we have agreed to provide the full costs required to support two church planters in their daily living and ministry needs.

This may sound like a large commitment and it is significant but in the context of our overall mission and costs it is a relatively small commitment of \$1250 per month that we make. This is funded by individuals representing each of our congregations committing to a regular contribution with any shortfall being covered from general funds.

This amount is split between two church planters and is sent quarterly. It is pleasing to note that following this trip sponsorship has increased and now the total amount, give or take small differences due to currency fluctuations, is met every month.

The two weeks in Nepal were divided between 4 days in class, 3 days travelling to the localities of the church planters, and the final 5 days a mix of sightseeing around Kathmandu and visiting the Boys' and Girls' homes. I had hoped to visit both communities we support but the logistics of travel in Nepal made that impossible on this occasion. To cover everyone our team was divided to ensure each Church plant was visited by someone.

Nepal - Geography

Nepal is a land-locked Himalayan country in South Asia sandwiched between India (south, east and west) and China (north). It is home to 28.5 million people. In area it is 147,181 square kilometres, almost the same size as the South Island of New Zealand. It is divided into 7 states and 77 districts; and further divided into 5 development regions, simply called: East, Central, West, Midwest, Farwest.





Nepal is famous for the Himalaya and Mt Everest. These towering mountains the result of the collision between the Indian subcontinent and Eurasia.

The Himalayan Mountains continue to grow at a rate of between 3 and 5 millimetres per year, as the Indian plate pushes north.

Nepal - The Political Situation



From 1996 to 2006, a civil war raged between the government and Maoist guerrillas. Thousands were killed; infrastructure destroyed; economy languished; and many people were displaced.

In 2008 a treaty was signed bringing peace and elections were held the same year. The monarchy was abolished and Nepal became a federal republic and renamed the 'Federal Democratic Republic of Nepal' (Loktantrik Ganatantra Nepal).

Strangely although national parliament elections were held in 2008 and have continued since there has been no local election or effective local government for the past 16 years. While we were in Nepal the nation was gearing up for local elections which were held mid-year. However, many were pessimistic about the ability of anyone elected to make a difference and many, especially the younger people I spoke to, were confused as to what it would really mean and how to vote.

Nepal suffers frequent natural disasters and severe rural hardship. Most Nepalis are farmers, but many villages suffer food shortages - their vulnerability increased by drought, earthquakes, floods, fires, epidemics, and avalanches.

Physical health is also poor, resulting in a life expectancy of about 68, an improvement of 10 years since 1990, but still low by western standards. Malnutrition affects many, especially in rural districts, and respiratory illnesses, heart disease, and epidemics due to poor hygiene affect millions.



In 2015 Nepal was devastated by twin earthquakes; the first on the 25th April 2015 followed by another on 12th May. Nearly 9,000 people were killed, and 22,000 injured. The quakes triggered many avalanches - flattened whole villages, and further damaged buildings and infrastructure in Kathmandu that were in disrepair after years of neglect.



Visiting two years after this event the evidence remained obvious to the eye with the infrastructure of Kathmandu broken and unreliable. Recovery is slow. This is hampered by the lack of local political organisation, mentioned above, by political in-fighting, by cumbersome regulations that tie up international aid money, by political tensions, especially with India which



resulted in India stopping supply of vital goods and slowing recovery. Apparently in the last two years, 22,000 homes have been rebuilt but that is just 3.5% of those that were destroyed. 750 heritage structures were also damaged but only 90 are now being worked on.

Politically the country remains unstable - the last decade has seen 10 changes of administration and this trend looks to continue.

Today, the hopeful, tell us, Nepal is entering a new era which promises improving stability, greater democracy and economic prosperity. However, the change may well fall far short of peoples hopes, and until political stability at both national and local levels is established the situation remains fragile.



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This is a very complex country - with many competing forces: multi-ethnic, multi-racial, multi-cultural, multi-religious, and multi-lingual. According to the 2011 national census there are 123 distinct languages spoken as a mother tongue in Nepal, and each is recognised as a national language. The dominant language is Nepali followed by the other various national languages, with English being used across the country as a second language.

Nepal - The Religious landscape

The people of Nepal are a religious people - virtually everyone holds to a faith of one type or another, with Hinduism being by far the most dominant, as can be seen in the chart to the left.

The 2015 constitution of Nepal has defined Nepal as a “secular, inclusive and fully democratic state” and as a “multi-ethnic, multi-lingual, multi-religious and multi-cultural” country. In theory all religions are equal in Nepal. Everyone has the right to practise their religion and they will not be discriminated for doing so.

Yet in practise Hindu opposition to Christianity is very strong - this is seen in Parliament where there is a strong push to suppress Christianity; it is seen in the media reports that claim foreign money is effectively buying conversions, and it is seen in the neighbourhoods.

I visited an independent pastor of a non-denominational fellowship in the outskirts of Kathmandu. The fellowship building, attached to his home, is situated near two Hindu places of prayer, from the nearest one my friend described the sound of people at prayer hurling curses upon the Christians below. He said, ‘they treat us worse than dogs.’

This same pastor told me of another fellowship whose worship was disrupted recently by the sounds of workmen gathered outside. Apparently, they were from a local authority with instructions to demolish the fellowship building and pastors home. Hindu neighbours had complained about them and



¹ Chart copied from <https://bengoestonepal.wordpress.com/2015/01/>

claimed the building was illegal. The police were called but simply stood by as the workmen proceeded to raze the building.

The constitution also makes it difficult to fulfil the Great Commission: Article 26 (3) “No person shall, in the exercise of the right conferred by this Article, do, or cause to be done, any act which may be contrary to public health, decency and morality or breach public peace, or convert another person from one religion to another or any act or conduct that may jeopardize other’s religion and such act shall be punishable by law.”²

While we were in Nepal this was a hot topic with stories of intimidation of Christians and the fear of arrest if found to be evangelising. A senior member of the church we visited was once stopped by police from evangelising in public and he was accused of attempting to convert people to Christianity. His response at the time was to point out that no man converts another person but that this is a work of God the Holy Spirit. He was warned not to do it again and told to be on his way.

Since then the situation has become more dangerous for the Christian community and for us who visit to encourage the Church there. In August 2017 the Parliament enacted more restrictions, these now include:

- No one should involve or encourage in conversion of religion.
- No one should convert a person from one religion to another religion or profess them own religion and belief with similar intention by using or not using any means of attraction and by disturbing religion or belief of any ethnic groups or community that being practiced since ancient times.
- If found guilty; there will be punishment of five years of imprisonment and penalty of fifty thousand rupees [approximately \$500 USD*]. If foreigners are found guilty; they will have to be deported within seven days after completing the imprisonment in third clause.³

Local Christians had anticipated these changes and when I spoke to them they expressed caution but also determination; they believe it is their duty to bring the gospel to the people of Nepal. For now, they acknowledge that Hinduism is the dominant religion and looks likely to remain so for the foreseeable future, at least another 25 years or so until, as one leader said,

‘the children born today will be able to see and compare the good and bad of Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam and Christianity’.

² https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Nepal_2015.pdf

³ <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2017/october/nepal-criminalizes-conversion-christianity-evangelism-hindu.html>

This same leader said to me

My Hindu friends and scholars try to convince me of the all-embracing and caring values of the Vedic teachings and of Brahma, Vishnu and Maheshwara and yet they do not see the lack of respect for fellow humans, the exploitation of the weak, the needy, the discriminated and marginalised for no fault of theirs and yet all this maintained systemically right under their noses by the Hindu and so called Buddhist frame of mind. Whither Buddhist or Hindu compassion? Exploiting God's creation until it is total exhausted! The West has done this too but there is increasing awareness for correction but the East specially, the Hindu, Buddhist and Islam dominated South Asia is still in deepest slumber yet on this reality!

The Christians here are beginning to see the problem with the alarm being raised by the West.

Walking the streets of Kathmandu, I found myself wondering similar thoughts. In a land where the dominate religion seeks dharma (loosely understood to be right conduct, righteousness, moral law, and duty), how can there be so little regard for others. The answer I believe lies in the fact that Hinduism is largely an individualistic faith whereas Christianity, when properly understood, reminds us that we have responsibility for one another, and for the world in which we live.

The caste system also plays a part in the disregard for others, especially those from a lower caste. Today this system is illegal, yet this ancient practise continues to lock people into levels in society from the Untouchable at the bottom, who are treated lower than animals, to the Bhramin at the top, who enjoy privilege and respect. I was intrigued that I could mention a family name to local Nepali and they would tell me what caste that person belonged to, an indication of how ingrained the caste system continues to be.

Christianity challenges this cultural understanding with the gospel message of oneness and equality before God. This is possibly a factor in the lower castes responding in greater number than higher castes to the gospel message.

The plight of animals, often left dying in the streets, and the crippled and poor crumbled on the pavement was sickening - especially when away from the tourist areas. The environment fares no better. One of our first sights after arriving in Kathmandu was the Bagmati River. This river is deemed to be holy by both Hindu and Buddhist, yet it has become an open drain.

Wikipedia has this to say:

The Bagmati River contains large amounts of untreated sewage, and large levels of pollution of the river exist due primarily to the region's large population. Many residents in Kathmandu empty personal garbage and waste into the river. In particular the Hanumante khola, Dhobi khola, Tukucha khola and Bishnumati khola are the most polluted. Attempts are being made to monitor the Bagmati River system and restore its cleanliness. These include "pollution loads modification, flow augmentation and placement of weirs at critical locations".

In May 18, 2013, under the initiative of former chief secretary Leela mani Poudyal, The Bagmati Mega Clean Up Campaign was started. Every Saturday, Nepal Army, Nepal Police and General Public gather to clean the waste and sewage from the river. The Friends of the Bagmati is an organisation set up in November 2000. According to its website, its aim is "to reverse the degradation of the Bagmati river." In 2014, Bagmati River is claimed to be almost pure after a long effort of 14 years.

The day we left for our homeward journey we noticed many soldiers, wearing face masks, descending on the river in another Saturday clean-up. Sadly, the need remains, and the river today is far from pure.



Illegal 'housing' on the banks of the Bagmati River

Denominational competition

A challenge for the Church is to present a united front, and while different Christian denominations speak publicly in support of one another the reality seems to be one of suspicion and competition. Even amongst Presbyterians there are competing denominations as there are in New Zealand and elsewhere. A senior member of the Aashish Church agreed that

'unity among us Christians needs to be strengthened. Remembering that unity does not need to be uniformity or homogeneity!' What is important he went on to say is to 'capture the centrality of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.'

A greater problem was the many pseudo-Christian groups prevalent in Nepal. Local pastors said to me that the Jehovah's Witnesses and other so-called Christians have caused considerable damage to the image of 'normal' Christians. Causing confusion and misunderstanding the pastors I spoke with blamed such groups for intensifying Hindu antipathy towards the Church.

Nepal - Church History

Christianity first came to Nepal in 1628 when Portuguese Father Juan Cabral gained permission to preach Christianity in Kathmandu valley. His presence was a curiosity but did not lead to conversion, the following century other Catholic priests attempted to establish a Christian community and to an extent succeeded. We know for example that in 1769 a small group of priests were forced to leave the Kathmandu Valley for the safety of India, they were accompanied by 57 converts. Others tried in the late 1700's and early 1800's but from 1810 till the mid-20th century there was no known Christian presence in Nepal.

In the 1940's the country began to open itself to Western aid, initially medical and typically Christian in origin. During this period many Nepalis were living beyond Nepal, especially large numbers in Northern India who had come under the influence of the Church. These new converts began to pray for Nepal and for the opening of the land, spiritually and politically, to the gospel.

In the 1950's the country began to open itself to western influence largely based around the mountaineering community. The conquest of Everest in 1953 by Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay lead to an explosion of interest in the nation, the gates of Nepal were flung open to the outside world and have not been closed since.

In the same decade many Nepalese Christians who had been living in India began to return and it was they who ensured the establishment of the church in Nepal.

The Aashish Presbyterian Church is one of these groups that still has a strong connection with India.

Aashish Presbyterian Church

From the Church website⁴ (hopelessly out of date) and in conversation I have come to understand that the Aashish Presbyterian Church of Kathmandu is an extension of the Presbyterian Free Church Council (PFCC) established in Kalimpong, Darjeeling district, India. The PFCC itself has it's roots in Scottish Presbyterianism. The name Aashish simply means 'blessings'.

The Aashish Presbyterian Free Church in Nepal originally started with a prayer meeting in 1989 by Mrs Pandi Bhattarai working in Pakhribas Agricultural Centre, Dhankuta, East Nepal. She came to work from Kalimpong, West Bengal, India in 1975. She was supported by Rev M. H. Subba of Presbyterian Free Church, Kalimpong. When her husband, Dr Mahendra Bhattarai, returned from the UK after studies, in 1990, the prayer meeting was developed to be an open fellowship at their residence. This further developed over time. They bought land and dedicated it for building a fellowship building. The Fellowship was named Aashish Presbyterian Fellowship.

⁴ <http://www.aashish-presbyterian.nepalchurch.com/>

Over time, leaders were trained and ordained Elders. Those ordained Elders at the Fellowship at Pakhribas were Dr Mahendra Bhattarai, Dhruva Adhikari, Kuber Gurung and James Poudel in different years. All these Elders have since been ordained Pastors in different years and have provided leadership to plant churches in other areas.

The Aashish Presbyterian Church (APC) consists of eleven church congregations and 24 fellowships. The difference is that a church has a designated pastor and at least two elders. The fellowships are seedling congregations currently under the oversight of the Himalayan Evangelical Fellowship (HEF) until they are declared (planted) as Churches.

This small denomination which is firmly in the Reformed tradition has a very simply Mission Statement: 'To make disciples and to plant Churches'.

From 2013 with the guidance of the Rev Joao Petreceli (Presbyterian Church of Brazil and the Wakatipu Community Presbyterian Church), they have developed a program of evangelism, discipleship and church planting that is seeing the Church train and release Community Outreach Workers (COWs) to plant fellowships in each district of Nepal.

After those initial years of preparation the project was launched in 2016. When we visited there are were eleven COWs working in nine districts; at that time nine of these eleven were sponsored directly by congregations like ours, and the remaining two were waiting full sponsorship. In the meantime, their needs are met by 'adjusting' what is supplied to the other nine.



A few of the team waiting for lunch. A guitar was never far away.

Going forward it is planned to add another seven COWs in the next 2 years, who will work in districts neighbouring those where work has already begun.

While I admire the vision, I am concerned that this rapid growth is spreading the support networks thin and that some of the COWs are poorly prepared for the task.

Our church, through the ministry of Pastor Petreceli and others, can provide some training by visiting in the Spring and Autumn of each year, yet I know that more is needed and that regular visits to each of the COWs and their families is essential to provide adequate supervision, training, and encouragement.



The Class - first day introductions

My suggestion to the Aashish Church is to release a senior pastor to this work, the problem however is that the two available for such a task have employment beyond the Church and their availability is therefore limited, as is funding.

It would also be helpful to provide more thorough training before the COW is released to their ministry field. However suitable trainers are not currently available for this level of commitment.

Currently church life is focused on weekly worship services on Saturdays (Saturday is the only day off per week for most people), house fellowships on Wednesdays, discipleship groups on Mondays or Thursdays and house visits on other days as opportunity presents.

After a fellowship is begun the aim is to form a congregation within 3 to 5 years, and to train the members to be disciple-making disciples.

The intention is that each congregation has within it separate fellowship groups for men, women, youth and children. In practise this is not working consistently but remains the goal.

Travel in Nepal

To visit the locality of one of the COWs our hosts decided it would be best to hire a car with driver to take us the 468 kilometres to Hile, Dhankuta, East Nepal. On the way we would deliver one of the other COWs to his home also in the Dhankuta region. This sounded like a

The road to Hile



fairly easy trip, maybe 6 or 7 hours, but the reality was anything but. We left at about 6:30am and finally arrived in our accommodation at 11pm. The roads are often crowded but also in very poor condition, at one point we had to take a detour that was reminiscent of the Skippers Canyon Road, but we also had to wait an hour for oncoming traffic to clear the road before we could proceed.

Challenges along the way for soft westerners is food that isn't going to destroy your stomach lining, toilets, and somewhere to sleep. Unfortunately, our guide hadn't thought to book accommodation at Hile, so we arrived in the middle of the night and had to find somewhere suitable for a lady and a gentleman. What we found left a lot to be desired, but we were so tired we didn't care.



Our Hile accommodation

It looks ok, but the bed linen was damp, the surfaces filthy, and the shower and toilet areas stained and showing signs of mould. Out the door and down the hall the floor abruptly stops and there is a two floor drop to the ground. I am glad none of us went wandering in the night.

In the morning we made it clear we didn't want to eat here so we were taken to the best hotel in town where we enjoyed coffee and cleanliness before beginning the day.

Mid-morning, we were at the Fellowship which was a beautiful experience - after a long time singing I was invited to speak so I told our story, gave greetings from Queenstown and delivered a short impromptu sermon.

Before we knew it, we were thanked, fed, and then bundled back into the car for a one-hour trip of twisting roads to another small fellowship, where again we were invited to speak, and were fed, and blessed by their love and appreciation.

Our time with the fellowships was too short but that was made up for by the time we had in the car; long hours and opportunity to build friendships (that have endured) and to discuss all the deep and meaningful, and trivial questions of church life.



Home and fellowship room, one level only

One of the challenges that became apparent on this journey was that the young COWs are being exposed to wide-ranging teaching from traditions at odds with the strict Reformed tradition of the Aashish Church. They had questions that will need to be answered if they are to be expected to have a robust, coherent and positive influence in their communities.

A side trip...

One day while in Kathmandu I had the opportunity to visit the family and friends of one of our Frankton parishioners, Heena. To get there I first had to travel across town - about 75 minutes - by taxi to meet Binod.

Binod is a young pastor of an independent church and a leader of youth in the city. We spent time together on the back of his bike, and then in his fellowship room before going to visit Heena's family. I have remained in a mentoring relationship with Binod to this day.



Meeting Heena's family was a treat and overwhelming. Gathered



were friends and cousins and the families pastor and his wife. We enjoyed a time of worship - singing in English and Nepali. And then the food came out. Apparently Heena had told her mother that I liked dumplings, so dumplings it was, or momo, as it is called in Nepal. They wanted me to eat while they served me, but I found that very uncomfortable, so I invited them to join

me; thankfully they did.



The Apple of God's Eye

With only one full day remaining in Nepal, accompanied by Deborah Bower and Joao Petreceli, I had the privilege to visit the Apple of God's Eye.

This is a ministry initiated by Silvio and Rosmari Silva in Kathmandu. Their primary task is to welcome young girls and boys into their family who have been caught up in the modern day



This team sings and dances to raise awareness of the work of Apple of God's Eye

slave trade of sex trafficking. Once set free Silvio and Rosmari work to have the girls repatriated to Nepal and then to care for them in one of the 3 homes they run.



Mobile dentist

Associated with the home is schooling, from pre-school to teacher training, health clinics, including a mobile medical and dental clinic, and scholarships which are a positive deterrent to trafficking.

The restoration process is long and vital. The basis of all that is done is love which is offered without condition. From here girls and the few boys also needing support are offered an education, medical and dental care, and over time restoration of their personhood, dignity, joy, hope, and love follow.



One of the classrooms

Every day more than 50 girls, some as young as 8, and women are trafficked out of Nepal and end up working in Indian brothels where they earn for their masters US\$76000/year and receive nothing but their food and accommodation in return. They are part of a world-wide problem of modern-day slavery.

The work of the Apple of God's Eye starts with saving one life and from there the ripples keep expanding; whole communities are being changed; the conditions that are the breeding ground for trafficking are changing and people's attitudes are becoming more humane. We pray for the day when every daughter is celebrated for the person she is and not merely for her earning potential.

Boys' Home

The Strategic Alliance Nepal (SAN) was first introduced to us when Ps Emerson Menegasse visited Queenstown in 2013. Since then we have become aware of their work with boys in Nepal who need a hand up for a variety of reasons.

While in Nepal we were introduced to a few of the boys currently receiving support from the Children of Nepal (a ministry of SAN).

The Project Children of Nepal Boys' Home was born in 2009. The project aims to help children of war, orphans, other children whose families cannot afford to take care of their basic needs.

Currently, the project serves 14 boys and supplies their whole needs, food, housing, education, medical care, and recreation. Each boy is encouraged to be the best they can be so that in adulthood they will be able to contribute back to their communities.



The Boys' Home (it was a school holiday so many of the boys were at their home villages)

An example is Suman. Suman is currently beginning studies towards becoming a Doctor of Medicine. At 19, he is the oldest amongst the boys in the home, and he has become a leader and role-model for the younger boys. He dreams of staying in Nepal and helping lead the country to a better future.

In Conclusion

The work of the Aashish Presbyterian Church in Nepal is a key component in the growing Christian influence in Nepal. Here in Queenstown we have found an opportunity to assist Aashish and in the process to grow our mission awareness and competency. At this stage we are committed to five years of support to two of the COWs, but I am now aware that more may be needed. I am also aware that we can assist in other ways: mentoring of the COWS; teaching from a range of our personnel, provision of learning resources, and other support as needs arise.

We could also be doing more for the Apple of God's Eye and the Boys' Home and in time I will be encouraging more visits and seeking ways to make a lasting positive difference. The danger is that we end up spreading ourselves too thin, yet a greater danger is that we do nothing.

Thank you to the Parish Council of the Wakatipu for granting me the time to travel and learn. Thank you, Southern Presbytery for granting me study leave.

Ngā mihi nui