

Tom Roberts hears the stories of CMF members caught up in the Nepal earthquake



NEPAL

WALKING THROUGH PAIN & HARDSHIP TOGETHER

key points

- Two large earthquakes have left 8,600 people dead, thousands more injured. Around 600,000 homes have been damaged, and 140,000 destroyed.
- While things are recovering in the cities, in the affected rural areas many health posts and hospitals need rebuilding from scratch, which is a huge challenge.
- The quakes leave an increased risk of landslides as the monsoon season approaches, as well as a risk of a food shortage after crops were destroyed and seeds lost.
- We must continue to pray for those in the front line of relief work and for the many churches and relief organisations working in the more remote areas and in Kathmandu.

On 25 April 2015, Nepal was struck by a 7.9 magnitude earthquake, causing utter devastation. This was followed on 12 May by a 7.3 magnitude aftershock, causing further damage and disruption. At least 8,600 people were killed and thousands more injured.

CMF has twelve members living and working in Nepal, all of whom were unharmed. We contacted several of them for their reflections on this tragic event.

What was it like?

'We had all been waiting for the "big one" as Nepal was overdue a large earthquake' said Rachel Karrach, working with United Mission to Nepal (UMN), 'Despite all the training I think we all hoped it would not happen our lifetime.' Amanda Douglas, a missionary doctor, was at church teaching the children when the quake struck: 'Suddenly there was a rumbling sound and the ground started to move violently. Children screamed and rushed for the door. I shouted at them to get down on the floor and those near me huddled together as I covered them with my arms. Plaster started falling around us.' Soon, they were told to leave and managed to get outside where the quakes continued: 'Every ten minutes or so the ground would start moving again. Each quake lasted only 30–45 seconds, but it left us all feeling we were pitching and rolling like on a ship.'

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What are the health needs?

In the aftermath, there are still significant needs. Around 600,000 homes have been damaged, and 140,000 destroyed. Many health facilities have also been damaged or destroyed. One CMF member working for a large relief agency explained the situation: 'One of the most pressing health needs is to keep the health service running and staffed with skilled personnel. Many health centres are now based in tents provided by development partners, but this won't last long. We need to move quickly to formal temporary structures and then permanent buildings. We also need to keep working hard to make sure the neediest get the help they need. Some people live several days' walk from the last road. These communities are the hardest to assist logistically.'

As the weeks go on things are improving, but there is much to be done. Liz Galpin, who works with International Nepal Fellowship (INF) told us, 'Hospitals in Kathmandu are functioning, some

with different levels of repairs needed. Patients are no longer sleeping on the ground floor or outside, but in some places clinics or even theatres and deliveries still need to be under canvas due to the damage caused. However, in the affected rural areas many health posts and hospitals need rebuilding from scratch – a huge challenge. It is clear that the rural communities are the ones in the most need due to their inaccessibility and lack of resources.

Those in less badly affected areas, such as Tansen (310km/192 miles from Kathmandu), where Rachel is based, were able to send teams out to help: 'One orthopaedic operating team went to Kathmandu and helped with treating the injured. A pair of doctors was among the first to reach the villages in Gorkha devastated by the first quake. We sent a team of paramedics to Dhading at the request of the district health officer and another of our doctors was released to help work out the best response for Christian medics as part of DRCC (Disaster Relief Christian Committee) and another joined the Samaritan's Purse team. In the acute relief phase, after the injured had been rescued the biggest need was for shelter, food and water not healthcare. The teams we sent found that they were treating minor ailments and many people were suffering from acute anxiety symptoms.'

As people struggle to get back to normal life, there is still an atmosphere of fear and uncertainty. Liz explains: 'We're now picking up life again and regaining energy – still with the occasional aftershock to throw us backwards. Rumours of worse earthquakes to come terrified many, and anxiety levels have been so high that some neighbourhoods resounded with screams each time a new aftershock came, even a month on.' Amanda echoes this experience, speaking of the continuing unease people feel, made worse by the second quake: 'Folks had started to adjust to the "new normal" around one week after the first quake. But when the second hit this seemed to be too much. Most people moved back outdoors again and settled in to stay. So much fear and exhaustion. Daily aftershocks sent people running outside shouting "aayo aayo" ("It has come!")'.

What does the future hold?

Now the aftershocks are subsiding, the work of rebuilding can begin. But this is no easy task: 'The rebuilding and relocation of several villages may take years,' Rachel tells us, and danger still lies ahead. 'The monsoon will start soon. The hillsides have been destabilised by the quakes and there is an increased risk of landslides.' 'Those without homes are in need of strong shelters,' Liz adds, 'there is likely to be a food shortage as some crops were damaged and farmers lost seed needed for planting'. Rachel explained that this may lead to a wider crisis: 'Some of the recent improvements in maternal mortality and infant mortality will be reversed in some of the worst affected districts. We expect that many families who were living on

the edge before the earthquake will now not be able afford medical treatment and we anticipate more demand for free care.'

Some working in Nepal had to return to the UK after their homes were destroyed or due to their organisations moving them for safety. Amanda has been struck by the number of people asking 'Are you going home now?' but told us, 'The idea of leaving now has not even crossed our minds. We came to live alongside, to share with, to love and (in some small way) help the people of Nepal – how could we just walk away when they are hurting so much? This is our home now, we need to serve as best we can where we are. We are not saying that we will never leave no matter what, but we know that for now and this season, this is where we are meant to be'.

How does the gospel help?

When faced with the scale of this disaster, it is not surprising that it causes people to reflect on their faith. Liz's experience forced her to depend on God: 'In the midst of the loss and devastation, I am grateful to be alive and for God's presence through this – I don't understand, but have to trust him. It is humbling.' Amanda and her family found an opportunity to follow Christ's example. She speaks of a moving incident where her husband Angus 'sat with a Nepali colleague as he wept, saying how much it meant to him and the community that we had stayed in Nepal. Walking through the pain and hardship together meant so much to him. That is what Jesus does: he is "Immanuel" – God with us. And that is what he calls us to.'

Others have been forced to reflect on the effects of the fall in our world: 'Living through a major natural disaster with your family, and then being part of the recovery effort puts you face to face with the harsh reality of human suffering. The Christian faith helps with understanding suffering in the world. Since the rebellion of the first man and woman against God we live in a resultant imperfect world, both structurally and personally. My wife encouraged me with the words: "Just remember the world was not meant to be like this". For now, we do the best we can to help and love each other faced with the reality of an imperfect world, but we hold firm to a greater hope that one day we will inherit a new world that's free from the problems of our current existence.'

How can we pray?

We must continue to pray for those in the front line of relief work and for the many churches and relief organisations as they continue to work in the more remote areas and in Kathmandu. Pray for the healing of Nepal and protection over the coming months and years as they work to rebuild. Above all, pray that the light and peace of the gospel will shine even brighter in the darkest of times.

Tom Roberts is CMF Communications Coordinator.



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