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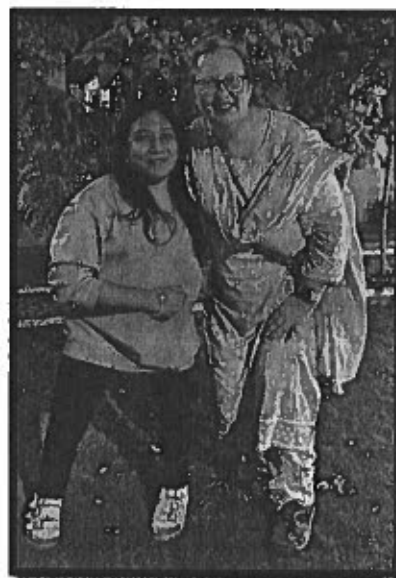
Dear Friends,

As we continue to live surrounded by so much uncertainty, I have been reflecting on my gratitude for all of the ways that I am supported by connections. I'm grateful for the opportunity to serve together with the United Mission to Nepal (UMN) and for you and my friends throughout the United Methodist Church.

I recently joined an online lecture by church historian Dr. Dana Robert on "Faithful Friendship" which emphasized why I think it is so important for us to continue the hard work of forging cross-cultural mutual relationships. In the United Mission to Nepal, we make constant use of the term partnership to express our role in bringing together community partners (individuals), local community-based organizational partners and supporting partners (donors) to forge a shared vision and action plan that is based in mutual respect for the contributions of all participants. It is not easy to change ourselves or prevailing notions, but we are seeking to overturn the traditional hierarchies found in these types of relationship. I admire the creative work of my UMN colleagues in crafting a space for partnership. I have also been challenged by Dr. Robert to think about what it means to move from partnership to friendship.

I have been reminded how Jesus both cared for his friends (he wept for Lazarus) and received support from those who became his friends such as the Samaritan woman in John 4. On a visit in Okhaldhunga earlier this year to conduct an evaluation of our project on Community-based Rehabilitation (CBR) for Persons with Disabilities, I also experienced how a network of friends came together when I got stuck in the mud.

It is always risky to travel in the rainy season (June – September), but sometimes we must forge ahead. My friend Bina Malla and I had driven eight hours from Kathmandu to Okhaldhunga in eastern Nepal and then joined two separate groups for four days out visiting participants in the CBR project at their homes in remote villages. I left some things at a room in the Mission Hospital in Okhaldhunga, packed a backpack, put on my hiking boots and got into the hospital truck that took us two hours into the hills where we came to a landslide blocking the road. The project team had arranged for a local jeep to meet us on the other side of the landslide but first we had to walk across it. Probing with my walking sticks I found the semi-hidden stones that marked the safer passage and headed out, only to notice the sole of my boot was flopping. I stretched an old plastic bag out to make some twine and tried to tie it up but after another drive and walking a bit to our second interview location both boot soles were goners. At the lunch-stop village, we looked for a local tailor who could re-sew or glue the soles without luck and my plastic twine was not going to last the whole trip since our days were a combination of driving as far as we could and then walking an hour or so to reach a home.



In November, Anjana Shrestha (left), the Project Manager for Disability Inclusive Development in Nawalparasi, and I worked on setting up her monitoring framework and survey questions for the baseline study.



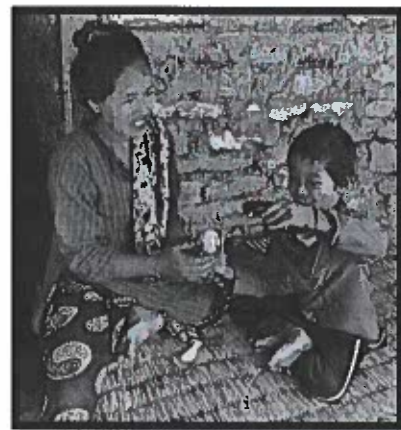
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A complicated network of friends was called into action to retrieve my everyday sneakers that I had left back at the hospital. First, I called a fellow missionary who had a key to get to where my shoes were located, and she gave them to the hospital driver who was leaving soon coming in our direction. Program Coordinator Indra Tamang was heading to Kathmandu so he took my broken boots and coordinated a hand-off between the hospital driver and a supply jeep on our side of the landslide. The supply jeep agreed to drop them off at a particular shop with whom our staff were friends. In the meantime, I continued in my flip-flops (normal for Nepalese but not for me) walking along the berms through the paddy fields and down a slippery grass slope. It was raining as we finished up our interviews about 6 pm, so the jeep I was in couldn't take the road past the shop where my shoes had hopefully appeared (skeptical me). Instead, Team Lead Ram Budhatoki took an alternative road by motorcycle (in the rain) and picked them up. We all met up at 8 pm at the field office where we were staying (ladies in the upstairs meeting room on some mats). What an astounding network of friends went the extra mile to make sure that I could more easily get around for the rest of our visit.



Pradip, a participant in the CBR project, works on motor skills with his mother at his home in Okholdunga.

But I shouldn't be surprised because, again and again, I heard stories of friendships that have been formed through this CBR project that supported new people to access needed support. Friendships formed through the advocacy groups have helped others in the community:

- to participate in local cultural events including as featured performers,
- to learn new income generating skills,
- to get access to assistive devices and learn when needed medications are back in supply,
- to learn about available government and supportive services, and
- to get registered for their "disability card" so that they are eligible for services.

And ultimately, I heard stories of dignified lives where people with disabilities are not hidden away but are participating in the community and valued as contributing members of their families. But I couldn't have heard all these stories if a multitude of people didn't first show their friendship to me in ferrying my shoes up and down the mountain side.

As Christmas approaches, we remember again the story of Mary and Joseph traveling from Nazareth to Bethlehem at a vulnerable time. We sometimes paint this as a picture of rejection because there was "no room in the inn." But I prefer to see it as a story of supportive friendship. Too often I think I must be self-sufficient and regress to transactional relationships like renting a room at the inn. But I've spent many nights in villages without an inn, where people give up their own bed for me or space is found on a meeting room floor, or even a pile of straw. It is faithful friendships that help us find space in the stable or ferry a pair of shoes or invite a neighbor to come and see this good news of what God is doing in our midst.

As I look at the list of addresses where I will be sending this letter, I see people who have opened their homes to me, fed me, prayed with me, supported, and encouraged me in so many ways. In all of this, I am also humbled to have experienced your friendship. Thank you, friend!

At Christmas we celebrate the incarnation of God in our world as Jesus, who we are blessed to call friend. As you reach out to friends in your neighborhood this season, know that your friendship has also been a blessing to me and to many, who may be strangers to you personally, here in Nepal.

Wishing you a Joyous Advent and a Merry Christmas, *Katherine*



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