

God is Faithful: From the Boardroom to Nepal

Angus Douglas felt the call from his work as a Chartered Surveyor to go as a long-term missionary in Nepal. He took on the role of Project Director for a Mission School, and under God's guidance and provision was able to raise the finance and build new school facilities even through a major earthquake. On returning to the UK he has found that the Nepali way of resolving disputes through relationships has been invaluable in his church work here.

Oh, No! What have I done!

'Oh, what have I done?!', I said to myself. My stomach churned as I dropped the application form in the post box. The application was for my wife, Helen, and I to become long-term mission workers with the Baptist Missionary Society (BMS) World Mission. This was 2010; we had three children, including a newborn, a mortgage and good jobs, but we felt God was calling us to overseas mission. It felt like a massive turning point in our lives but one about which we were confident. God had always been faithful, and we knew he always would – but it did feel like a big jump into the unknown.

Months later, after extensive interviews, presentations, references and a psychological assessment, BMS accepted us as long-term mission workers. We were required to undertake and pass a one-year residential mission study course at

their centre in Birmingham. In the time before enrolling we needed to prepare for a long period overseas, secure school places for our children in Birmingham, sell our large home, pay off our mortgage and buy another house suitable for renting out.

At that time, I was a Chartered Surveyor (general practice) working as a director for a family commercial property investment company. Previously, I had been a commercial property agent and valuer, as well as working in sales and property acquisition for serviced office providers, Regus and MWB Business Exchange. Helen is a doctor, and she was working in a local GP practice, close to our home in Penarth, South Wales. Before we met, Helen and I both felt we had a calling to work overseas, but once we were married, with a big mortgage and small children, we were never sure when we would have the chance to go. Being

married to a doctor, my assumption was that Helen would be the main visa holder, and I would be in a supportive role.

His ways are not our ways

Upon acceptance to train with BMS we did not yet know where we would be sent. During the time in Birmingham, we explored our calling together with BMS, seeking where we should serve, – considering our skills and family demographics. The initial countries suggested were in the Middle East and equatorial Africa. I always thought the phrase 'My jaw dropped!' was just an expression – but I learnt otherwise. With three small, blonde children (including two girls), the thought of living in extreme heat, in areas of political and social unrest, with strongly traditional Islamic cultures, my initial reaction was 'no'. But after reflection, prayer and wrestling over the issues, together with Helen, we came to a place of being able to say





to God, “if this is where you want us to be, we will go, but if we have a choice, we’d rather not.” Soon after this prayer, we were offered new opportunities in Nepal and Bangladesh that not only suited my skills better but seemed a better fit for us as a family.

The role I was offered in Nepal was to work in a mission school in Kathmandu, called KISC (Kathmandu International Study Centre). My initial response was “Why would I want to work in a school for international mission children? That’s not real mission!” I wanted to be pioneering on the front line, working with local communities. So, I said ‘no’. But after further encouragement and prayer, it became clear that this was a good fit for me and my family, so we accepted the placement and prepared for take-off. I am so glad we did.

We committed initially with BMS to a four-year term, and we arrived in Kathmandu in July 2012 overwhelmed by the new sights, sounds, smells, culture and people. However, once we arrived at KISC – the children as students, and Helen and I enrolled in LOP (Language

and Orientation Programme) – we all started to feel at home.

After a few months of LOP, I took on my role as Project Manager and had a big surprise. The school was located in an old four-storey, brick-built carpet factory, with some ancillary buildings around, but on a very small site. The only place for P.E. was on the roof! It was explained to me that I was to find the school a new, long-term site, ideally to purchase. My assumption was that the money was available, but I was told that was part of my job too. They had £300,000 already raised, but land to buy suitable for a school would be in the region of £4-8 million – land is extremely expensive in Kathmandu, especially inside the ring-road that circumnavigates the inner city.

I suggested to the CEO that we should look outside the ring road and consider leasing land, reducing the upfront costs. But she firmly believed that God wanted the school inside the ring road.

Wait

The CEO suggested that I take a 24-hour retreat to pray about the

situation. During that time of reading and prayer, I got a clear picture from God – probably only the second in my life. The picture was John chapter 21. The disciples had been out all-night toiling in their efforts to catch fish. When they set to come ashore after an unsuccessful night, Jesus was standing on the shore and he instructed the disciples to cast their nets out on the other side of the boat. What I believed God was saying was “Don’t toil in your own strength, but wait for me to tell where to cast your nets”. So, rather than toil in my own efforts to find land and funding, I felt it was time to wait for direction on when to cast our nets and where.

I took back this message to the leadership and Board of the organisation, that we needed to wait. It was my first year in the role. I am being financially supported by many faithful donors and a mission organisation, and I am going to tell everyone that we wait for me to do my job. I felt the pressure (often self-inflicted) to perform amazing tasks and activities in the field and for God, especially as a fully signed up missionary, but I had to be obedient to God.

They heard what I said and agreed that it was a clear direction from God. We wait! – and it is just as well we did, because the following years held so many events, good and bad, that we wouldn't have had the capacity to complete a school development.

One project that I was able to undertake, was to manage the construction of a two-acre site adjacent to the school to provide sports facilities, parking and an additional classroom. A student's parent was an architect, who also advised UNESCO, and he designed the site and building, and ensured that they were earthquake proof. A covered basketball court, an astro-football pitch, a Design & Technology classroom and a car-park were built, and it was a great blessing to have a solution to the serious lack of space in a short space of time.

During construction I had a major issue with the standard of the basketball court. It was uneven and had holes in it. When I discussed it with the builder, he was adamant that this is acceptable and that's what he quoted for. In my mind, this was unacceptable, and as I couldn't come to an agreement with the builders, I proposed the only option was legal action through courts.

In one of my previous roles managing a commercial property investment portfolio, a tenant of ours had not paid the rent, even after several reminders. My senior colleague pushed for us to take them to court; however, I suggested that I deal with it directly on the telephone. After chatting through their problems and challenges they

were facing with their business, we were able to agree a restructure of the payment schedule that worked better for their business. They eventually settled the outstanding amount and kept up to date on rental payments. My colleague reflected how the relational approach was more effective and probably helped keep the tenant in business. In the Nepali contract however, I felt less equipped with the relational approach and could only think of court as being a reasonable solution.

On discussing this approach with my colleague, and cultural tutor, Khim Kandel, he laughed. He said it would take about ten years to take it through the courts, and frankly that's not how things are done in Nepal. I was instructed that we should sit with the builders, have chia, and come to an agreement. Nepal is such a relational community, and everything should be able to be resolved over chia. Khim regularly reminded me that relationship comes first.

Khim sat with me as we met with the builders and discussed a solution. We had to pay a bit more money, but they agreed to do the surface to our exact specifications. Because we had resolved the issue over chia, my relationship with the builder became very close and he often went over and above what was required, because of the relationship.

God knows what's coming

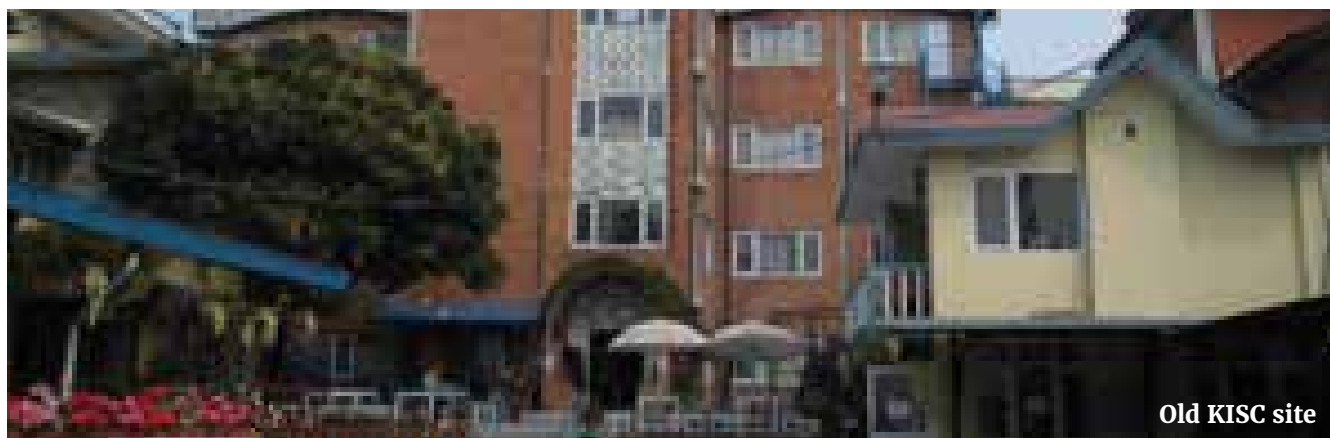
Soon after the opening of the sports site, there was a major breakdown in

the school leadership. A perfect storm of events led to the CEO, Chair of the Board, Head of Secondary, and Head of Primary leaving the school. There was a lot of hurt, mistrust, accusations, and threats, and it was pulling school community apart. Staff were taking sides, taking stands based on very little information and misunderstandings, and the very existence of KISC was hanging by a thread.

Following the departure of the leadership, I was invited to take on a role as a director to take responsibility for the non-academic operation of the school, along with a fellow BMS Mission Worker, Dan Parnell, who would be responsible for the academic side of the school, and our Nepali colleague, Khim Kandel, who would be responsible for government relations and the operation of the Nepali teacher training programme, EQUIP. Having a leadership of three Directors, with equal authority, is not standard practice, but worked so well in this context. We all had different strengths and abilities, we complemented each other so well, we also connected with different parts of the community, and could draw alongside the whole make-up of the community – and we became, and still are, very good friends.

Starting the new academic year, we were concerned how the community would react to the new leadership in the aftermath of the changes. Remarkably, God provided another staff member just at the right time.

An Australian accountant was due to start in the new academic year at KISC,





to help in our finance department. He was coming with his wife who was also keen to help. She wasn't a teacher, but we were told that she worked in the church, and we weren't sure where she could be placed, so we'd sort that out when she arrived. It turns out that she is a counsellor within the church community specialising in reconciliation. We were blown away – it was clear that God knew what was going to happen well before the events, and he provided what we needed, when we needed it!

A couple of weeks into the new year, I remember seeing two colleagues who had been strong opponents in the previous year due to the troubles, but they were having lunch together and laughing – it was then that I knew we were going to be alright. God was in this, and he was reconciling relationships and building something stronger.

To ensure similar events didn't happen again, we worked a lot on strengthening the governance, policies and accountability, and this was the first step in making a foundation for the future stronger, but that's a different story.

God provides

In Spring 2015, a neighbouring landowner approached KISC to offer their building to rent. I viewed the property and whilst it was adjacent to our sports site and offered good space, we declined the opportunity as we really didn't need extra space. Although we didn't realise it at the time, this property offer was again God's provision, even before we needed it.

At around midday on April 24th 2015 our family was worshipping with our Nepali church community, that met at that time in a small tin roofed building. Suddenly a huge roaring noise started – like a jet plane taking off from the roof above, then the whole building began to shake as a 7.9 earthquake struck Nepal, its epicentre just 50km from Kathmandu. It was a memory that will live with me for the rest of my life.

After waiting four hours at church for the aftershocks to calm, we went to our flat to quickly grab some supplies – food, bedding and our emergency grab bags – before setting up our family's makeshift sleeping spot on the covered basketball site at KISC, the planned rendezvous site following such an event. In the coming days approximately 300 displaced people from the school and local community settled onto the earthquake proof, covered basketball facility. Running a displaced people camp was not something I had been trained to do, but the community came together, and we learnt quickly how to manage so many people living in close proximity.

The earthquake damaged the KISC staff accommodation building, making it unsafe to occupy. Immediately I recalled the neighbouring building that I had viewed a few weeks earlier. We approached the landlord and were able to lease it and move in very quickly. It felt to me that God had provided what we needed before we needed it – the earthquake wasn't a surprise to him, and he ensured that we had what we needed. God doesn't take us from the storm, but he does promise to be with us in the middle of it.

A year or two later, the school was served notice to vacate the basketball and sports site. The school community was very sad to lose this facility, but we recognised that it had been God's amazing provision just when we had really needed it. This loss of the sports site was unsettling for the whole community, and it seemed to us, as leadership, that there was a great need for a new school site and maybe the time was right to start casting our nets.

“Cast your net in Thecho”

KISC is owned by a Nepali Christian NGO (charity) called HDCS, which was established by the Nepali churches. The director of HDCS was also involved with several other ministries including a Nepali school, Somang Academy in the town of Thecho. It had a large site but was struggling financially. HDCS recognised how both schools could support one another, one needing land and the other finances. It really seemed that God was providing the much-needed site. KISC took a long-term lease on the land, with the rental income ensuring the future security of Somang Academy.

Now that KISC had secured land, plans were drawn up for a school. The initial plans were for a large new building, estimated to cost around £2.5 million. Whilst significantly cheaper than buying and developing a site, at that stage we only had about £500,000. We knew that God was able to provide and so we waited. During this time, I heard that Somang Academy were not happy with the building design, feeling it was too big and imposing. Initially



I felt frustrated and disappointed, but in that moment, it was like I could see how the layout should be. Rather than constructing a whole new building, a development could be done using the existing building if we could redraw the current rented boundaries. The new plan was to earthquake proof and renovate the existing buildings, as well as construct a new secondary block. The project cost was going to be £1.3 million, and we were nearly half-way there. Unfortunately, the lease on our existing building expired in one year's time, and they didn't want to renew.


I had been told that a project like this would take about two years in Nepal, but we had less than a year left on our existing property lease. By this time, we had a great relationship with our architect, and we were treated as family by the builders who had built our basketball court, and they were determined to make it happen. I was so glad to have had that cup of chia with the builders to resolve our issues because, amazingly, the building was ready for us to move into before the lease expired on our old site – admittedly, there was still a lot of finishing off to do, but the whole school was open, and we worked alongside the builders, who at times had shifts working on site 20 hours a day.

With the builders, I would agree stages of construction as and when

we got money in, and we had around £1 million raised, partly through donations (about 10%) but also through the relocation of many mission families from India, due to visa restrictions imposed by the Indian government. This massive influx of income helped to pay off a lot of the bills. I was saddened when the builder came to me with the final bill that was £200,000 more than we had agreed – and I hadn't authorised the work. "You needed it, so we did it", I was told. "I can't pay you – or at least not for a while!". We agreed a two year pay-off period. Again, I was in awe of God's provision, and this was paid off in six months!

Our eleven years in Nepal were incredibly fulfilling but also full of challenges. We knew God had called us there and that he had promised to always be with us, even in the storms of life (and earthquakes!). His provision of staff, finances and buildings at the right time was confirmation to me that he knows the future, and he will provide what is needed for the completion of his purposes. I wanted to say 'no' to being a part of this story of God's faithfulness, but even after a few months in Nepal, I knew this was where God wanted me to be – and there is no better place to be than that!

Reflecting on my time in Nepal and how well I was in preparing for my time there, I felt my time in church leadership equipped me most for working in a relational culture, more so than my time in business. When I worked in sales, one of the directors would describe the sales team as hammers or farmers. A hammer would get the deal done no matter the cost to the relationship and move on to the next. A farmer was someone who would cultivate a relationship and have an ongoing business relationship. I was a 'farmer' and this helped too in Church leadership which requires a very relational approach to get things done – it is a body of people, with different expectations and approaches, and finding a common direction can be challenging.

Returning to the UK, I am finding my experience of working in a relational culture invaluable in my current role, and I am applying a more relational approach in my work; and I regularly remember Khim's advice that 'relationship is key'. And I'll add to this that relationship with God is primary. As it says in Mark 12 v 30–31 "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength". The second is this: "Love your neighbour as yourself". There is no commandment greater than these.' 



Angus Douglas was a Chartered Surveyor for 20 years, working in agency and investment, before moving into the serviced office sector. He then worked for BMS World Mission as a mission worker in Nepal for 11 years, seconded to Kathmandu International Study Centre and International Nepal Fellowship in leadership roles. He is currently Director of Donor Ministries with Samaritan's Purse International.