

Prayer letter No. 7: Spring 2012

Spring vacation update



图表 1 Noodle-making school in Gansu province

I'm happy to report that all my plans for the Spring vacation worked out fine! Angela, my teaching partner, and I left Jining on 5 January for an Amity field trip in Lanzhou, Gansu province, North-West China, from 7-10 January; it was a 20-hour train journey but quite comfortable (we had sleeper bunks). We visited many agricultural projects undertaken by Amity in the region, which really helped to give a sense of the other things that Amity does. There was bridge-building, irrigation, assistance with seed and crop storage, micro-credit, and even a noodle-making school! (The noodle-making training enables people to gain a qualification and then go on to employment elsewhere. Amity no longer funds



图表 2 A countryside mosque in Gansu

that project, but it has been taken over by other funders.) What struck us during our visit was how many mosques we saw in the countryside, as there is a large Muslim

population in that region. After that, I went on to Chengdu, Sichuan province, in South-West China, to see the pandas! I then flew on to Shenzhen (on mainland China close to Hong Kong), and then crossed



图表 3 With a panda in Chengdu



图表 4 At the war grave of my great-uncle, Robert Kerfoot, who died in Hong Kong in 1941

the border into Hong Kong. My Hong Kong Chinese Amity colleagues, **Anthony** and **Anne**, were very kind and showed me around Hong Kong. With Anthony I attended a church service at Hong Kong cathedral, which I really appreciated as it is the location where my great-grandfather, James Kerfoot, married his second wife. We then managed to find and visit the war graves, where my great-uncle is buried. After a few days in Hong Kong I flew on to Taiwan – to stay with my friend **Min-Hua Jen**, whom I met while working at the University of Bristol. After a few days with her family, we both flew back via Hong Kong to Heathrow. I spent 3 weeks in Bristol and one week with my family in Cheshire before returning to China in the third week of February.

Semester 2

We are still working on the 'winter timetable' (work starting at 8 am), but this term I have more classes, including two new First Year Business English classes. I have to work hard to try to ensure that the pace of the lessons is appropriate for these students, as many of them have had very little exposure to Oral English in the past.

Bereavement

On the same day, 9 March 2012, two people precious to



me died – Tanja, aged 22, in Germany, and my cat, Jasmine, in the UK. Both died suddenly and unexpectedly. Tanja had suffered from leukaemia since the age of 10 and experienced a constant roller-coaster of cure (including bone marrow

transplant) and relapse. The last few years saw her approaching a normal life; she went to the University of Cologne and was in her second year of studying Biology when she died. I had known her since she was 3 years old and to me she was like another god-daughter; I was privileged to be invited to her confirmation service about 8 years ago.

Bereavement is never easy, but it is harder when one is away from family and friends. As I struggle with my grief in a lonely environment I am reminded of the experience of a missionary family in Mongolia, as told in their book, [There's a sheep in my bathtub](#) by Brian and Mollyanne Hogan. They too experienced bereavement far from home, but felt called to stay in the country while grieving rather than returning to their native USA for comfort and support from family and friends. It was only much later that they learnt how their witness in their time of suffering had been a profound challenge and blessing to the Mongolian believers. I pray that I may witness to those around me through this dark time, and that I may grow in God's likeness as I do so. One thing is certain: in dark times, we look for God more urgently than we do

in 'peace' time.

The significance of songs, hymns, internet broadcasts – and grandmothers...

My oldest surviving possession is a maroon, hardbacked book which my father bought for me, at my request, when I was seven. It is entitled 'Hymns and Prayers for Use in Schools'. I had just started to play the recorder and loved playing the hymn tunes that we sang at school and Sunday School. My grandmother, who was looking after us at the time because our mother was in hospital for a few months with a serious illness, loved the hymns just as I did, and we discussed ones that we liked best. My return home from school was invariably heralded by the squeaking sound of my recorder as I walked down the road. Despite the absence of my mother, whom we could only visit at weekends due to the danger to us from her radiotherapy treatment, I remember it being a very happy time; my father and his parents did well to protect me from their anxieties, and I remained happy and unworried.

Those of you who have ever read *Heidi*, by Johanna Spyri, or seen one of the many movies of the same name, may remember the character of the blind grandmother. She was anxious that her grandson, Peter, learn to read, as she longed to hear the words of hymns again and wanted him to read them to her. Hymns have become much more important to me here in China than they have been in recent years. I can access programmes such as the *Daily Service* and the *Act of Worship* via the BBC's online services; I also use two websites that contain the printed lyrics and audio tunes of hymns:

www.hymnswithoutwords.com/hymns and www.billysloan.co.songs

I think that hymns are becoming important to me because they are a way of expressing my relationship with God. After Tanja's death I spent a lot of time singing hymns and reading the Bible, particularly during her funeral (I wasn't able to be there, but worked out the time difference so that I could 'be there in Spirit' at the appropriate time). My church in Bristol also uploads sermon talks to their website as well as providing these on CD, and I have been grateful to have had access to these during my time in China. My favourite 'snub to

the Devil' when we are visited with the frustrations of an electricity cut is to put on a Christchurch sermon CD on my laptop!

Future plans

I don't have any, as such... but that's OK. I'm leaving Jining in July of this year and may take the opportunity to visit some more places in China before returning to the UK (I am fortunate that my residence permit doesn't run out until September). I'll then return to my home in Bristol and start looking for work. I envisage that I'll be doing temporary secretarial work initially, while I try to work out what the next step should be.

Having made a career change (remember that I worked in UK Higher Education administration for the entirety of my working life, 22 years, until 2010) I will need to put careful thought into what job I should seek to do next. I need to discern what God's plans for me are. I was blessed when, in 2009/10, my path seemed very clear: *apply to Amity, give up work, retrain as a TEFL teacher and spend 2 years in China!* Please pray that I will have patience to wait for God's timing for the next stage of my working life and sense His direction through prayer, the counsel of others and my own research.

Prayer requests

To give thanks for

Hunter, a young teacher suffering from a very serious illness. He is making some progress and hopes to be back at work in May.

An increased love for God and desire to be closer to Him – an answer to prayer from my last newsletter! God has indeed blessed me through your prayers and is also using bereavement to draw me closer to Him too.

The friends who have rallied round to support me in my bereavement, particularly from my church in Bristol.

Safety during traveling in the Spring vacation – thank you!

To pray for

Ellie, a strong believer but who, perhaps due to mental illness, has completely cut herself off from family and friends. We are deeply concerned for her welfare.

Ant, a teacher struggling with depression and

unhappiness at work and seeking direction in his professional life

Lee, an older gentleman who has recently undergone surgery for a life-threatening illness

Mac, the father of an Amity Teacher who recently had to spend time in hospital and is still recovering

The skill to make students of all abilities feel included in every lesson

For continued skill and inspiration in preparing lectures for Staff Development. Towards the end of our time here, this becomes more difficult, as Angela and I have already done the 'easier' topics and are thus spending a lot of time researching and preparing topics that are more out of our comfort zone

The ability to cherish and use wisely the time I have left in Jining, and the patience to wait for God's direction on my future path in His good time



图表 7 Trying to play the [erhu](#), a traditional Chinese instrument

Basic info:

- I'm a TEFL (Teaching English as a Foreign Language) teacher in a Teacher Training College in northern China (the province is called Inner Mongolia, which borders the country of Mongolia)
- I'm working on behalf of the [Amity Foundation](#), a Chinese Christian NGO, and was sent from the UK by [BIATG](#) (British and Irish Amity Teachers group), which comes under the umbrella organization [CTBI](#) (Christians Together in Britain and Ireland)
- I'm supported by my local church, [Christchurch, Clifton](#), (in Bristol, UK) and funded through a combination of BIATG, Amity, the college in which I work, and my church
- I have been here since August 2010 and will return to the UK in the summer of 2012