

Dear all,

December 2013

So how *did* the Wise Men get to Bethlehem?
Clearly the makers of our new nativity set were afforded an insight into that first Christmas that the gospel writers missed out on! Definitely no room at the inn for him...



This Christmas we're spending our days off at home in Blantyre after a busy term. I'm enjoying the rest as it has been really busy at times. Those of you who follow the [Presbyterian Church in Ireland Prayerline](#) updates will know that some specialists employed by the College of Medicine (University) have been in dispute with the Ministry of Health over 'out-of-hours' pay. As a result they began a work to rule in October, leaving a hole in our clinical rotas that has left me (as head of department) and several of my colleagues doing a lot of extra cover. Although I agree with the cause, I disagree with the action taken and have made my position clear. Unsurprisingly it's been a difficult time, but at least our department has maintained good relationships between colleagues who've disagreed on the issue. Sadly no end in sight...

Malawi has been in the grip of a much larger crisis in the last few months. The [Cashgate affair \(good article in the Financial Times\)](#) involving the theft of billions of kwacha has dominated the headlines. Consequently most of the major overseas donors (including the UK) have suspended direct government aid for the foreseeable future, and Malawi is likely to face significant economic problems in the next few months. Corruption is nothing new in Malawi, but the scale discovered in this affair has shocked the nation and led many to question how far gospel ethics have really penetrated business and civil society. The president [Joyce Banda](#) got a great reception in South Africa for her speech at President Mandela's funeral, but her leadership at home is being called into question. Elections are due in May 2014.



The paediatric department has had some more favourable press in the last few weeks in both the [Independent](#) (on HIV/AIDS) and [Financial Times](#) (nice video about child cancer care). In the midst of a lot of disappointment and disagreement, it's good to see the faithful work of our team being recognised. My 'Movember in Malawi' was an attempt to raise both morale and some money. Everyone who laughed had to pay something – not surprisingly we did well! Thanks to all who contributed.

Another significant encouragement was the visit in October by Frank and Claire Sellar from Bloomfield Presbyterian Church in Belfast. Claire worked in the college physio



department. Frank was the main speaker at the Christian Medical Fellowship day conference. It was a great day and Sara and I really enjoyed the fellowship and teaching. We hope it will lead to more CMF activities in the New Year.



'One-Stop-Centres' have now been incorporated into the Ministry of Health national plans. It's anticipated that a total of 4 large centres in central hospitals and 23 smaller ones in district hospitals will be established across Malawi over the next few years. The 3 other larger buildings in Zomba, Lilongwe and Mzuzu are either complete or nearly complete. In December members of our Blantyre team helped to

lead the first roll-out training involving staff from Zomba and Mulanje. This really is a significant step for us and we thank the Lord for his faithfulness, doing more than 'we asked or imagined' (Eph 3:20) could happen. The next phase is to train a cadre of 'expert trainers' in February who can continue the roll-out over the year.

As a family we are all well. Grace was baptised in October and Ben safely completed his Gold Duke of Edinburgh trip up Mulanje in December. Sara and I are very thankful for all of you who have read this and prayed for us this year. Thank you to the PWs and others who sent us cards over Christmas time. Here are some things we'd like you to pray for over the next few months:



- Neil has a trip to Belfast for a university conference in February. Pray for the family left behind in Blantyre, and that the university talks will go well. Neil will also be speaking in 2 churches.
- Pray for the planning of the PCI [Ignite team](#) who are coming to Blantyre in April. A team of health professionals will visit Blantyre and Mulanje and get a chance to see what we *really* get up to! Click on the link if you want to know more or apply to come.
- Pray for a just and speedy resolution of the dispute between the Ministry of Health and College of Medicine staff, and for stamina for those of us trying to plug the gaps.
- Give thanks for the first roll-out training, and pray that the trainings planned over the next year will go well. Pray that the right people (i.e. those with a commitment to care for abused children and women) will be trained.
- Pray for the ongoing work of Christian Medical Fellowship. It is good to see Christian medical students become compassionate and diligent Christian doctors!

Happy Christmas and best wishes for 2014.

Neil, Sara, Ben and Grace