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Dear friends

Christmas 2009 is approaching fast and furiously, and we are coming to the end of an eventful and formative (polite form for 'difficult') year. To sum up succinctly: Church life has been a challenge; family life also!

Before the summer break we had a church weekend away, and those who came greatly benefited from Charlie Cleverly (rector of St Aldate's, Oxford and former Crosslinks mission partner) who came to speak. It was a good way to finish the academic year and we really sensed the presence of God with us. It was also the moment for us all to say goodbye to **Ben and Rachel Tanner**, who had been with us for the whole year (on a Crosslinks placement). It was a wonderful encouragement to have them with us – they made a real impression on areas of church ministry, particularly the youth group and website...



Manu, who joined us in September

Since the summer, we feel the church has moved forward in a number of ways:

- The '**conseil**' (PCC) is stronger than ever, with a positive team in place, committed and spiritually discerning.
- In September, **Manu** (Emmanuel) joined us to take responsibility (amongst other things) for the youth ministry and for the development of worship. He is a great asset and has been able to pick up naturally with the youth from where Ben and Rachel left off.
- From the 7th to 13th **September** we welcomed a team from England (Oxford, Leeds and Cambridge) for a week of mission entitled '*Partager la joie – partager la foi*'. They were generous, joyful and resourceful and we are so thankful for all they achieved, not just by doing things but mainly by their inspirational presence. We feel that a significant work was done through the connections that were made between our guests and the host families. We hope that the friendships that were created during that week will continue to grow and bear fruit...
- For the last 3½ months we have had a wonderful helper called **Alice** with us. She has got stuck in with the children's work, the youth group, administrative tasks and the family. In a short time she has managed to befriend the old folk and the young people. She has been a precious helper for Uta and she will be greatly missed as she leaves us just before Christmas.



Week of mission

Alongside these encouragements, the week of mission also revealed afresh to us the fear that the French have about talking about their faith, never mind sharing it. This is a significant and ongoing challenge for the church (as it is for the Christian witness in general in this country) which inevitably limits vision for the mission of the church...

At the same time, since September, we have been keenly aware of the spiritual battle that is being fought here. We have struggled to get any momentum going at the start of the new academic year. A number of families have stopped coming or are coming less regularly. Numbers at services and for other events have been down and there has been a general feel of discouragement hanging over the community. We have been hit by a number of major pastoral issues/crises that have tested the church and us personally. Please pray with us that, as a church and as a family, we may break through this cloud and come out at the other end on "higher ground". Thank you.



Alice with Amélie

On a different note, in **October** Andy led another youth weekend at Pierrefonds, an annual regional event. A record number of 250 teenagers attended, creating problems in terms of space! For the first time, it not only touched reformed church circles, but also involved teenagers from Lutheran, Anglican and free evangelical churches. Andy and his team have become victims of their own success... The Lord definitely blessed this weekend. It's a big encouragement and source of thankfulness.



Andy with student pastors in Congo

In **November** Andy spent 2 weeks in the Congo (Brazzaville) where he taught at the theological faculty on Calvin and the Reformation, and its relevance to us today. It was an extremely interesting and rich time for him (and the students I dare say). We are grateful that he was able to extend his stay to spend a few precious days with his brothers Tim and Mark (and Mark's family), who are both teachers at a Christian school in Kenya.

This year's **Christmas** play is called "Le Noël du Père Noël" – all about Father Christmas becoming a Christian! For details to fire your prayers about this and other events, do check out the church website (www.erfmantes.org) or our blog (<http://andybuckler.blogspot.fr/>). As a family, we are really looking forward to a much needed break just after Christmas.

Family news

What can we say? We have about the same joys and struggles as most families with babies, young children and pre-adolescents. **Thomas** started secondary school in September and is doing well. The change of school has had a very positive impact on him and he is (at last) making friends. It is a great relief for us to see him come out of himself. **Samuel** is in his last year of primary school and we need to think about where he will go next. He has definitely entered pre-adolescence. Say no more. **Daniel** is doing his best at school and has ups and downs. School will never be his favourite activity but he has the most amazing imagination. Give him rubber bands and cello tape and he will create all sorts of wonders for you... **Lois** is growing up fast. She is still trying to find her place in the family. She has greatly benefited from Alice's patience and joyful character. Favourite pastime: colouring and annoying her brothers. **Amélie** (last but by no means least) is also growing up fast (there must be something in the water...) She's a joyful character, chatty and funny. If you want to know what she looks like, dig out an old photo of Daniel..

With much love to you all and our thanks for your support,

Andy & Uta