

God's call prompted us to create retreat

IT was a huge leap of faith – but it wasn't the first time Evelyn and Graeme Stewart had heard God's call to go abroad.

The couple, from St John's Church in Locks Heath, have given up their jobs, sold their house and spent their life savings renovating a French farmhouse. It opens as a Christian retreat centre this summer. They felt God prompting them to set up La Grande Connais Christian Centre in Brittany as a place of refuge for individuals, couples, Christian and non-Christian groups. It will give them a chance to serve and minister to those in need.

They felt a similar call 10 years ago, when they went to Nepal with their three children. They served God with a healthcare and development charity there for three years. Yet there was nothing in their background to suggest any kind of wanderlust.

Graeme attended daily worship at boarding school and Evelyn grew up going to Sunday School and was confirmed at 13. But they both stopped going to church as teenagers and only returned in 1986 after their third child was born. A vicar asked Graeme, who worked for Nat West Bank, to talk to wedding couples about finances, and it prompted them to come to church again.

In 1987, they started going to St John's, Locks Heath, where their faith grew as they joined a home group and absorbed the church's teaching on discipleship.

Evelyn, 46, said: "It hit home one day in Tesco's when I saw a mother whose child was distressed and getting agitated. As I reached up for a box of cornflakes, I found myself asking God to give them peace. I stopped in my tracks, as I suddenly realised that I did that quite a lot, and that I did have that relationship with God that the church was always talking about!"

"We were very settled before we went to Nepal. I was working in a hospital and Graeme had been working for the bank for 23 years. We had three children aged 10, 11 and 13 and a lovely home in Titchfield. But we felt a 'stirring' from God and eventually knew that he was calling us to Nepal. We actually had to raise £15,000 a

Christian centre is now open for visitors



The Christian centre is near the village of St Georges de Reintembault on the border of Normandy and Brittany

THE Stewarts welcomed their first paying guests – who are from New Zealand – to their Christian centre last month.

The renovated farmhouse, near the village of St Georges de Reintembault on the border of Normandy and Brittany, can take up to 17 guests at a time. And Graeme and Evelyn are expecting a variety of different visitors.

"From September until Easter each year, we'd like individuals, couples and small groups – both clergy and laity – to come here for retreat," said Evelyn. "Then in the main summer season, we'd expect Alpha groups, house groups, choirs, prayer groups and youth groups. We're also happy to take non-Christian groups – art groups, camera clubs, RSPB groups and so on – as we don't

feel God has called us to work exclusively with Christians."

The couple have created a meeting room overlooking the garden that people can use for prayer, worship or seminars. They are also happy to help lead sessions for groups, partly to give the regular group leaders some time off. The house is also in an acre and a half of garden and is surrounded by fields.

"It is a truly beautiful spot, and all you can hear outside are the birds," said Evelyn. "We love the fact that we might have a quiet prayer group one week and a noisy youth group the next – it's the kind of place that could cater for both."

For details, see www.christianbreaks.com or ring them on 0033 02 99 97 00 16.

year in order to go, which made us very dependent on God."

Graeme worked as the Kathmandu representative for the International Nepal Fellowship, a Christian healthcare and development charity. His job involved

wanted to do some kind of charity work, but couldn't find anything. I worked for a finance broker for 18 months, as a mortgage broker for a firm that then folded, and in a tele-sales centre, but I was unemployed for long periods of time."

car crashes and there were around 20 other distressing and significant things that happened that made it difficult.

"We didn't regret our time in Nepal, but if I'd known what the next seven years was going to be like, I wouldn't have put our family through it. I'm amazed our faith came through undamaged. In fact, if anything, it got stronger – and that must have been God's handiwork, because it wasn't ours! And we wouldn't have survived without the prayer and fellowship of our family and friends at St John's."

The couple had talked about going to France before they decided to go to Nepal. They had thought about running a gite business. But they realised that simply welcoming guests to their cottage and handing over keys wouldn't be enough.

my faith

Evelyn and Graeme Stewart (pictured below) sunk their life savings into a Brittany farmhouse and bought a one-way ticket to France because they felt God calling them to ministry

liaising with the government, sorting out official papers and helping find resources for colleagues working with victims of leprosy and TB. Evelyn did some work with street children and some with ex-patriot youngsters. And it turned out to be a great three years for family bonding – no TV, little water and frequent power cuts meant plenty of family quizzes and games.

St John's Church had supported them in prayer, financially and by sending tapes of church services while they were in Kathmandu. So when they returned to the UK, it felt like coming home. The children re-entered the education system and settled socially. But Graeme and Evelyn found things more difficult.

Graeme, now 52, said: "I

And Evelyn said: "The sheer materialism of people in the UK distressed us. I'd get agitated when the neighbours watered their garden because water is so precious in Asia. Both our fathers died of cancer, our children were involved in a series of



They wanted to be involved in Christian ministry.

So they gave up their jobs and booked a one-way ticket to France. They decided to stay as long as it took to find the right place to turn into a Christian centre. In fact, they found the farmhouse on the first day they were looking for property! They moved permanently last August. Since then, they have been renovating constantly.

"We took it right back to the timber and the stonework, even dragging mortar out of the stonework to rebuild it," said Evelyn. "We have missed our Easter deadline to open and our bank balance is getting smaller while the bills get bigger, so that's a challenge to our faith."

"The other thing that has been difficult is that it is a 100-mile round trip to our nearest English-speaking church. We really consider ourselves to be still part of St John's and we visit the church whenever we're in the UK."

"We don't have many bookings this summer but we have a number of enquiries for next year. So the challenge for us is surviving this year!"