

Friends of CRS

Newsletter April 2020



Bird's eye view of the classroom at Bibibagan

The attention of everyone is presently dominated by the global COVID-19 pandemic, and our first article is the appeal to support the relief operation made necessary by the lockdown. But we also want to share the positive news this Eastertide about recent developments at different CRS projects, and the wonderful work of CRS as seen through the eyes of a number of recent visitors.

Cathedral Relief Service (CRS) in Kolkata supports poor and marginalised people in the city's slums and rural villages further afield through education, health and empowerment programmes, and special projects.

COVID-19 crisis – Urgent Appeal

*From the Right Reverend Paritosh Canning, Bishop of Calcutta,
Mr Rig David, Director of the Cathedral Relief Service, and
the Trustees of the UK Friends of CRS*

The Government lockdown in India, aimed at mitigating the spread of coronavirus, will have a devastating effect on those living in poverty in Kolkata's slums and the surrounding rural districts.

Most people live from hand to mouth, earning meagre incomes by doing menial jobs or running small businesses such as tea stands. With these sources of income removed, whole families who are already living below the poverty line and in dire need, will be left without any livelihood, and the means to fend for themselves. In such circumstances, it is particularly the women and children in the communities who are most at risk.

CRS is working with the Diocese on a plan for the distribution of basic aid to those most in need in the 12 city slum areas in which CRS is engaged, and in the 36 Diocesan pastorates (parishes).

The intention is to bring relief to 1,600 families (about 8,000 people in all) by distributing basic medical supplies and staple foods (such as rice, lentils, sugar, milk, and oil).

CRS will use their own vehicles to distribute in the slum area, and distribution in the pastorates will be undertaken from the churches by the clergy and pastorate communities.

While it will not be possible to implement the aid programme until the government lockdown ends, CRS and the Diocese urgently need to raise funds now to be ready to move when able to do so. The budget for the programme is approximately £11,500.

Thank you very much for your support.

For different ways to donate from the UK via the Friends of CRS please visit
<http://www.cathedralreliefservice.net/donate/uk/>

How your support makes a difference

Several years ago, Ela Nag enrolled in the one-year Beauty Care training program at Dum Dum. The curriculum equips students with skills for seeking employment in the beauty care business, including massage, make-up, care of different skin types, and Bengali bridal preparation.

After completing the course Ela established a beauty parlour in her home as a means to support her family income and now gives employment opportunities to others. She has also found work in the local film industry as a make up artist.



A Bishop and an Archbishop visit CRS

Last summer, Kolkata welcomed a new Bishop: the Right Reverend Paritosh Canning.

His role includes acting as Chairman of CRS and he began his tenure with a visit to the projects at G B Lane and Hastings, as well as the Nari Dana production centre.

At the end of September Bishop Canning made a day trip to see some of the work of CRS in rural areas, including the village of Mahamaya, where building work on the expansion was almost complete.



Bishop Canning meeting women at Nari Dana



Rig presenting the Archbishop and his wife with stoles embroidered by women from Nari Dana

On 08 September 2019, CRS was greatly honoured by a visit from the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Most Reverend Justin Welby, who was in Kolkata during a tour of India.

After giving a message during the Sunday service at St Paul's Cathedral, the Archbishop and his wife, Caroline, toured the cathedral grounds where the educational and social service activities of the diocese were on show.

It was a great privilege for the CRS Director, Rig David, to be personally introduced to the Archbishop and his wife and have the opportunity to explain the work of CRS.

New Trustees for UK Friends

In 2019, the UK Friends of CRS welcomed two new Trustees to the team:

- Dr Alison Brown is Deputy Director of Education for Derby Diocese. She has been involved in organising the links between schools in Derbyshire and Kolkata since 2015.
- John Forster was a Senior Manager in the automotive industry until his retirement in 2018. He became a Trustee in 2019 and focuses on supporting Nari Dana.

Latest developments at Nari Dana

By John Forster, Trustee, UK Friends of CRS

Steps into Nari Dana

For women interested in working at Nari Dana, the first step is to take a 12 month course in tailoring and embroidery at one of CRS's centres. This programme is called Ashakiran and, in 2019/20, there are 214 women enrolled for this training.

The coursework is evaluated by an external organization and those that achieve the pass mark graduate and qualify to work at Nari Dana.

This opens up the option of additional training on professional electrically powered sewing machines located at central the Nari Dana production centre.



Training for women at the CRS centre at Bibibagan

Easier transport arrangements

In a city as large and busy as Kolkata, simply getting around can be time consuming and exhausting. Many of the women were experiencing difficulties in travelling to the central Nari Dana production centre.

Rather than give each woman a small allowance for transport, the money has been pooled into providing a vehicle to collect them from the CRS centre in their neighborhood.

The vehicle serves a different location each day giving as many women as possible the advantage of transport for at least one day per week. This has increased the regularity of attendance.



The new display area in Bishop's House

New display area

On touring the activities of diocesan organisations at the start of his tenure last summer, Kolkata's new bishop was very impressed by Nari Dana.

He generously made space in Bishop's House, his official residence just across from St Paul's Cathedral, for an additional production centre and a small area fitted out with shelves to display products and serve as a sales outlet.

With many national and international visitors and dignitaries passing through Bishop's House this is a great way place to showcase Nari Dana.

New Production Manager

There's a new member of staff at Nari Dana: Mr Sankar Das. Sankar is a Master Weaver who ran a small family weaving business for ten years before being appointed as the production manager of a business unit in Murshidabad that manufactured woven and sewn products for export. It employed 48 women, many of whom were trafficked into prostitution in Kolkata.

The Murshidabad centre closed in 2019 as part of a business restructuring but Janet Rogers, who originally set up the venture, recommended Sankar to CRS.

Sankar will be seeking to improve quality and establish systems for a more professional operation at Nari Dana. One important step was to develop a system for recording the time each woman works and her transport costs. This is used to generate a weekly summary that can be signed and confirmed to allow speedy processing and payment.

Currently the production of items at Nari Dana focuses on sewing and embroidery, but there are plans for Sankar to introduce weaving training and a new line of woven products. To this end, there are plans to purchase some of the looms and equipment from the Murshidabad business.



Sankar (left) and Janet (third from left) with some of the women from Nari Dana.



At work on the Juki sewing machines



Rituparna, Nari Dana's production supervisor selling products at the German Consulate trade fair

Links with local sales outlets

Nari Dana staff are focusing on increasing production quality so that goods can be sold through various sales outlets.

The team have long been displaying and selling goods at local fairs but they are now building connections with local sustainable trading outlets. They hope to establish a regular flow of orders that would provide reliable work for the Nari Dana women.

Recently Nari Dana received a sample order for bed covers 'Biswa Bangla', the company run by the Government of West Bengal, to promote Bengali arts, crafts and culture.

<http://www.cathedralreliefservice.net/activities/naridana/>

Mahamaya building officially inaugurated

Zoe Higgins (Scargill C of E Primary school) and Marie Clark (Baslow C of E Primary school)

Zoe and Marie spent several days in Mahamaya village, staying with a local family and being involved in the daily life of the school, before being joined by a large group from Kolkata for the grand opening ceremony and celebration for the extended building.

After a few days acclimatising in the heart of Kolkata, we headed off on a 3½ hour car journey through the hectic streets of Kolkata, through the suburbs, and eventually into a rural landscape.

Being taken in by Nilima and Bikash to stay in their family house and hosted in a way that we could only imagine celebrities are treated with was very humbling. Their passion and enthusiasm to continue building this fabulous school and women's programme shines through.

The children, ranging in age from 2-11 years old, were a delight. Three teachers have classes which sit side-by-side in a large room and are taught reading and writing in Bengali and English.

We were amazed at the ability of these young children and what they are achieving with limited resources. The younger children used chalk and slates to practice writing, whilst the older children had work books, pencils and text books.

They all thoroughly enjoyed the books and stories that we took out and gave to the school, especially 'Dear Zoo' where they got so excited to shout out the next animal (the teachers even more so than the children!).

As well as storytelling, singing is another effective way to teach language. Our daily exercise each morning came from singing many rounds of 'Head and shoulders, knees and toes' and other action songs. Seeing the delight, smiles, engagement and enthusiasm from these children was such a joy.



Although there are still some finishing touches needed to the building, the rooms are used every day for school and the women's programme



Zoe (left) and Marie (right) with the three teachers from Mahamaya school

Preparation for the official opening of Mahamaya School and Women's Empowerment Centre got well under way on our penultimate day there.

Beautiful marigold garlands hung in the windows and doorways, balloons galore gave a celebratory feel, and the plethora of colour epitomised the wonderful and beautiful place India is.

The house was a-buzz with a host of people busily preparing food, rooms and the children, ready to receive the Bishop of Kolkata and guests for the opening of the building and more so the longevity of this amazing school and centre.

Reporters from national television were there on the day to record this momentous event. Nilima and Bikash could have not have been more proud or have done a more sterling job for the opening with the Bishop and for the children and women of Mahamaya School and Centre.

It was a real privilege to have been a part of it and to now continue the link between Baslow C of E Primary and Scargill C of E Primary schools in Derbyshire and Mahamaya School in India.



<http://www.cathedralreliefservice.net/locations/mahamaya/>

Derbyshire partnership continues to strengthen

January saw another visit of teachers from schools in Derbyshire to CRS as part of the long-term partnership between Derby Diocese and the Kolkata Diocese.

The teachers spent time at the CRS Education Centres paired with their school back home. Those who had visited Kolkata before were delighted to meet old friends and see how children have grown and developed.



In the classroom at Hastings

The visitors also hosted two day-long continuing professional development workshops for all CRS teachers. At each table there was demonstration and practice of different techniques for teaching using storybooks and simple resources.



Learning how to use storytelling for teaching English

There was also a day of fun and celebration for children from CRS education centres held in the grounds of La Martiniere School for Boys. The visiting teachers visiting organised a range of team games, races and activities, and the children enjoyed a picnic lunch.



Impressions from a first visit to CRS

By Thomas Mathew, CRS supporter, Cambridgeshire

While on a visit to Kerala in southern India, Thomas Mathew, who attends Little St Mary's Church in Cambridge, one of the churches supporting CRS, flew to Kolkata for a few days to see the work of CRS.

I was very excited about the invitation from Rig David to see the work of CRS for myself.

The first project we visited was at Hastings. Despite the very English-sounding name, this is a deprived slum area. We trod carefully through the slush and garbage to reach a small clean area under a concrete fly-over, where a group of young children, aged about 3 to 4, greeted us enthusiastically. To the tune of Ten Green Bottles we joined them in singing "Ten ripe mangoes hanging from a tree", and then listened as the volunteer teachers went through the alphabet and numbers with them.

After a couple of hours, we moved on to the project at Brace Bridge. We walked across railway lines and went down a narrow, dirty and crowded street until we reached a shed-like construction (built recently by CRS) with no walls but a corrugated iron sheet roof to keep out the rain and the sun.

In one half, a group of young children were practicing their letters and numbers, and singing nursery rhymes. In the other half, there was a group of women busy with sewing and embroidery, each one eager to show me her work.

After these two visits on the first day, I felt emotionally drained by the abject poverty I had witnessed, and the seemingly hopeless mountain of a task that CRS had taken on.

My emotions were, however, quickly reversed when I reminded myself of the enthusiasm of the women and children being helped, the patience and dedication of CRS staff, and the difference being made in many lives.

The next day I went to the offices of CRS within the precincts of St Paul's Cathedral and saw the work of Nari Dana, the amazing programme designed to empower illiterate vulnerable women.

Next on to a free eye camp at Bibibagan held in a small crowded room open to the street, where an optometrist with a few old tools and sight charts was available to see patients who came with various eye complaints. Those with long-sightedness were given free reading glasses; others who needed surgery (such as for advanced cataracts) were given a letter of referral to the nearby government hospital.

Finally on to Sukantanagar, where CRS runs an education for children up to about age 12 and a women's empowerment project.

On my final morning, I was privileged to be invited to Bishop's House to join the Rt Revd Dr Paritosh Canning for breakfast. The Bishop is a young and far-sighted man with vision and charisma, and very keen on giving CRS all the support and help that he and the Diocese can give.

The work being done by CRS is truly amazing. Given very meagre resources, they have taken on tasks that seem enormous and totally unconquerable. With patience and deep faith, however, they have achieved miracles.

Yet there is so much more to be done! They need our prayers and our material help. The staff working for CRS need to be better paid, and with vision and imagination we could help to raise the care given to the poor of Kolkata.

Teaching at Sukantanagar

By Karen Laister, CRS supporter and volunteer from Oxford

In December, 2019 Karen Laister spent two weeks volunteering at the CRS Centre at Sukanatagar.

This was my second visit to Kolkata, the previous one being four weeks working with women and children in a school in Topsia run by another NGO.

CRS placed me in Sukantanagar school on the east side of the city, a short walk from the city's Eastern Bypass. It's a two-room building with a tiny yard. The larger room is used to teach 3–11 year olds, with four mats used to differentiate the age groups, and the smaller room is used for teaching sewing and tailoring skills to women.



It was an enormous privilege to be part of this small school community for two weeks. There is a sense of fun at Sukantanagar, a warm welcome, eagerness to learn and the odd bit of mischievousness, of course!

The two teachers, Lakshmi and Kamala, have quite a challenge on their hands teaching such a wide age range of pupils in such a confined space.

My memories will include the fun we had making crafts, learning the Out of the Ark song, 'Wake Up, Wake Up', and extending the children's vocabulary using a variety of approaches.



One of the special moments was seeing the children help each other with the crafts and reading with some of them at the end of each day. There is so much talent and it is clear that these children just need to be given the opportunity to flourish.

Meeting Rig David and learning about the wider work of CRS was one of the highlights of my trip. He kindly took me to visit the CRS projects at Brace Bridge and Hastings, both of which are in areas of extreme deprivation.

Meeting the teachers and children at these projects was humbling and deeply moving. The ability to teach and learn in such circumstances is inspiring. With so little resource, so much is being achieved.

It is very clear that the CRS staff value and have great affection for the support that the UK Friends provides them. CRS work is very much a relational mission, and this includes those who journey with them in volunteering, support and prayer.

<http://www.cathedralreliefservice.net/locations/sukantanagar/>

Opening eyes and touching hearts

By Rev Mark Meatcher and Rev Melanie Smith, United Reformed Church Ministers

Mark and Melanie, regular visitors to CRS, made another trip to Kolkata in October 2019 with a small group from the churches they serve in Enfield, North London, as well as a couple from the West Country.

The work of Cathedral Relief Services is, as ever, a joy to behold. This visit proved to be yet another opportunity for us to open eyes and touch hearts of the people that we took with us, and for the wonderful folk we met whilst there.

Our first visit this time was to Brace Bridge, where we encountered the community living between the railway lines. We were welcomed and shared in some fun with the schoolchildren and some of the older young ladies.



Mark got himself into trouble by sharing sweets – something the children seemed to quite enjoy – while Melanie wandered off to take a closer look at the dwellings and conditions that those we met lived in.

After the experience of visiting such a deprived area our group were then treated, that evening, to a meal with the new Bishop of Kolkata, and we delighted to hear his support and enthusiasm for the work of CRS.

On another day we visited the Hastings project – another eye opener for our guests.



One of the most precious things from every place we visited with CRS was the smiles and happiness that we saw in the children's eyes. Our group came away from every encounter with tears in their eyes, because they know how much we in the UK have and how little these precious children have...and yet they keep on smiling!

We also had the opportunity to see the Pally Mangal project, and are delighted to hear that there is now funding for the extension. Next time we return who knows what further improvements we may see?

To keep up to date with the latest news, follow us on Twitter (@crsukfriends) or Facebook (www.facebook.com/friendsofcrs)

Impressions from two first-time visitors

*By Grace Carter, student at Derby High School
and Christine Wright, Health and Social Care student, Derby University*

In October I had the chance to experience first-hand some of the projects of CRS when a small group of sixth-formers from our school visited Kolkata.

A highlight for the whole group and something that impacted each one of us really powerfully was the opportunity to spend time in different education centres, to step out of our comfort zones and try something new.

Seeing the joy that the children got from simply being able to go to school enabled us to appreciate what we have – to reflect on our own lives and realise how fortunate we are for the opportunities we get in terms of education in the UK.



Working with CRS was a truly unforgettable experience. The trip opened my eyes to the power of humanity and the importance of helping others.



Earlier this year, I was one of a small group of students from Derby who elected to do our community placement at CRS in Kolkata. I was very nervous beforehand as I had never even flown before but, from the moment I stepped off the plane, I knew I had made the right decision.

I spent a month with CRS and visited many of the schools, as well as health and empowerment projects around Kolkata. The work that CRS carries out amazed me as I had never seen such commitment to provide children and women living in the slums with opportunities to make a difference to their lives.

It was such an overwhelming experience and one I will never forget. I would like to say a big thank you to everyone for giving me the chance to visit. I can truly say it has changed me.

Financial update

By Clive Brown, Acting Secretary, Friends of CRS

The Trustees of the UK Friends receive detailed financial reports from the CRS team, the last of which covered April to December 2019. This showed total income for the period of approximately £77,500 and expenditure of £68,000.

Donations from the UK Friends during the period are shown as £41,400, and other overseas donations were £20,200. Local donations amounted to £14,200, but CRS also receives “gifts in kind” which would not be shown in that figure.

In the UK, during the financial year to the end of March 2020, the Friends received individual donations of nearly £16,000, mainly from people who give regularly under a standing order.

Churches and schools gave £12,700, of which £8,500 were restricted funds for particular projects.

The Friends’ income was topped up by investment income of £3,735 from the Patricia Payne Memorial Trust, and £4,695 tax refunded on donations made under gift aid.

During the year, we made five transfers to CRS totalling £67,166, of which £32,973 was restricted funds for specific projects.

We started the new financial year with £8,300 in hand, and that is quickly being augmented by a generous response to the Covid 19 Appeal.

Fundraising news

Coins in Cambridgeshire

Naresh and Rashmi Ghelani, who run a newsagents in Cambridge, have been loyal supporters of CRS for many years. As well as the collection box on the counter in the shop, Rashmi makes everyone empty out loose change from their pockets and purses whenever she goes to a family gathering! In the past ten months these donations of small change amounted to £360.

Funds for new floor at Pally Mangal

In the last newsletter we appealed for funds for an extension to the CRS centre at Pally Mangal where the women’s group meet in a small one-roomed building. We were delighted to receive donations from Paul Stuttle and Jo Whitehead amounting to £2,400. Together with the gift aid recoverable, this is sufficient to cover all the costs of building an extra floor.

**Thank you for your ongoing support for the work of CRS.
Every donation, however large or small, makes a difference
to the lives of poor and marginalized people
in the slums of Kolkata and villages of West Bengal.**