

Visit to India by Marie Branch (Shrewsbury CC Twinnage Officer) and Terry Brown (National Twinnage Officer) from 15th Jan to 1st Feb 2016.

16th January: Having flown out from the UK via Dubai with Adrian Abel (National President) and Stephen Hogg (Portsmouth CC Twinnage Officer) we were met on our arrival at 8am in Cochin Airport by Bro Johnson Varghese (Indian National President) and a team of members. After a warm welcome we were taken to rooms in a local hotel for a chance for some rest and a change of clothes.

Stephen and Adrian were due to take an overnight train to Kanyakumari that evening. We were collected at 5pm and taken back to the airport for a flight to Delhi, there we were met by CC President, Bro Antony Varghese and another member and taken for an overnight stop in the YWCA guest house, arriving there at 1.30 am. Many thanks to our Brothers for coming out so late to escort us. The original plan had been to fly to Delhi on the morning of 17th and from there to Ranchi but the flight timings were changed.

17th January: We were taken back to Delhi Airport for our flight to Ranchi. There we were met by the CC President, Bro M C Mathew and other members and taken to the Kwality Inn hotel. The thought of three nights in the same bed was most encouraging.

Later in the afternoon we were taken to St Mary's Cathedral for a meeting with members of Ranchi AC (Area Council). The meeting was well attended and we were treated to a warm welcome followed by dancing and singing by youth members before learning a little about the work in the area and passing on a few thoughts of our own. The AC President, Sr Roshni Minj and others told us about their works and we had the opportunity to say a little about the SVP in England & Wales.



As is the case across India each conference has “adopted families” which may be a family with no breadwinner due to ill health or disability or may be a single widow or disabled person. They receive regular support, food and maybe other items, from the members. There is no state pension or unemployment pay in India and so this work is of great value to help with day to day food and needs as well as school fees and medical bills which also have to be paid by the families.

On four occasions each year the conferences in the Area Council group together in the Cathedral compound to provide a meal, to hand out clothes (new and second hand) and give blankets for all their adopted families. We always picture India as a hot country but in this area, high up and towards the North of the country the temperature in Winter can drop down to single figures at night, as we found when we were there. The clothes and blankets are collected from local donors and purchased with locally raised funds and from their Twinnage grants. On 26th December each year there is a special event where up to 3,000 people are given a meal (blessed by the Cardinal) and clothing is distributed.

18th January: We were collected at 8am and driven on remarkable good roads on a two hour drive to Gumla where we met the Bishop, who was most encouraging and supportive of the work of the SVP. We then met with members of Gumla AC and from Chainpur AC who had come some distance to meet us and were treated to dancing displays and songs from a large number of youth members. They obviously loved what they were doing and at the end of the meeting we could hear them continuing the lively dancing as lunch was being prepared. Marie was pleased to be asked to join in the dancing.

Gumla AC President, Bro Xavier Ekka, ran the meeting and Chainpur AC President, Bro James Roasario Tigga, who is CC President elect, also attended. We handed out blankets to some adopted families and heard good reports of the work of the local conferences. The main commercial activities in these areas is copper mining.

Members were there from St Patricks, Gumla which is the Cathedral conference and is twinned with St John Lloyd, Cardiff



and from St John the Evangelist, Chaimpur which is twinned with Our Lady of Lourdes, Hull and we were able to tell them a little about their twins.

On return to Ranchi we had afternoon tea with Cardinal Toppo, who was very supportive of all the works of the SVP in the diocese..



January 19th: We left Ranchi, again on a very good road, to travel the 32km to Johan Parish which is in a rural tribal area. The SVP in Ranchi has adopted the parish school and we were warmly greeted by the children with displays of dancing and singing.

St Joseph's School, which is run by St Joseph Cluny Sisters, has 210 pupils and 10 teachers and a wide range of subjects are taught. The local people are mainly farmers but with poor soil their income is meagre, sometimes only about £5 per month and they depend for their livelihoods on Rasan (ration) Cards, the benefits of the cards include subsidised food prices from fair price shops but families still struggle to get more than one meal a day.



Despite their poverty families are keen to get education for their children, to some extent so that they can gain employment and provide an income for their families. Some are walking 5 or 6km to get to school.

Ranchi CC has given some support to the school to help pay the fees of the most disadvantaged and we were asked if we could make a regular commitment for 22 named children of Rs 4000 per child (about £40). The National Twinnage Committee have not agreed to fund this from the Student Sponsorship appeal.

From the school we returned to Ranchi for lunch and then travelled to Dighia for a meeting with the members, this conference is twinned with Mongeham & Sandwich. We were given the usual warm welcome with singing from the school children. The parish priest spoke very highly of the SVP, there are currently only (only!) 17 members but he felt that 75% of the parish should join – that would be 9000 as the parish has 12000 parishioners. The work was generally similar to other conferences we had visited.

We asked for their prayers for Bro Michael Tighe, former President of their twin conference.

Following the visit we returned to our hotel and were joined for dinner by four members of the Central Council.

January 20th: We departed Ranchi at 8am for the 2½ hour drive to Jamshedpur. After experiencing excellent roads in the past two days this one was very poor. It appeared that a bit of it was being converted to dual carriageway but, as was explained to us on our arrival, the work was planned on “Indian stretchable time” and little appeared to be being done as we travelled.

We were greeted in Jamshedpur by Bro Cashimir Thomas and other members at the Hotel Boulevard. After lunch we travelled to Bishop’s House where we met with the Vicar General, Fr David Vincent the CC Spiritual Advisor and other clergy. The Bishop was at a meeting in Kerala. Jamshedpur diocese has 60,000 Catholics in 35 parishes with 60 priests and covers a very wide area with boundaries with four states. To put this in context India has 19.9m Catholics, 1.55% of the population, which is the second largest congregation in Asia after the Philippines.



We then moved to a hall within the complex where we were greeted by members, both youth and senior. Two of the younger members greeting us with a guitar duo and we heard reports from all conferences present.

Bro Harry Francis told us that the Central Council was formed in 2006 when it was bifurcated from Ranchi CC and now has 17 conferences spread over a wide area. The original Central Council was Calcutta, the split to Patna, then Ranchi and so St Anthony’s Mango conference has been in four different Central Councils in its existence. The 2010 SVP AGM was held in Jamshedpur with 71 Central Councils represented.

Fr Joseph spoke on behalf of the Bishop and was very encouraging about the great work being done by the Society and we both gave short presentations.

January 21st: We were collected from our hotel and taken to Mango parish where the conference is twinned with Southwark CC and personally supported by Bro David Wiles. We were greeted by Sr Kamala Preema Kerketta and many other lady members with a traditional greeting and hand washing and then, after coffee, were led round to the hall where there was a large gathering of members and adopted families.

Bro Vincent, a founder member of the conference in 1958, when he was 14, was one of many to greet us.

Two members from St Barbara, Mosabani Mines conference, which is twinned with Our Lady and St Anne, Caversham spoke about their work. The parish is 65km away in a very undeveloped area and the tribal peoples live a meagre existence collecting forest foods. They are 20km away from a source of rice. The conference provides food to adopted families

Infant Jesus conference, which is twinned with Scotland, were supporting adopted families and also making hospital visits and providing medications and clothes.

As well as the regular work, the Mango conference has carried out a number of house repairs and has completely re-constructed one house with funds from the small project scheme supported by their twin. They support 10 children, paying half their school fees and a number of VJS students through the Student Sponsorship Scheme. Their next project is to repair the roof on the school toilet block. They are also helping families through the Jubiloan scheme. This is a revolving loan scheme which was established with funding raised by SVP (England & Wales) around the time of the year 2000 Jubilee and has continued successfully ever since with a 95%+ level of repayments.

In the afternoon we took a walk around the village visiting the re-constructed house and several where they had repaired roofs. Some villagers also earned a small income from raising pigs through an SVP pig project.



January 22nd: An early start for the train to Howrah Station, Calcutta, where we are met by Bro Peter Lloyd Lawless and taken to the YWCA hostel where we are to spend two nights. After some negotiation, having been booked just one en-suite twin room, we were able to get 2 rooms. They are pretty basic, with hot water theoretically provided but in practice not and rather hard beds but perfectly acceptable on an SVP trip and at £12 per night well within budget.

After lunch we are taken to Mother Teresa's convent, where we were able to visit her tomb and an exhibiton about the work of the Missionaries of Charity. We met the Mother Superior, Sr Mary Prema Pierick, who spoke well of the works of the SVP. We then went along the road for a brief visit to the children's home run by the nuns and from there past some places of interest to attend the Calcutta AC meeting at Sacred Heart Church.



The meeting was well attended with 7 conferences present, none of these were twinned although some had been and had surrendered their grants for a more needy conference. Over the years we have had 17 twin in Calcutta CC but now, through the re-twinning scheme, only support 4. There was a question, which would be for Indian NC, about whether a conference that has surrendered over 10 years ago could be eligible to re-apply for a twin.

From the work which was all reported all conferences are giving great assistance to those in greatest need in their communities. Adopted families in a conference were generally 20+ and each would be receiving regular food supplies plus clothes, soap and medical help. All conferences had made a special effort around Christmas with squash, cake and even chicken being given to the needy families, lunches held and a small sum of money being given. Some also gave hampers, saris and blankets.

One conference had organised an Eye Camp with check-ups and cataract operations improving or even saving the sight of 15 people and one ran a blood donation on Good Friday.

Bro Peter had been invited to give a 2 hour address to seminarians which was very successful. As elsewhere some parish priests are not supportive of the SVP and this seemed an excellent idea to get them on-side before ordination.

We heard that the conferences were each required to pay Rs40 (about 40p) per member as an annual subscription, Half of this would be retained by CC and half passed to National Council. They also contributed Rs50 for their copy of the Reachout magazine.

We returned to our hostel for a meal in the restaurant next door and a good night's sleep.

January 23rd: As Bro Peter had an active time in recent weeks with the marriage of one of his daughters and the sudden death of one of his brothers, and also a wedding to attend that afternoon the programme was a little limited.

In the morning we travelled with Bro Peter across the large toll bridge to Howrah where we met with some local members at the Nirmala Matha Maria Girga parish (Our Lady of Happy Voyage). This is run by the Pilar Fathers and Fr Martin D'Souza, Bro Arun the AC President and other Brothers made us most welcome.

This conference has 25 adopted families and helps a further 75. For Christmas they provide all with "love buckets" containing food stuffs, a sari and other gifts.



We also met five adopted families, most were single elderly but one a younger man with only one hand, and we handed parcels to them of food stuffs and requisites.

Other conferences were doing similar work and one explained they were helping a woman who had four children and had developed breast cancer. The treatment for her was free but all medications in India have to be paid for and so the conference was assisting the family with these costs.

Calcutta CC has 37 conferences in 6 ACs. Unfortunately none of our four twins were close enough to visit.

The afternoon was free and so we walked around a nearby large park, mostly full of casual cricket games, and visited the Anglican Cathedral.

January 24th: We were taken by Bro Lloyd to the airport for a 46 minute flight across Bangladesh to Guwahati where we were met by Sr Gwendoline Menzies who is North East Extension Officer and has been the driving force behind the SVP work in the North East for several years. Pausing for a short lunch en-route we drove about 2 ½ hours, uphill most of the way, to Shilloing where we booked into the Hotel Pine Wood for the night. Shillong is 4,908 feet above sea level and the Winter temperatures are very low, down to 4 degrees at night whilst we were there.

We were met there by Bro Markus Marngar (CC President) and Bro Jeronimus Pala (CC Secretary and AC President) who were to join us on our visits.

After a short break we went to Sacred Heart conference, Nongmynsong. The conference has 26 members but only 8 attend regularly. The conference made 1100 home visits in 2015 and provided two scholarships to poor students. At Christmas the conference gave food parcels to 10 families and clothes to many more. This conference is not yet twinned and is struggling to manage on the funds they can raise locally.



January 25th: We first visited the Cathedral where we met with the Vicar General who was very supportive of the work of the Society. We then visited the Don Bosco Museum which was a fascinating and comprehensive collection spread over 7 floors giving a great deal of information about local cultures but also a room giving the full history of the Church throughout the world and another giving detailed information about all belief systems in India and elsewhere.

From there we visited two housing projects at the Devine Saviour conference which is twinned with St Joseph's, Ramsbottom. The first was supported by England & Wales in 2009 and carried out extensive repairs on one house and minor repairs on others. The second, funded by the Netherlands in 2014 was the construction of a house. We passed on a letter sent from their twin.



After lunch back at our hotel we met with the members at the Devine Mercy conference, Mawtyngkneng which is twinned with Our Lady & St Peter, Aldborough and then went to visit two of the ten families who were beneficiaries of a pig rearing projects funded through the small projects scheme.

The families were each given two pigs which costs Rs3000 (about £30) each. They were fed on waste food, materials the family could gather in the forest and also the residues from making rice beer, a popular pastime. After nine months the pigs has reached a size at which they could be sold, one family sold the pair of theirs for Rs21,000 (about £210) and with this they purchased two more small pigs and used the profit to pay school fees of their children for the coming year as well as to provide food for the family. In an area where the wages of a casual labourer could fluctuate between £1 and £2.50 per day, if there was work, a profit of around £150 in 9 months, makes a great difference to the welfare of the family.



From this project we headed back down to Guwahati (a mere 163 feet above sea level) and were taken to the Montfort Provincial House where we would spend three nights.

26th January: As well as the Provincial House, which has a number of guest rooms and hosts training events for the Montfort Brothers, Montfort school is in the same complex. This caters for all children, some boarding and some day-pupils and takes in a large number of deaf / dumb children and blind children. After breakfast we walked down the steep hill to see the children line up for the Indian flag to be unfurled, this day is Republic Day and a holiday so most of the children there were the boarders. It was very good to witness the care being given to those with disabilities by the more able children.

We were saved the long walk back uphill and set off for Chandrapur to visit St Thomas's sub-parish and meet members from two conferences. It was rather embarrassing to find on our arrival, a little behind schedule, that the church was full of parishioners waiting for mass, the start being delayed to wait for us.

After mass in the local tribal language, Garo we were entertained with a local song and greeting with the traditional shawls and hand washing. The conferences present then spoke about their works. The work of St Peter, Gobardham, which is twinned with St Helen, North Watford and Christ the King, Dispur which is twinned with St Catherine, Wimbourne was broadly similar using their Twinnage grants and money collected locally to assist their adopted families with regular food and some extras



on holidays. Both had supplied lamps, and we handed out some of these as well as a food packages to 7 adopted families. Both conferences sponsored students to go to local schools and there had been a project, sponsored by St Helen's, North Watford, to supply solar lamps, which are of great value to homes with no electricity and also to provide bicycles. This is a poor area with the daily rate for casual labourers £2.50 per day or less, and that only if they can get work. The support the local conferences can give through Twinnage is therefore of great value.

We then gave a brief talk to all still present, which I think was most of the congregation, and after a lot of hand shaking and photos went outside to meet the SVP members followed by a brief stop at a member's house.

We next returned to Montfort House and met the two teacher members. There are also ten student members but they were not present as it was a public holiday. The conference was working well helping the students in the school.

We then travelled to St Joseph's parish, Panbazar to meet the members and visit their sewing project. The conference is twinned with Scotland and had received a project grant for nine sewing machines. Six have been given to successful students and in return they now come and teach others using the three remaining machines. Unlike some projects elsewhere they are not paying back the cost of the machines so we presume any more will have to be purchased from funds raised locally. The conference also has an active piggery project.

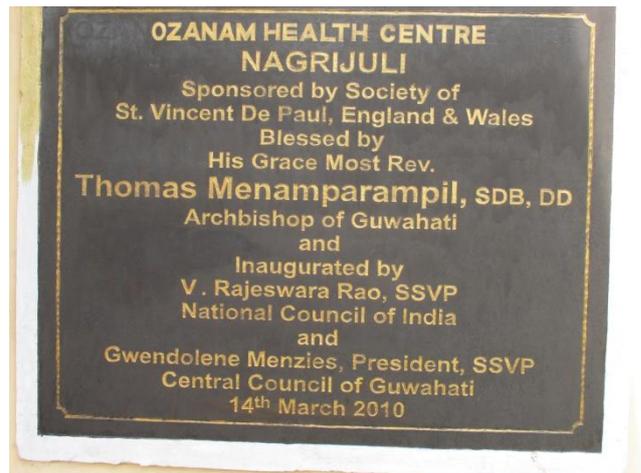
On the way back to Montfort House we made a brief visit to the Cathedral.

January 27th: Bro Kulendra Samgma, the CC President had travelled to Montfort House by train and came with us during this day's visiting. He seems a very enthusiastic, able choice and, as in Shillong, is well below the average CC President age.

We travelled first to the Ozanam Health Centre in Nagrijuli. A two and a half hour drive starting first on a dual carriageway and ending on a very rough unmade track for the last few miles. Indian dual carriageways are "interesting". It is usual but not universal to drive on the left hand carriageway and we saw many two wheelers, some cars and even the occasional bus and lorry coming towards on our side of the road. Lorries certainly choose to drive in either lane and overtaking is done in the one they are not occupying.

The Ozanam Health Centre was sent up by a project funded by SVP England & Wales from a legacy and was officially opened on 14th March 2010 by Thomas Mensamparmpil the Archbishop of Guwahati and members from the National Council of India and Guwahati Central Council.

The site was originally visited by Bro David Wiles in 2008 and from his report his view was *"There is absolutely no doubt in my mind that the Health Centre reflects an extraordinary opportunity to help the local Poor and Needy as well as the general population. I am sure that the benefactor of the legacy involved will be smiling down on our intentions2"*



We send a regular small sum to assist with running costs each quarter. The centre has a consulting room, pretty basic, run by a very capable Sister and 23 local staff of which two are trainees.

There is no overnight accommodation but there are day wards and we saw several patients receiving vitamin boosts or other basic medication intravenously.

The centre saw 2540 patients last year. The consultations are free but patients are asked to pay for medications when they can afford to do so – there is of course no NHS in India. The main diseases faced are malaria, TB, pneumonia and anaemia. The centre is run by the nursing sister and 2 student nurses.

The centre also runs writing courses in Assamese and English travelling out to 10 villages and teaching 450 people in one hour local classes four days a week. They have trained 850 in health awareness and 450 in malaria awareness and run awareness programmes on health and hygiene for around 850 people in 10 villages. They also supply medicated mosquito nets. We treated to displays of tribal dancing and then a short literacy class was held and we inspected all the work done.

It was explained to us that simply being able to write your own signature makes a great difference to people's lives as they can then interact with the authorities.

The health centre has great need for a wall to be built around it and the home on the same site to keep cattle out of the grounds which they could then be used to cultivate crops and we have suggested that they apply for a project through Bro Prakasham (Projects Officer).

We visited the home where four nuns live and where there is accommodation for some children at the adjacent school and after lunch headed back on the bumpy ride to the tarmac road and then headed away from Guwahati to Kumatikata to meet members of local conferences there and be greeted by the local school children.



Members were present from five conferences including St Matthews, Ganeshguri which is twinned with St Robert, Harrogate and we were able to hand over a letter from their twin. The members were mainly from the Boro tribe and all were carrying out similar works with assistance of rice and clothes and a little cash given to adopted families. Some had got some student sponsorships which were of great assistance in getting the very poorest into school, some conferences were also giving assistance with school fees from

funds raised locally.

After the meeting we walked round to see the grounds and were met, on the way back, by the resident pupils walking in columns around the grounds reciting the rosary.

28th January: We left Montfort Provincial House giving our grateful thanks to those that had hosted us so warmly and leaving a modest donation as they had made no charge for accommodation or meals. From Guwahati we flew to Calcutta and then changing both planes and airlines caught a flight to Cochin via Bangalore arriving mid-evening to be met but a Brother from the local conference and his brother who drove us to our hotel on Fort Cochin via a brief stop at his Church and his home.

Just before reaching the hotel we saw Bros Adrian Abel and Stephen Hogg who had completed a very active visit in the South.

29th January: Bros Johnson Varghese (National President) and K J Francis (National Secretary) came to our hotel in the morning and we discussed various matters in advance of tomorrow's meeting with their Board.

And the rest of the day off! And opportunity for four of us to get out a stretch our legs after so much time spent sitting in cars and meetings, and to catch up on each other travels.

30th January: We were collected in a small bus by Bro Johnson and other members for lunch and then taken on sightseeing to the historic Dutch Palace and then in late afternoon trip across to Ernakulam and then on a boat to see the sunset.

31st January: Bro Soundararaj (Vice President for Canonisation and former Thuckalay CC President) along with Thuckalay CC President, Bro D. Iyathurai and one other member came to our hotel to meet with us.

After lunch we were taken by taxi to the Cochin Pastoral Centre where the Indian Board had been meeting that morning.

It was a most convivial meeting where several matters were discussed. To summarise this and the earlier meeting on 29th:

Brother David Wiles had written to Bro Johnson pointing out some areas where reporting on the student sponsorship scheme could be improved. All points were agreed except the request for more medical students. It was pointed out that to study medicine is very costly and out of reach for poor students hence the very low numbers. Nursing courses can be sponsored and may be either 3 or 4 years. In response to a request to increase the grants we asked to be advised of current and proposed figures but pointed out that we do send all funds we can raise and so an increase in grants would mean a reduction in numbers sponsored.

The question of increasing the Twinnage grant was raised but we pointed out that this had been done a year ago and any proposal for a further increase so soon would be not accepted.

We asked about the previous policy of reviewing twinings after 15 years to see if the conference could now become financially independent and pass their grant to a more needy conference. This has been reviewed and will go ahead shortly.

It was agreed that the limit for projects would be raised from Rs 60,000 to Rs 80,000, the figure having been unchanged for some time and the pound strengthened against the rupee during that period.

For projects above Rs 80,000 we suggested that they should seek funding through CIAD.

We enquired about the project study which was started some time ago and was advised by Bro Prakasham that it was moving slowly forward.

We raised the question about sending some regular support for students of the poor school we visited directly through Ranchi CC and this caused no concerns as the school is already being supported by the CC.

The question of correspondence between twins was discussed. There are complaints from both sides about not hearing from their twin. National Council of India is moving towards e-mailing all papers to save postage time and costs. Each CC now has an e-mail address and has been instructed to get a member with written English to take charge of regularly checking the address inbox. There have been some teething problems but we agreed to send Bro Johnson details of all twins with our CC addresses and hope that we will be able to develop an exchange letter through these e-mail links.

As an aside to the meeting we discussed with Bro Joseph Pandian (ITVP for Asia) about the situation in Nepal. He advised that a major project to build homes and create self-sustainable jobs was about to go ahead and that a further contribution from Disaster Fund would be welcome, he will send a report shortly



The trip to India was very rewarding and it was spiritually uplifting to see the wonderful work done by the SVP members throughout India. Common misconceptions are that India is becoming a rich country – however we have seen that there is no free welfare or health system and even education has to be paid for. There are still over 250 million people in India living below the UN poverty line.

Terry and Marie saw that life was very hard especially in the rural areas for the tribal communities who had very little income and relied on limited support of food relief, clothing and blankets from the SVP.

[And in India you get a wide choice of tuk tuk drivers!](#)

