

# Community of St Mary the Virgin



Annual News 2019 - 20  
from Wantage and overseas

## Community

Sisters at December 2019  
in order of Profession -  
the making of their life vows to God:

Honor Margaret  
Jean Frances  
Valeria  
Phoebe Margaret  
Christine Ann (Solitary)  
Eileen  
Lorna  
Stella  
Trudy  
Elizabeth Jane

The Sisters are pleased to have living with them two Postulants and one Alongsider who are exploring the religious life.

## Acknowledgements

We are grateful to all the people who have provided material to be included in our Annual News, including in particular:

Aashish James  
Rita Ball  
Margaret Taylor  
Estelle van der Schoor  
Rosey Feuell  
Suellen Pedley  
Stevie Ancient

CSMV website: <https://csmv.co.uk>

Front cover:  
Pupils and staff of the Gabane  
Community Day Care Centre, Botswana

## Welcome



Dear Friends,

The first phase of our building and reconstruction work has been completed with a striking façade of high arched windows at the entrance to the Convent, leading into the new reception area. We hope you will find it welcoming and peaceful. Our architect has, we feel, created an imaginative environment, sensitive to the spirit of simplicity that we wish to live as pilgrims in the religious life.

The service of Blessing of the new space and refurbished North Wing was shared by Fathers Toby Wright and Brendan Clover and conveyed with solemnity yet with a lightness of touch. As well as the pleasure of having CSMV staff as part of the celebration, there was the delight of the Oxford Diocesan Schools Trust (ODST) trustees and members of staff being with us and having their new office space on North Wing blessed, followed by the blessing of our refurbished Saints' passage to accommodate Alongsiders and those well known to us.

Part of the experience of the Blessing was sharing together in the Eucharist, concelebrated by Toby and Brendan in St Mary's Chapel, with rousing and heartfelt singing after Communion of the Taize chant, 'Bless the Lord, my

soul'. On return to the reception area there was much happy energy in talking and relaxing with one another over tea/coffee and cake.

Another aspect of newness and change is this edition's first combining of CSMV Annual News with our Overseas Links magazine. It expresses part of our growing commitment to unify and expand our Community's outreach. We want, too, to celebrate and affirm today something of CSMV's concern for aspects of pastoral care and mission that we are in touch with in the UK, but also in places in our troubled world where courageous Sisters responded to various Bishops' invitations to initiate forms of education and Christian nurture: first in India in 1877 and later to South Africa and then to Botswana.

We rejoice that the courage and dedication of those early Sisters' prayer and service have left their mark on the continuing work overseas: in support of children and young people in Pune, India, for the intellectually disabled women at Irene Homes in South Africa, and for orphaned and deprived children and for hospice care in Botswana. You may feel led to go and experience some of this forward-looking work that CSMV supports and even to explore offering voluntary help and/or perhaps to provide a donation for a young person without means to pursue further skills and training. We warmly encourage you to share in the Sisters' prayer for upholding those involved in giving and receiving compassion and contemporary insights in these areas of struggle and suffering.

It feels important – as we seek to reflect upon and pray about the present political disruption and fear in our society, as well as the challenges of new and stretching demands here at the Convent – that we acknowledge our own corporate frailties and limitations as a Community. At the same time we need to be rooted in traditions that strengthen our faith and

enrich our vision, such as our spiritual ancestors of the 4<sup>th</sup> century desert tradition in Egypt together with the first stalwart CSMV sisters that struggled in this country in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century to form our charism of education and support of vulnerable women in the face of much opposition and limited funds. It can help us to draw closer to one another and to value and trust each other.

I believe our shift into a smaller group has enabled us Sisters to be able to listen more carefully to each other and to be discerning in sharing personal experience that has been life-giving even when it has revealed past issues that may have hurt or damaged us. It has, I believe, helped us to pursue unexpected tasks and to explore creative expression that has revealed beauty and self-knowledge.

Having other religious visit us this year, Br Stuart OSB and Sr Susan SLG coming to share personal insights with us about the vowed life, has been stimulating. It was specially invigorating to listen recently to Sr Katharine SSC sharing about the feelings and content of her artistic output, bringing many of her pictures for us to absorb, and helping us to reflect on how such inner gifts of God can be part of living the vowed life. It released joy and inspiration in us.

As we look towards the couple journeying to Bethlehem as part of an oppressed nation, with pregnancy and imminent birth becoming threatening, let us ponder on what metaphorically we would wish to bring to birth from the womb, from our deep inner darkness, now, as a gift to God.

May the Feast of the Nativity be a rich blessing for you.

With peace,

Stella csmv



Sr Lorna in the Sisters' new summer house

In all of the work of every member of the CSMV Community, its staff and trustees, we are seeking to advance God's kingdom.

During 2019, we looked afresh at our charitable objects and re-expressed them to reflect today's world. Our new objects reflect the three broad areas which have always been at the heart of what we are and what we do since our founding as a Community in 1848. These are:

- Living and growing in faith, and in particular sustaining the life of the Community of Sisters which is at the centre of CSMV
- Supporting education founded in Anglican Christian principles
- Caring for the vulnerable, in particular women and girls and those who are ill.

This annual review reflects how we have sought to realise these three objectives in 2019.

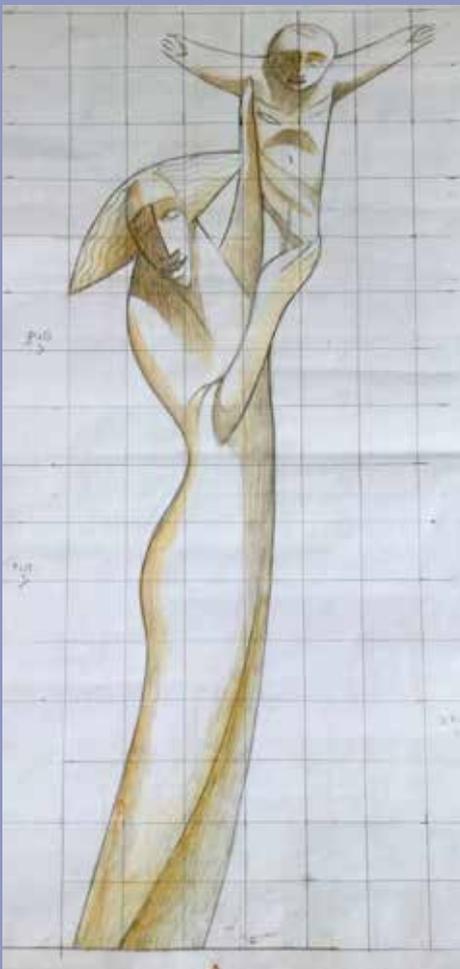
## Surprises! Building work & disruptions Surprises!

I wander every day as I try to find a way;  
to get from A to B is a mystery to me.  
Is it here, I ask, at all  
or am I up against a wall  
that I really didn't want to have to see?  
Yes, some days things are here  
and then they don't appear:  
it's here, it's not, it's cold or hot  
or doesn't work at all.  
I try to find the bin amidst all the  
dust and din  
to put my relatively small amount of  
rubbish in.  
It'll be alright, they say,  
it will indeed become much better,  
yet sometimes things are getting wetter  
than they ought to be.  
And there's the unexpected guest who's  
coping well with less than best and glad to  
have some rest  
and not become too stressed by our  
exciting changes!

New resources are delightful, full of fresh  
surprises,  
like liquid coffee beans or chocolate hot  
on the dot, just press the spot of this our  
new facility  
and you will have the ability  
to do it all again, then go away as if  
it's play,  
just smile and say:  
much thanks to all our helpers, who mer-  
cifully keep their tempers.  
But tell us now, they ask, of your  
embroidery.

'Lilies appear, not finished, I fear,  
on my own embroidery frame, yet it's  
good, I feel, to work at it as part of a  
friendly game.  
Do look and see, have pity on me ... '  
-sometimes a bit beside myself, but not on  
the shelf!  
Will there be any 'afters'  
as we shake among the rafters?  
Oh yes! We now have a new hexagonal  
place to rest and stay.  
See our green little house  
where there's not a single mouse.  
No, there's not a single mouse  
in our new & striking summer house -  
except perhaps the odd and lonely one  
helping us be still and pray!

Sr Lorna



### Mother and Child sculpture

When I first viewed the design for a new entrance area for St Mary's Convent I was struck by the clean and elegant lines and the sense of light and space that it would create; the Beauty of Holiness. I felt that the design encapsulated and emphasised the openness of the community.

My artistic response reflects this sense of welcome and outreach. A tall elegant pale limestone sculpture of the young Mary joyously holds her son aloft. With rolled up sleeves Mary looks directly at us, smiling, engaging us. As one Sister noted, "Mary steps out", meeting us where we are, much as Philip meets the Ethiopian (Acts 8 v.27).

Mary presents the Christ-Child to us. Jesus, here portrayed as a very young infant rather than a newborn baby, raises his arms in joyous celebration of Life. He meets our gaze and says, "This is your Mother". (John 19 v.27).

The Christ-Child, arms raised, is at once the crucified Lord and the Risen Christ.

Nicholas Mynheer

Nicholas' new sculpture will be set in place in late summer 2020.

## Living and growing in faith

We seek to live and grow in faith as a Community and to help others to come closer to God. We are currently in the middle of a programme of renewal of parts of our Convent buildings so that we can offer opportunities to more people for prayer and reflection. We are also supporting other organisations doing innovative work helping people to pray and be introduced to the religious life.

### A striking new entrance offering a warm welcome



St Mary's Convent has always been a place of hospitality, but we have been aware for some time that parts of the building were in need of renewal if we were to continue to offer a warm welcome to guests. The first phase of this work is now complete and at the end of October 2019 our striking new entrance building and reception area were opened.

When most people started arriving by car, the main entrance to the Convent was switched to the north side of the building. As this was originally the back of the building, however, it was not that obvious which of the many doors was the entrance. By filling in a courtyard between two wings we have created a distinctive new entrance where we can offer a warm welcome and easily direct visitors to different parts of the Convent.

We have also refurbished the adjacent North Wing of the Convent. This now provides a new office for our own Bursary staff and, on the first floor,

office space for the Oxford Diocesan Schools Trust. You can read more about their work on page 9.

Our builders are now refurbishing the West Wing of the Convent, which houses our Guest Wing. When the work is complete, at the end of the summer in 2020, there will be 21 comfortable bedrooms and a variety of spaces where those on retreat and coming for quiet days can reflect, learn and pray. Disabled access will be much improved by a new lift.

Although the Guest Wing is closed until the refurbishment has been completed, we are still able to offer accommodation to small groups in White Lodge and to provide space elsewhere in the Convent for quiet days and retreat groups.

By moving the reception area and some other activities from the ground floor of the West Wing, we have an opportunity to create a new area of meeting and conference rooms. This too will open in the latter part of 2020 and we look forward to welcoming churches, diocesan bodies, education organisations and other charities to use this space.

St Mary's Convent is a special place where worship and prayer continue to be offered daily, as they have been for 170 years. The current work on the building will safeguard that specialness but offer new opportunities to connect to the contemporary world.



## Community Life

Our life in community is enriched by encounters with others. Here are some highlights from 2019.

15-year-old Katie Jarvis came to visit us in preparation for presenting her GCSE art work. The subject she chose was 'inhabiting space' which she felt we would have some experience of in living at the Convent. A Sister showed her our chapels and then she showed us her inventive and sensitive embroidery designs. She drew us into a circle to interview each Sister about how we used our space and what it meant to us. We were very impressed with her listening. Later it was a delight to visit the GCSE and A Level Art exhibition at King Alfred's School to see some of our faces embroidered in one of her designs!

It's a pleasure to welcome the Wantage Parish Church Choir to sing Choral Evensong in our larger chapel, and recently to have their organist, John Ridgway, giving two much appreciated organ recitals. It was good also to share in the welcome at the Revd Philip Wells' institution at Wantage Parish Church and likewise, to attend the institution of the Revd Orazio Camaioni to the Wantage Downs Benefice with its four villages. At both services Bishop Colin Fletcher's humorous, down to earth and simple encouragement to pray and to engage with the ceremony was inspiring.

We value Bishop Sarah Mullally's visits twice a year as our Bishop Visitor, especially hearing her responses to knife crime and her account, from a visit to Mozambique diocese of Lebombo in July, of the bishop's desire to encourage the laity and children to take part spontaneously in liturgy and leading prayers.

A member of the Community of Hopeweavers – a dispersed community living under a rule of life, 'weaving hope into every day' – together with one of our Sisters shared with a group

of spiritual directors in Winchester for a day's reflection on the spiritual life. It was evidently a helpful interplay of creative gifts between the two disparate forms of religious community.

One of the year's most stimulating experiences was visiting Deddington Primary School with Anne Dellar, CEO of the Oxford Diocesan Schools Trust. The independent spirit of the children was especially noticeable at the end of the school day when all gathered for Assembly. A variety of tasks – leading the singing, organising the mikes, doing the readings, arranging symbols for worship – were the sole responsibility of various children. When a local clergy woman shared about the Gospel reading many hands repeatedly shot up to give explanations and ask questions. It was an energising engagement.

Perhaps the most relaxing and enjoyable event in the year was being warmly welcomed to the annual musical at King Alfred's School. This was 'In the Heights' about a neighbourhood north of Manhattan where the majority of people are Spanish speaking immigrants struggling to make ends meet and threatened by gentrification. The story line was swept along by energetic dance, good acting and lively singing.

## St Raphael's Wing

It was in 1895 that the Sisters decided to build an infirmary for the care of ill and ageing members. It was named after the Archangel Raphael, the angel of healing.

Nowadays the wing is staffed by a team of well-trained carers, under the guidance and support of Head of Care, Vyvyan Hazel, who understands and affirms that this is primarily the Sisters' home. She meets regularly with the Sisters, discussing with them any changes necessary. These may vary from choosing curtains and planning the use of rooms to offering a choice of vegetarian and other foods.

As one of the carers said, "She gets things done."

Those Sisters on SRW may be frail physically or emotionally, but there is an expression among them of vitality of spirit that is heartening. We are enjoying having Sr Adrian SLG living with us here for a period.

Sr Honor Margaret

## St Frideswide Community



The Community of St Frideswide is one of an emerging network of new religious communities sharing a common rule of life. In addition to one year full-time residential commitments, the community is working closely with parishes and chaplaincies in the Oxford and Cowley deaneries.

CSMV is supporting the development of the community, and Kate Seagrave, who leads it, comes regularly to the Convent to preside at the eucharist and then share with us the latest developments. It's a pleasure to hear of those who are feeling called to spend a year meeting and sharing and praying together about what offering themselves to God involves and is requiring of them.

It was most heartening to be at the Commissioning eucharist at St Frideswide's Church in September to give thanks for the members who had completed their year and to listen to Bishop Steven Croft asking the new group three questions about their commitment to prayer, to mission and to adopting their Rule of Life.

## Life Together Oxford

In February 2019, several religious communities joined together to share the Religious Life with students of Oxford University.

Brothers and Sisters from CR - Mirfield, SLG - Fairacres, ASSP - Oxford, and myself representing CSMV, were made so welcome by both college chaplains and students, together with the vicar and staff of the University Church. There had been very good preparation beforehand, including the creation of a Life Together website and the printing of bookmarks and other publicity material.

We spent four days in Oxford and I was allocated to stay at Worcester Col-

lege where I was warmly welcomed. Being February, the gardens were full of snowdrops. Over eighty varieties in all.

I quickly became aware that of course the Oxford colleges have very monastic foundations and that our presence was both a reminder of this, as well as connecting us to our roots. Worcester College for example had early Benedictine and Carmelite connections.

Each morning I gathered at the University Church with Fr George CR, Br Marc CR, Sr Judith SLG, Sr Margaret Theresa SLG and Sr Jane ASSP, together with clergy, chaplains, students and

others to say a monastic style Morning Office. There were up to 30 of us each morning, and a lovely sense of unity and stillness as we chanted the psalms and prayed together. We were then all warmly welcomed into the church café for coffee and pastries. It was a lovely opportunity to mingle and chat.

Each day we then went on to a different college chapel to chant the Midday Office. One of us then gave a talk on a different aspect of the Religious Life – at Keble, Worcester, Brasenose and Trinity in turn. We had thought carefully about the talks beforehand and our titles for each day were: Community and Belonging; Worship; Being Human; and

Justice and Reconciliation.

These lunch time meetings were followed later in the afternoon by Tea Parties in a variety of colleges, hosted by the college chaplains who had an abundant supply of tea and cake. I found myself visiting Hertford, Magdalen and Lincoln. Others went to Christ Church, Keble and Merton.

Some of us were then able to attend a college Evensong before dining in our respective college dining halls. We were then out and about again in the evening leading or attending Compline in various college chapels. One night I was at Queen's and enjoyed beautiful singing by the choral scholars, followed by hot chocolate

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## CSMV Oblates

UK Oblates continued to meet through 2019 in local groups and to visit the Convent at Wantage for times of retreat; there is always a warm welcome from the Community and the support staff. The on-going building work has meant that group retreats have used White Lodge, with the Oblate Council using the Song Room. It has been fascinating to walk through previously unseen areas of the Convent following the carefully positioned signs to avoid the builders' activities.

This year the Annual Oblate Gathering was held at the College of the Resurrection in Mirfield in early October. Eighteen Oblates, Sister Stella and our invited speaker the Revd Professor Jeremy Duffy spent a day exploring the theme of "Community". It was a time of new insights and challenges, and the questions and learning that we shared will continue to be explored, when we gather in September 2020.

Those of us who have had the privilege of being welcomed into the newly completed entrance and reception area at Wantage have been overjoyed to find it stunningly beautiful, warm and embracing, full of light and with familiar friends like the St Francis statue there to greet us in little niches. As an increasing number of people come to know the Community through retreat and conference events, we pray that many may want to know more about the Oblate vocation and that is part of the challenge of the year ahead.

## Wessex Group BBQ

The Wessex Oblate Group held their summer meeting in a wood. One member, Felicity, owns an area of ancient woodland which, as a Deacon, she has been able to turn into a hub for baptisms and wedding blessings as a result of her woodland management and craft skills.

Communion was set out at the heart of the meeting roundel. Although the weather tested our resolve and taking cover was needed, it was a joyful and peaceful time. Only the sound of trees, the wind, grasses and the fire crackling broke the silence.

There was prayer for friends overseas, and others in pain and illness who could not be there, and they felt very close. There was prayer too for those starting challenging new ministries, renewal of Oblation vows and an 'Iona' Eucharist, creating a sense of being 'at one with all creation through the Holy Spirit'.

This was followed by joyful eating together in the sunshine, with expert BBQing and delicious food.

## Oblates in South Africa

South African Oblates met with some of the Associates at Irene House in Pretoria for Candlemas. They feel that

or madeira! Another night I was at Trinity College where Compline was a new experience for the students. Afterwards they said how much they'd enjoyed it and that they'd like to do it again. The chaplain then invited everyone down to the bar to complete the evening.

Over these days, we had wonderful opportunities to meet with students who were so open and genuinely engaged. They are obviously at a point when they are very much thinking about their futures and what they want to do. It was so natural to ask them about their hopes and dreams for the future, and they were so interested to hear our vocational stories. The chaplains, too, felt encouraged and

heartened by this initiative and the opportunity it gave to work together across the colleges. One commented that it can be lonely being a college chaplain.

We made some lovely contacts, and as a result the chaplains of Brasenose and Wadham Colleges have both brought Quiet Day groups to the Convent. Encouragingly, the students really enjoyed these Days and want to come back.

Those of us who took part found it a most exhilarating and inspiring time and feel we have a template which we can take to other universities in the future.

**Sr Elizabeth Jane**



Sister Elizabeth Jane joins members of the other religious orders and organisers of Life Together Oxford



The Wessex Oblate Group's summer BBQ

it is important to have at least one service together and it is such a joy to get as many as possible to come from within such a vast country.

The Council met in March to discuss many matters. There are communications with all the Oblates and each one has personal conversation before their Renewals. The Oblates also know they can contact any one of the Council with news they want or need to share. It is glorious that they feel secure in what they tell us.

Each member of Council has a portfolio, a system which is working well.

Time leads to change, but the Oblates take each challenge as it arrives and God has guided us. We are so blessed to have each other.

### CSMV Associates

There are over 150 Associates, about a third overseas. We are keen to admit

new members and are considering new projects. The Associates' Day continues to be popular, as do retreats and quiet days. Add to that visits to Wantage for services, music, events, private stays and regional groups, and a lot is going on. Overall there is much optimism and future oriented faith in evidence, with lively gratitude to God and CSMV.

In past years, most Associates came from the Convent's regular visitor-base, reinforced by CSMV's schools, social care, and work abroad. All wished to pray with/for CSMV, to keep in touch, and to visit the Convent when possible. However, life changes and these groups are smaller or no longer in existence, so we need to find new members elsewhere.

There is concern for more isolated Associates unable to visit or meet nowadays, and Committee members support some with calls, letters, occa-

sional visits, creating links with other Associates, plus considering how informal "buddying" may work for others desiring it.

The Associates recognise that there are varied spiritual awakenings today! Longings for special places and faith-nurturing has never been greater as society fragments. Hence the importance of knowing what "Associateship" offers, how such belonging might be shared more widely and how it might enfold different newcomers. The opportunities for ongoing connection and community are clearly appreciated.

*Our website has more information about becoming an Oblate or an Associate.*

## Helping others pray

CSMV continues to support two charities which promote prayer – Discovering Prayer and BeSpace.

Discovering Prayer offers those seeking to explore prayer many different ways to do so through the medium of the internet. CSMV has been supporting the charity, run by CSMV Oblate Michelle Eyre, since September 2017, both financially and by keeping the work in our own prayers.

The website is flourishing. It has reached over 1.6 million people since its inception. "People's lives have been transformed by prayer," says Michelle. Currently, with CSMV's support, the site is increasing the number of audio prayer times it offers and is working with ordinands at Wycliffe Hall, Oxford. "I think Discovering Prayer is a significant development," says the Rt Revd Colin Fletcher, Bishop of



Bishop Colin joins students in a BeSpace Prayer space

Dorchester. "It's helping many thousands to discover the ancient forms of Christian meditation."

BeSpace is a charity which equips local churches to facilitate prayer and reflective spaces in schools and other

community areas.

It has helped create 218 prayer spaces in Oxfordshire schools in the last three years and is busy with another very active year in 2019-20.

Some of the reflections left by pupils who have used the spaces, tell their own story. "I loved the Prayer Space. It lets people become a better them" and "I thought the prayer space was helpful because it helped me talk to God in a way I liked".

BeSpace is passionate about seeing every child, young person and adult have space to pray or reflect in their daily lives. Sisters from the Community visit some of the prayer spaces to lend their support to the children, schools and charity team.

CSMV has recently agreed to continue to support these two charities financially for a further three years.

## All Saints Embroidery Group



This has been a busy year for the embroidery workshop at the Convent. Helene completed the centre of the Letcombe Regis altar frontal, and has made a green chasuble for the Convent chapel. She has also completed the rays for the centre of the Childrey

frontal she is restoring. She has since been convalescing, and we look forward to her return to the workshop.

The Letcombe frontal is finished, worked on by Helen, Juliet and Suelen. The festal frontal has the badge of the World Council of Churches in the centre, supported by the saltire Cross of St Andrew, the church's patron. On either side of the frontal are two panels of flowers worked in an Italian form of quilting called Trapunto. Each section of the design is separately stuffed from the back, giving an effect of low relief sculpture. Helen worked on the two panels, showing spring flowers for Easter and winter flowers for Christmas.

Kath is a very welcome newcomer to the group. For the last two years she's been working at the Cathedral Embroidery Centre at Christ Church, Oxford. Kath is now working on the centre section of the Corpus Christi College frontal which is a Pelican in its

Piety, a symbol which appears on the arms of the college. Helen is working on two saltire crosses which will flank the pelican.

An exciting new commission was for a new cope, mitre and stole for the Bishop of Reading, to be ready for her consecration. After many long hours, the work was completed for Bishop Olivia to wear at St Paul's Cathedral. The vestments will return to the group later for additional decoration.

Following the popular retreats based on embroidery when the group worked in the studio, another retreat is being organised using White Lodge as the base. The Retreat Leader will be the Revd Robert Teare, and it is planned for the weekend of the 22nd May 2020.

The year has been both challenging and rewarding, and the team are to be congratulated for their hard work, skill and enthusiasm.

## Sister Catherine Naomi 1906-2019

Sr Catherine Naomi's early life was spent in Egypt. She was given a good deal of freedom as a child, and recalled being allowed to go boating alone in Alexandria harbour despite being unable to swim.

Catherine trained as a nurse at Addenbrookes's Hospital, Cambridge. During World War 2 she drove an ambulance in Europe and later spent some time in India before coming to test her vocation in 1952. She made her life Profession in 1955.

The highlight of her Community life was the 24 years she spent at St Katharine's, a care home we ran in Wantage. Together she and Sr Mary Jennifer formed a richly nurturing partnership. During this time she set up and managed a second-hand dress shop called 'Out of Town', and also helped in the local Oxfam shop.

Sister was a lovable person, kind, gentle and sociable. She always retained a strong affection for her family. We had a surprise when at her centenary party four generations arrived to help her celebrate. She sat in the midst of them, thoroughly at ease.

Her last months were not easy. However, there is no doubt that in the last two to three years of her life she much enjoyed Sisters dropping in on her; she also appreciated the staff who cared for her, especially giving her the pleasure of listening to children's novels being read to her when she could no longer read for herself. She also sang a lot very peaceably night and day. At her last time in Chapel for the Eucharist she was brought in by wheelchair and quietly sang to herself through the service and greeted her Sisters with delight, waving to us as she left. 28 members of her family joined us for her funeral, which had a deep sense of joy.

Sr Honor Margaret

## Supporting education

Supporting high quality education of children of all ages, and particularly young girls, has been a guiding principle of CSMV since its foundation. Today, the Community is involved in exciting new ways of offering that support both in Wantage and overseas. This section of our report focuses on these efforts.

### A hub for education

Teaching was a vocation to which many of the Sisters were called and they were instrumental in the creation and development of schools not only in the UK but also in India, South Africa and Botswana. Over the last two years a number of initiatives at the Convent in Wantage have again made it a hub for education.

Many schools in the UK are now part of multi-academy trusts. These trusts bring together a number of schools as part of one organisation. At the centre of each trust is a small team providing leadership and support. We are delighted to be providing space on the Convent site for the central teams of two multi-academy trusts. In 2018, we refurbished our Studio building for use by the Vale Academy Trust which has eight schools in and around Wantage and Abingdon. These include the Church of England Primary School in Wantage set up by our own founder, Revd William Butler.

More recently, in October 2019, the Oxford Diocesan Schools Trust (ODST) has taken space in the refurbished North Wing of the Convent. Since its creation in 2012, ODST has grown to a family of 34 schools in the Diocese of Oxford. The Convent now provides a second base for their central team and for meetings of school

leaders, complementing ODST's space in Church House Oxford.

One of the challenges faced by local schools is the high cost housing in Oxfordshire. This makes it difficult to recruit young teachers in particular. We are helping with this in a small way by offering six flats at affordable rents in St Mary's Lodge. Now in its second year, this scheme is helping newly-qualified teachers start out on their careers.

We are also pleased to welcome to the Convent head teachers from Church of England schools across the Diocese who come for briefing and training sessions organised by the Oxford Diocesan Board of Education. Once our new meeting and conference space is completed in 2020, we will be able to expand this sort of activity.

Meanwhile, we continue to keep in touch with schools set up by CSMV Sisters in Pune, India. Sister Stella, accompanied by Alastair Hunter (chair of the CSMV trustees), visited these schools in November 2019 to see how the legacy of the Sisters in India continues to help hundreds of poor children receive a good education. You can read more about these schools and the visit to see them later in this review.

For many years, the Sisters went out from St Mary's Convent to run and teach in a network of different schools. As a modern hub for education, the Convent now hosts organisations teaching over 10,000 children in Oxfordshire and Berkshire, with almost 1,000 more in schools which we support in India.



## Indian Head gains much from Wantage stay

*Sangeeta Kadam is the Principal of Epiphany School in Pune, India. During September 2019 the Sisters were delighted to welcome her and her daughter, Sannaya, to the Convent. These are her reflections on her stay, which included visits to schools run by the Oxford Diocesan Schools Trust.*

I want to sincerely thank you for the wonderful and blessed time that Sannaya and I had at CSMV, Wantage. This visit was truly an enriching and life-changing experience. Growing up in India, Sister Nora Lucienne and Sister Mary Ansylem, had a great impact on my life. Being able to visit Wantage, meant so much to me.

I would also like to thank you and Anne Dellar (ODST) for the meticulously planned and arranged school visits. This experience has helped me grow as an educator.

I am taking back immense learning to share with the teachers at Epiphany School. What stood out to me the most was the more student-centric teaching style, facilitating learning through classroom discussions and activities and encouraging students to think and use their own creativity. It was great that the teachers engaged with every student in the class and catered to their individual needs.

I was able to identify two school to develop future ties with, St. Christopher's Primary School and Churchmead Secondary School. These have many children from disadvantaged backgrounds, similar to Epiphany School. A particular attribute of Churchmead Secondary School is that, despite having children from diverse backgrounds, it has been able to uphold the Christian ethos in its daily functioning. I look forward to partnering with both these schools

Sangeeta Kadam

## Schools in India

In the autumn of 1877, the young CSMV community, responded to a request from the Bishop of Bombay, Bp. Mylne, to come and help him in Poona (today Pune).

The Bishop had a bungalow in the city which he offered for the Sisters' use until they could find a suitable permanent place to live and work.

Mother Harriet decided after much prayerful consideration to send five Sisters, aged between 26 and 41 and all young in their religious profession, to pioneer this expansion of the work of the Community.

On 9th November 1877, Sr. Elizabeth, Sr. Emily, Sr. Annette, Sr. Sophie Ruth and Sr. Beatrice, with Gertrude Tucker (a student bound for Poona), set sail from Liverpool. A letter sent by Sr. Elizabeth graphically described their journey including their near shipwreck off Aden. Eventually they arrived safely in Bombay, ten days overdue, on 10th December. They got to Poona a week later.

Letters written from India as well as the daily log survive and give a vivid picture of the first impressions. One letter from Sr. Sophie Ruth is particularly touching as she is clearly delighted in all that she sees, 'lovely and beautiful, strange and interesting' is how she describes things. Her letter brims with enthusiasm for their task, but sadly this was her only letter home. On Christmas Day she was taken ill with a fever and died on 8th January 1878, only a month after arriving.

All the remaining Sisters became involved in teaching at St Mary's School and caring for vulnerable children and widows. They set a foundation for other Sisters to build on.

The work of the Sisters in India is carried on today by local Christians through the Society of St Mary the Virgin in India (SSMVI). This oversees

the management of a number of schools and hostels, centred in the city of Pune. Below is a snapshot of another busy year for the charity and those it cares for.

**St. Mary's Convent - Shanti Sadan School, Lonavala** The school had 240 students in the academic year 2018-19. Its pupils are drawn from a number of disadvantaged groups within the community.

A team of 23 teachers and support staff work tirelessly for the holistic development and growth of the pupils, led by Head Mistress Mrs. Ruth Dussa.

This year 20 students took the State Board Secondary School Certificate (SSC) Exam and the school enjoyed a 70 percent pass rate.

Apart from the academic activities, the school conducted extracurricular activities and participated in inter-school activities and competitions in Lonavala. Students from St Mary's won prizes in Elocution, Drawing, Sports, and Science Exhibition. The school also organized a Scouts and Guides Camp.

The school buildings have had an extensive programme of repairs this year. Many of the leaky roofs have been mended. The school boundaries were secured with a new wall for the security of the children and property.

**Epiphany School - Pune** Epiphany School with its 720 students enjoyed a 79 percent pass rate in the SSC examination.





Science Day and Independence Day celebrations at the Epiphany School, Pune

But its work alongside other organisations sets it apart. This collaboration is focused on student and teacher excellence. In the last academic year the school has welcomed the Pi-Jam Foundation which sent representatives to teach computer coding. The Indian School Leadership Institute and 'Udaan' conducted training and workshops aimed at improving school performance, and the Open Links Foundation ran an exciting workshop to teach students the craft of making videos and developing their communications and leadership skills.

The school celebrated Science Day with a session on anti-addiction and abuse.

Students from 7th to 9th grades produced a thought provoking campaign to raise awareness around the excessive use of plastic. It aimed to sensitise both students and stakeholders at the school to the various ways in which human activity has degraded the ecosystem we live in. The campaign saw students collecting all plastic waste at the school and rallied more people to donate plastic that could be recycled. All this waste was sorted and sent to an organization which creates usable poly-fuel out of plastic waste. The campaign was a big success as students and staff now see a visible change in how the school collects and disposes of the plastic it uses.

Away from the classroom, the Under

12 football team won the State Championship and flew to Bangalore to play in the National Championships, and the school's Frisbee team played in national tournaments in Goa and Mumbai and was recognised as the team with the highest potential.

**St. Hilda's School - Pune** The school welcomes girls from the poorest areas of Pune city. It has a pre-primary section catering for 25 children aged 4-6 years old. The Primary School has 109 pupils and the High School an additional 400 students.

This year 70 girls took the SSC exam. The school achieved a 68 percent pass rate. Across the schools, teachers are working hard to improve academic achievement and the staff attended several training workshops on new ways of teaching and learning. A new E-learning system has also been installed in seven classrooms.

The school enjoyed special school days to mark Republic Day, Independence Day, Yoga Day, Teachers Day and Children's Day.



Under 12 football team and supporters

## Get involved in India

For a number of years CSMV has encouraged volunteers, of all ages, to consider travelling to India to offer time and talents in the mission at Panch Howd, Pune.

This was where our Sisters lived, worked and prayed for nearly 150 years and their work is now carried on in SSMVI's schools and hostels.

A number of people have taken up the challenge over the years and have found the experience challenging but immensely rewarding.

Students on a gap year would be really welcome working in the schools, and the experience would enhance any future CV.

For further information email Sister Stella at [srstella@csmv.co.uk](mailto:srstella@csmv.co.uk)

Alternatively, you might want to donate to the work of SSMVI – see the inside back cover for more information on how your contribution could make a real difference to the lives of disadvantaged children.

# Caring for the vulnerable

In the late 19th and early 20th century, the Sisters of the Community were called to work with the poor and disadvantaged in Southern Africa as well as in India. Today CSMV continues to support this work at Irene Homes in Pretoria, through community projects in Botswana, and at SSMVI projects at Panch Howd in Pune, India.



Irene Homes Annual Garden Fête

## South Africa

Irene Homes in Pretoria cares for vulnerable adults and offers them training in various craft skills.

During September each year Irene Homes holds a Thanksgiving Day to celebrate all the good and great things that they have received and achieved over the past year; it is also a day when the needs of the Homes are prayed for.

One of the highlights of the year is the Annual Garden Fête. The day is not only about raising money, but also an opportunity for us to make communities aware of intellectual disability, to sensitise them to the needs of the residents and day workers and to have lots of fun and laughter. The residents and day workers never miss the opportunity to sing and dance.

Sadly some of the residents do not have family or friends to take them on holiday. But each year the management of Forever Resorts invite residents to spend a week at the resort in Bela-Bela (Warmbaths). It is pure enjoyment and laughter.

Birthdays are special events at Irene Homes. Staff make sure that the ladies enjoy their birthdays with other residents, family members and friends. This year the residents marked two milestones: Marie Collinet turned 80 and Karien Blom turned 21.

Participation in structured sport plays an important role in the development of residents and day workers. On a weekly basis they practice golf and swimming. Residents are also active in athletics; they participate in the Down Syndrome Athletics day annually and a day worker and two residents won golf gold and bronze medals at the Special Olympics tournament in Abu Dhabi.

The management of Irene Homes has undertaken a comprehensive assessment to determine the Homes' preparedness and ability to care and support residents over a long-term period especially when they became frail.

Some of the findings were striking. Almost 50 percent of the residents are already aged 50 or more, increasing the risks of age related diseases, chronic medical conditions, possible dementia and physical vulnerability. Almost 65 percent have one or more high risk conditions requiring chronic medical intervention. Every resident has one or more physical impairment and perhaps most startling two thirds of the residents are dependent on government health care.

The implications for the continuing support of the residents and their medical needs are pressing and the subject of management time and efforts in 2020.



It's Gold in Abu Dhabi!



Margaret Taylor joins staff of the Holy Cross Hospice, Gabone



Marie and Karien celebrate their birthdays at Irene Homes

## Botswana

CSMV Associate Margaret Taylor continues to manage donations from Wantage to development projects in the southern African country of Botswana. These projects at the Gabane Community Care Centre and the Holy Cross Hospice in Gaborone have historic ties to the Sisters.

The management and staff of the Hospice went through a very difficult time recently. Funding from a significant donor stopped and the Hospice was left unable to pay its professional staff their full salaries for some months. The appointment of a new Board Chairman and a Diocesan-appointed manager alleviated the situation and the Hospice is serving its community once again. The new manager is a doctor and about to be ordained as a priest. He has made a marked difference to the running of the facility.

The day centre in Gabane continues to provide early education and (almost as importantly) regular meals to pre-school and primary school children in a community outside the country's capital.

## India

### St. John's Home for Women and Children

The Home offers a comprehensive care package on very limited funds for 16 female residents in Pune. The residents benefit from free health checks through the work of one regular sponsor, while another offers some of the Home's residents additional financial support. Many local donors and businesses provide items for the day-to-day needs.

The Home also offers day care facilities for a small number of children of working mothers. The opportunity to have a job to support families is vital.

### St. Michael's Hostel

St Michael's Hostel is a long-established service operated by SSMVI. Its offers residential care for 150 girls at risk. This includes children who are orphans or from single parent households, children affected by HIV-AIDS, children of prostitutes or from broken and poor families.

High quality education for girls is one of the biggest challenges facing India. The hostel facilitates the education of the girls in its care at the adjacent St Hilda's and Epiphany Schools, along with providing a safe and healthy living environment. It protects the girls from

all kinds of abuse and tries to provide them an opportunity to live happy lives. The staff work hard to offer a variety of different activities aimed at physical, mental, emotional, academic and spiritual growth.

In addition to marking special occasions like Independence Day and a fun packed sports day, this year the hostel staff arranged a workshop where ex-students returned to St Michael's. The former students brought back memories, but also news of what they had gone on to do once they left the hostel. It was an emotional day, with students new and old happily sharing their experiences.

Life skills are among the most important things taught at St Michael's. This year a variety of workshops were organised, including sessions on sex education, leadership, puberty and hygiene during menstruation.

## Bishop Olivia consecrated



The Rt Revd Olivia Graham was consecrated as the Bishop of Reading at a special service at St Paul's Cathedral in London in November. She was consecrated alongside the Rt Revd Rose Hudson-Wilkin, who was made Bishop of Dover.

Olivia, a trustee of CSMV, is the first female Bishop in the Diocese of Oxford, one of the largest dioceses in the Church of England. With 170 churches in the Reading Episcopal Area, she will now oversee an area larger than many other dioceses.

Following the service, the Archbishop of Canterbury hosted a reception for the family and friends of the two new bishops. A group from the Convent in Wantage were delighted to be invited to both events.

Bishop Olivia then enjoyed a Service of Welcome at Reading Minster. "It was very different (to the consecration),"

she said, "but lay people and clergy from all over Berkshire were there." She was delighted that members of the Jewish, Sikh, Muslim and Hindu communities attended, as well as other Christian denominations. "We are part of one big faith family, and that is so important, particularly in this day and age where we have got quite a divided society and world." Bishop Olivia, asked by BBC Berkshire how she felt about being called Bishop said, "It's taken a little bit of getting used to, but it's such an honour to be stepping into this role that it feels like a huge affirmation every time I hear it."

Photo: Graham Lacroix/St Paul's Cathedral

## An Act Of Folly - An Act Of Love

*A Wantage Extinction Rebellion activist, a good friend of the Sisters, offers these thoughts about its campaign.*

For over 12 years I have been distressed about the catastrophic harm and mass loss of life that has been unfolding due to climate breakdown resulting from the use of fossil fuels.

As long as I can remember I have gained great spiritual sustenance from the beauty of the natural world and the amazing creatures with which we share it. It is an integral part of who I am as a man and as a priest. The death of fauna and flora, on land and in the deep oceans, had left me hopeless with prefiguring grief.

I have written letters to Government ministers, political leaders, media platforms and corporations. I have met and written several times to my MP.

In November 2018, Sir David Attenborough, as the

"People of the World's" representative at the International Committee for Climate Change in Poland, said that the voice of Greta Thunberg and the Extinction Rebellion movement represented the first glimmer of hope he'd seen. His words energised me and gave me hope. So I joined Extinction Rebellion to take non-violent direct action, to get Government to tell the truth about climate change and to act urgently!

Non-violent action does put a great strain on the police, but many of them "get climate change," are concerned for their own families and behind the scenes are very supportive. While I was in custody an officer asked me how he should address me - we agreed on first names - asked if I had eaten and enthusiastically offered me a wide range of hot food and drink! Twelve hours later as I left the police cells, several officers shook my hand conveying a friendship that I value.

Some may say, that the disruption caused by Extinction Rebellion is wrong and have little faith that it will influence international corporations which hold such power in our world and continue to promote the use of fossil fuels - despite the terrible and irreversible consequences.

But the fact that XR won't shut up and may very well be awkward with a particular company, does open the doors for dialogue. From my own experience, directors and executives have listened attentively to my heart-felt concerns when I have called on them without an appointment, purely because I am involved in XR. I have no idea if these charged and impromptu meetings will have any effect, but I have to try.

Extinction Rebellion has hundreds of local groups throughout the country. In Wantage, we support each other in our efforts to bring about "climate justice" in the

world, sharing each others grief and joys. People ask, 'why do you in XR seem to be having fun, over something that it so serious?' The answer is that we absolutely have to try to stay cheerful and positive and not be overwhelmed.

It would be easy to be discouraged, as the scientists tell us that effects of what happens over the next 5 years or so will be felt for 10,000 years to come. So we believe that this is a chance to make a change that we just cannot let pass.

As a Christian, I believe in equality, justice and peace and in radical change when it is necessary, and now is time. I had never imagined myself as being a law breaker and "It is horrifying that we have to fight our own government to save the environment" (Ansel Adams). But if that's what it takes - that is what I and we in XR, here in the UK and across the world, will do.

## Supporting our work overseas



Sr Stella and Alastair Hunter amid the girls and staff at St Michael's Hostel, Pune, in November 2019

Will you support our work with some of the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children and adults in India, South Africa and Botswana?

**You can give now by completing a donation form available either with this review or from our website at <https://csmv.co.uk/donate/>**

CSMV will match every donation made – so each £1 you give will mean £2 going directly to support this vital work.

The projects we help all have their origins in the work of the Sisters in these countries over many decades. We keep in close touch with what is going on today and visit to see first-hand how money is being spent.

In November 2019, Sister Stella and Alastair Hunter (chair of the CSMV trustees) spent a week in India, seeing for themselves how the schools and hostels run by the Society of St Mary the Virgin in India are helping to give hope and opportunity to hundreds of children from the poorest parts of the city of Pune.

As a direct result of this visit, we will be launching in 2020 a sponsorship scheme so that individuals and churches in the UK can support the care and education of a particular child, receiving regular reports on how they are and their progress at school.

If you are interested in finding out more about this sponsorship scheme, please email us at [sisters@csmv.co.uk](mailto:sisters@csmv.co.uk).



In August Sister Stella was re-elected as Sister in Charge of the Community. The Sisters, staff and friends marked the occasion.

## About Us

The Community of St Mary the Virgin at Wantage is a registered charity (no. 1181510).

Originally set up as a charitable trust in the nineteenth century, the charity is now constituted as a Charitable Incorporated Organisation (CIO). During 2019, all the activities and assets of the original trust (registered no. 240513) were transferred into the new CIO.

The CIO's affairs are managed by a board of trustees who collaborate with the Sisters to sustain CSMV, to support the Sisters in their ministry, and to ensure that the organisation meets its charitable objects.

At December 2019, the Trustees were:

Christine Allsopp  
Sandie Capel  
Michele Foot  
Olivia Graham  
Alastair Hunter  
Alison Jestico  
Teresa Morgan  
Sr Stella, CSMV  
Toby Wright

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