



Community of St Mary the Virgin

Annual News 2023-24
from Wantage and Overseas

Community

Sisters at December 2023 in order of Profession -
the making of their life vows to God:

Valeria

Phoebe Margaret

Christine Ann (Solitary)

Lorna

Stella

Trudy

Elizabeth Jane (Sister in Charge)

Lizzie Ruth (Sister under Promise)



Dear Friends,

The Sisters join with me in wishing you all a Very Happy Christmas and Every Blessing for the New Year.

This year has been one of change for CSMV as Sr Stella laid down her responsibilities as Sister in Charge in September and I was elected by the Community to take on this mantle. We give thanks for Sr Stella's seven years in office, and for her creative energy and vision which have enabled our major refurbishment and re-building programme, together with her joy and lightness of spirit in the face of any difficulties. We pray that she is now enjoying her well-earned Sabbatical and look forward to welcoming her back among us for Candlemas.

At the same time, we said 'goodbye' to our Steward Gina Hocking upon her retirement. We have so appreciated Gina's sensitivity to our way of life and her quiet efficiency, and we wish her a happy and fulfilling retirement. We are most grateful to our Bursar Keith Glenny who has taken on the role of Steward, and as I write we look forward to welcoming our new Bursar Rachel Gerhardi.



On 8th September, the Feast of the Birth of the Blessed Virgin Mary, I was blessed as Sister in Charge. Our Sung Eucharist was held in St Mary's Chapel and it was a most joyful occasion. We were very blessed to have our Bishop Visitor Sarah Mullally to preside and preach, assisted by our Warden Fr Toby

Wright. It was so good to welcome our staff, Oblates, Associates, Trustees, clergy and friends to be with us, and to enjoy a simple lunch afterwards in the Maribel Centre. As part of the Service I was asked:

“Sister Elizabeth Jane you have been called by God within this Community of St Mary the Virgin to lead and guide it in the service of Christ, to act justly, to love tenderly and to walk humbly with your God. Will you seek to live in this spirit of loving service?”

.....words which surely apply to us all in our Christian ministry and service, whatever our vocation.

Earlier in the year it was a great joy to receive Sr Lizzie Ruth as a Sister under Promise. This took place on 26th April and we were delighted too, to welcome Sr Lizzie Ruth's parents, brother and sister and their families - including two small nephews. We continue alongside Sr Lizzie Ruth in the discernment and nurturing of her vocation. As part of her ministry, Sr Lizzie Ruth has made three videos which include her own journey, together with the spirituality and ministry of CSMV. They are available on our CSMV Website, so do watch them and commend them to others.



In the summer Bishop Sarah asked if one of us might be chaplain at her Two Cities Clergy Conference, and I was the happy recipient of this invitation. The Conference was held at Lancaster University and the theme was “Faith and the Arts”. I was made very welcome by the clergy of central London – the City of Westminster and the City of London and lovely connections were made. Our worship reflected the diverse traditions represented, and there was time to relax, as well as to enjoy stimulating speakers such as Ben Quash, Chine McDonald and a speaker from the National Gallery. All in all it was a lovely opportunity to be enriched and refreshed.

Lastly but not least, we rejoiced with Sr Christine Ann who celebrated her Diamond Jubilee of Profession on 2nd October - the lovely festival of the Holy Guardian Angels. These occasions are always an inspiration to us of lives faithfully lived over many years in response to the faithfulness of God. As we read:

“The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do it.”

1 Thessalonians 5: 24

So let us remember this as we look to the year which is before us. We do not know what this New Year will bring, but we do know that we can rest in the faithful promises of God.

With our love and prayer,

Sr Elizabeth Jane
Sister in Charge

News from the Sisters

A New Associate Link Sister

Life goes on at Wantage Nursing Home the same as usual, I've been living here for thirteen years now. I still try to do my flowerpots with the help of a friend, trying to brighten up the surroundings (pictured below). I join the Parish Church for Communion during the week, and stream/zoom the church service once per month. Sometimes I join the St Mary's Church, Witney service also by zoom.

Since I have been invited to be the link Sister for the Associates, I join the Steering Committee group for their meetings. I have been trying to phone Associates to have a talk to them and find out more about themselves and their families. Not living at the Convent, I don't always see Associates when they come to the Convent to have a chat with them and to know what to pray for them in their lives. I think of the Associates every day when I say the Community's memorial prayer, which they say too.

I still go down into the town to do some shopping for myself and very often meet people in Wantage, sometimes I know them by sight and not by name, but we still have a chat. I still try and say all the Offices and have my prayer time, and hopefully something comes from that into the home.

Sister Trudy



Gina Hocking, the Steward

There was something about Gina's sense of balance in becoming part of the Convent staff that gave me confidence. Not, I feel, that she clung to power or even that she relied on personal control, but rather that she had a capacity to listen and to encourage new ways of looking at issues or of reflecting on them. In moments of relative calm, she liked, I think, to generate laughter and to leave the other feeling somewhat affirmed.



It was early after the appointment had been made that Gina was given the title: Steward, in preference to perhaps the term General Manager, who with others would have been administering the property and financial advisors. The Steward would seek to uphold and to enhance the individual insights among the staff members as well as to help form personal relationships with one another. Gina, I feel undertook this task with some warmth and generosity and there were staff members who found her kind and supportive.

Over the five and a half years Gina was with us, her mind grew with fresh ideas, not least to responding to the complexities of safeguarding with our Religious Life structure. Later, after the strictures of Covid had reduced, there was space to respect the shared management of three gardeners who worked creatively together combining demands of seasonal change in planned flowerbeds with a lightness of touch for areas growing wild.

Two days after Gina had had her retirement lunch with a range of close friends and contacts in the Convent's Dalai Lama room, the Sisters formed for Gina a welcoming simple tea-party in a small-ish part of the garden with much gentle sharing and thanks giving.

Sister Stella

Pictured above: A good humoured Gina at her retirement lunch with friends and colleagues

Noise, Dust and Hazards; Joys, Sorrows and Delightful Surprises: of those living and working on St Raphael's Wing

"After you Cecil; no, after you Claud!" Amazing patience of workmen, Sisters and staff was very evident. We were all polite and helpful. It wasn't easy – and noise was the worst, complicated by further noise from the building of a bypass not very far away. Because it is a very old building, sound proofing was never considered. Therefore, in spite of the fire doors, sound from the ground floor was very loud two floors up. Such work has not been done to upgrade our facilities for many years.

One incident close to my heart and my sense of humour came as I looked out of my cell door. There were two workmen kneeling on the floor trying to collect the dust together. Along came a very generous Carer with a paper bag full of jam doughnuts. She offered them to the workmen who gratefully accepted and stayed on their knees to eat them. Well, those who eat most...etc.



Every morning just after 8am, when I was dressed decently, I made my way from my room to the bathroom – only a matter of a few yards – to be met by a man with an electric drill poised. Also just outside the bathroom was a man on a ladder. "After you, no, after you!" I must say that all this hassle took up a great deal of energy. Added to this were architects checking that everything was being done well. All electric wiring had to be replaced because it posed a danger to all. Also a new fire alarm system has been installed just inside the SRW front door. Now everything is ticking and working whether or not there is a fire – which mercifully there hasn't been. This system is separated from the main Convent, although we are part of the main building. This makes locating a fire much easier.

We have each had our rooms re-decorated and secondary double glazing has been put in. For the first time in fifty-five years I was allowed to choose a colour. Over the years we have had magnolia. Also we have had new fire proof curtains put in, nicely lined. This also helps to alleviate noise at night

from traffic. My walls are artichoke green and my curtains are cream with a Chinese pattern of red peonies and other flowers. I find them a delight. When I tried to share my delight, another Sister told me she hadn't noticed hers at all. How wonderfully different we are all made!

Last but by no means least, what we had all been promised – a WET ROOM. This is no exaggeration! Water flows all too freely. The staff do not mind getting wet whilst assisting. "It's only water" are the remarks so far! Perhaps they would like wetsuits in future.



None of these things have prevented us from having friends and family coming to visit us "on the Wing". One particular workman, Mike from Uffington, had expressed an interest to see the Stations of the Cross in St Mary Magdalene's Chapel, so it is hoped he will return as a friendly visitor now work is complete.

We thank God for our safety and kind people to help us.

Sister Lorna

Pictured: previous page Sr Lorna in her room. Above: a Chinese painting by Sr Lorna, one of many pieces of art and photography now adorning the corridors of the refurbished St Raphael's Wing.

Part of a Sermon Sr Lizzie Ruth Preached to Oxford Students

Below is half of the sermon recently delivered by Sr Lizzie Ruth at Wadham College Sunday Choral Evensong as part of their Michaelmas Term series on “Ways of Knowing”.

The half omitted here included descriptions of ways that Christians get to know and have a relationship with God, how Christian prayer, unlike Buddhist meditation or The Headspace App, has relationship with a God who knows us at its core, our pattern of life at the Convent, and how life-transforming it is when people encounter for themselves God’s unconditional love.

I don’t know how much you already know about Religious Life but as I stand here I expect some of you might be thinking, “I could never do that!” or “Why on earth would anyone want to live like that?!”

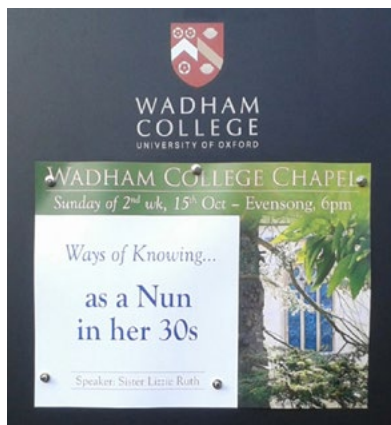
Would it surprise you to learn that a lot of people in Religious Life had exactly those same thoughts at some point? “I could never give up the lifestyle I love”, “I could never leave this home or career I’ve worked so hard for”, “I could never spend the whole rest of my life without sex”!

And yet they came to the point where they did end up doing the very things they felt they couldn’t do.

Why? And how?

They found something even more appealing and compelling and life-giving. They found treasure in a field. And compared to the beauty and value of that treasure, everything else in their life became less significant.

There are millions of Christians who never imagined themselves becoming Christians. And equally there have been thousands of people in Religious Life who never imagined themselves becoming monks or nuns.



Only a small number of people who become Christians become monks and nuns. That's because God calls most Christians to live out their Christianity in the context of marriage and family life and a relatively normal work life and social life.

But this handful who do feel God inviting them to become monks and nuns... What does our life look like?

The threefold vow we make is of poverty, chastity and obedience.

Religious poverty includes living simply, not having personal possessions, and sharing all things in common with the other members of your community. It also has a wider meaning of solidarity with those who don't have so much personal choice in their life.

You're probably wondering what I'm about to say about chastity! Those of us in religious life vow "celibate chastity". Celibacy means staying single. Chastity is a very wide term, wider than just being about sex, and it actually sees sex as good. All Christians are called to chastity, including married Christians. Chastity means two things: 'single-heartedness towards God' and 'things viewed and treated as God intended'. It means seeing our own bodies and other people's bodies as good and beautiful and sacred and treating them as such. As well as having implications for sexual activity, chastity – which lots of Christians and people of other religions find a beautiful way of life – also has implications for how we dress, as well as for eating, drinking and substance use.

In the Christian tradition, chastity involves keeping sex within marriage. This means that for unmarried people, including monks and nuns, chastity means abstaining from sex (with others and with yourself), being careful what we look at and watch, and being careful about what we entertain in our minds. This is out of reverence for how sexual activity ought to always be a two-way loving act and reserved for life-long commitment that involves sacrifice along with pleasure.

Obedience involves submitting to the way of life of your convent or monastery, being willing to live and make decisions as a group, listening to others, and not insisting that others do things your way. Ultimately it's about being open to God and others rather than living life completely on your own terms.

As with the whole of Christianity, poverty, chastity and obedience aren't so

much about rules and renunciation as they are about love and relationship. I don't always find religious poverty easy but it deepens my relationship with God by making me trust God more, and it deepens my sense of what's most important in life. I don't always find celibacy and chastity easy but they draw a circle around me and Jesus, making him the central relationship in my life. Celibacy and chastity also help me encounter the wider romance and passion of God for the whole world.

You've probably come across the scenario in a book or a film where someone falls in love and to their own surprise they find that in order to be with the person they love, they're willing to leave the place they thought they'd never be willing to leave, or they're happy to live on a more modest income than they formerly thought they'd be willing to, or they're able to endure more than they thought possible. This is the experience of people who come to love God on the back of God's love for them. This is the experience of people in Religious Life and of Christians in general.

Sister Lizzie Ruth

Our Convent Hospitality

It has been a busy year of hospitality here at the Convent. Our Maribel Centre has provided working spaces for a multitude of organisations. During term time, the rooms of the Maribel Centre are alive with the buzz of teachers and school staff coming together to learn, share and engage with one another. We are also delighted to be able to provide the Oxford Diocesan Board of Education with a contemplative space to support school leaders through their 'Performance, Resilience and Support' programme, which focusses on providing wellbeing and pastoral support to headteachers as they respond to the many challenges of their role. The management teams of the Medaille Trust work remotely nationwide, and this year we have been delighted to support them getting together for face-to-face meetings here at the Maribel Centre.



We are pleased to be able to support the Diocese of Oxford in their ministerial work as they host a variety of diocesan meetings at St Mary's Convent. Our versatile combination of spacious meeting rooms, residential accommodation and multiple options for group worship means that a working diocesan or parish group can really embed themselves into the environment of the Convent, making the most of their time together. On a smaller scale, a Diocesan Vocations Advisor regularly meets one on one with those in the early stages of exploring ordination.

The Retreat Wing welcomed nearly one thousand guests in 2023, for both Retreats and Quiet Days. The Sisters are most pleased to welcome retreatants to St Mary Magdalene's Chapel for the Daily Office and encourage all guests to relax into the rhythm of prayer and silence here at the Convent. We are pleased to be gradually increasing our programme of conducted Retreats; starting with a Beginners' Retreat facilitated by Sr Lizzie Ruth, which will become an annual event. A further three CSMV run events are planned for 2024 along with the many Retreats and Quiet Days organised by our very active CSMV Associates group that are open for all to attend.

Please see the next page for a listing of Retreats and Quiet Days in 2024.

2024 Calendar of Retreats and Quiet Days

The below Retreats and Quiet Days are held at St Mary's Convent, Wantage and are open to all.

For further information visit www.csmv.co.uk.

For bookings contact welcome@csmv.co.uk or 01235 763141.

16-18

February

Care for Creation

Conducted Retreat reflecting on our place in God's creation and our response to the current environmental crisis with Revd Canon Liz Jackson.

2

March

Lent Quiet Day

CSMV Associates run Lent Quiet Day with Revd Katherine Price, Vicar of Wantage

24-26

May

Spending Time with Julian of Norwich

Conducted Retreat with Revd Canon Emma Pennington.

16-20

July

Themed Retreat

CSMV Associates run Retreat on the 19th Century Oxford Movement, to include local visits, talks and prayers.

16-18

August

Images of Mary

Conducted Retreat exploring the names of Mary through the writings of St Bernard, with Revd Susan Blagdon.

22-26

October

Conducted Retreat

CSMV Associates run Conducted Retreat. Further details to be released January 2024.

16-17

November

Beginners' Retreat

Facilitated by Sr Lizzie Ruth, retreatants will be gently guided in how they might use the space and time in retreat.

Oblates UK

Firstly, we would like to thank Sister Stella for her commitment to us, and we are delighted that she will continue to be Oblate Sister this coming year. Rita Ball's time as an Oblate Councillor has concluded, and we owe her our heartfelt thanks for her calm presence, organisational skills, insights, wisdom and creativity. Current council members for the coming year are Mary Haywood, Anna Sketchley, Jennie Keyte, Maria Dent and Georgetta Forster-Pert. We are also very grateful to Elizabeth Pook, who has continued to send out the Anniversary cards and renewal slips. We would also like to thank our friends in reception, finance and administration for their welcome and support, and to hospitality for feeding us so well, taking different dietary requirements in their stride.

In August, we held our annual Oblates' Summer Meeting (pictured below). Our theme was based around Psalm 71, specifically verse 20, the turning point from looking backwards to looking forwards to the future; hence the title of the day, "And yet...". We started the day with the Eucharist in St Mary's Chapel led by Rita Bell with Anna Sketchley as Deacon, Mary Harwood played the organ, Jennie Keyte led our intercessions, and Anna Sketchley and Maria Dent read. Sister Lizzie Ruth preached: her sermon was inspirational, and was made available to everyone afterwards. Maria Dent led the afternoon activities with Oblates and Sisters working together. Through conversation and the medium of collage, we celebrated our vocations, and reflected on what it means to be an Oblate. The outcomes are being used to create meditations, shared via our monthly Jottings and the website. During the day, Sister Stella shared the Community news, and via Zoom, we were able to share news with South African Oblates. At the end of the day, there was opportunity to make renewals.



In October, from 10th to 14th the Read, Rest and Reflect retreat took place. Six of us attended and following an initial meeting and enjoying tea and cake, we went to Vespers, then began the silence. We were able to spend our time either in silent contemplation, in reading or walking, whilst being held by the rhythm of the Offices and mealtimes. We all met together from 16.00 for a talking tea, which was lovely for us in getting to know one another. We were also fortunate that Sr Elizabeth Jane, Sr Stella and Sr Lizzie Ruth managed to join us during this space, which was very special to have that informal time with them. We may well offer this again next year.



Pictured above: Oblates Rev'd Joyce Birkett (front), left to right Jennie Keyte, Rev'd Isobel Rathbone, Rev'd Emma D'Aeth, Anna Sketchley and Rev'd Rita Ball

Oblate Council had been saying for some time that it would be good to have more contact with the Associates, particularly as both groups have a number of people who are geographically isolated from any other CSMV contact, and an age profile that means less people are able to travel or stay away from home for a variety of reasons. This year first steps were taken. Rita and Mary met with Sue, from the Associate Steering Group, and Sister Trudy, Associate Sister, to explore practical ways of building a closer relationship. One possibility is to share contact details which might enable some of our and their more isolated members to be in touch with another CSMV "person", as well as greater coordination of retreats and quiet days.

Oblate resources continued to be reviewed, and updated as appropriate. The revised Oblate Rule book was distributed at the end of last year, and the Oblate address book has been updated, printed and distributed this year; our thanks go to Mary and Catrin for their hard work. The new Oblate leaflet

is available in reception, and information on the website has been enhanced; the intention is that they inform visitors about the Oblate Fellowship, hoping to attract enquiries from those exploring a 'Rule of Life' within a religious community. Last year, Anna organised electronic Christmas cards for the South African Oblates, and as they were very well received, the same will happen this year. In addition, we will also include the majority of UK Oblates in the mailing list; physical cards will be sent to those who prefer them, and to those who do not receive the newsletter electronically. Money saved will be donated to charity. The weekly, online Compline still continues, facilitated by one of our Oblates, Hugh; if you are interested in joining this, please contact one of the Oblate Councillors.

In the coming year, we hope to build our relationship with Associate Fellowship, to explore new ways of facilitating retreat opportunities, and to develop the website further.

Maria Dent and Jennie Keyte

Oblates SA

What lies at the heart of the small group of Oblates in South Africa? Seventeen in number, we are scattered around the country, with fifteen members aged between 73 - 92 years of age. The practicalities and responsibilities of daily life have become more complicated, and some are feeling the effects of aging and continuous ill health. Regular attendance at church can be difficult and sometimes impossible. The great distances between us means meeting together seldom happens. Planning an in-person Council meeting has to take into account the 650km (403 miles) from Pretoria to KwaZulu-Natal. Enough to make anyone wonder how we can be in fellowship with one another!

Underlying everything is our commitment to God and to His call to serve Him as Oblates of the Community of St Mary the Virgin. Key elements include the spirituality of CSMV and the example of the Sisters living out their calling, day by day. The Oblates' Manual, known as the 'Blue Book', gives us the Common Rule, to which we bring our personal commitment to a rule of life and our individual experiences. Covid taught us to explore the practicalities of keeping in touch and making Renewals when unable to meet. The Community approved the receiving of Renewals telephonically and this

practice continues to be a blessing. Above all, prayer is at the heart of our lives in Christ, and we support one another in prayer as best we can. When a specific prayer request is sent out, the result is tangible.

Modern technology has given us ways to keep in touch and we have a degree of fellowship now that would have seemed impossible twenty years ago, when CSMV withdrew from South Africa. In some cases, relatives have stepped in to ensure that an Oblate is not cut off from the Newsletters and messages. Stevie, now happily settled in England, remains in contact and Council fondly refer to her as our 'offshore' member.

Prue, Marion and Margie have known each other for a long time and keep in constant contact, both as friends and when handling Council matters. Discussions can be lively as we often start from three differing viewpoints! Much prayer, attentive listening and a willingness to wait on the Spirit is needed, only when we are of one heart and mind will a decision be made. Fortunately we all have a good sense of humour as well! During our Council meeting at Candlemas 2023, we gave thanks to God for the great resilience and fortitude of the Oblates, their commitment of heart, mind and soul to their calling, and their compassionate reaching out to one another. Messages, emails and phone calls move so easily around this big country, giving encouragement and support. In 2023 we find ourselves in fellowship and a mutual understanding with one another that is greater than anything we could have planned or expected.

Thanks be to God.

Prue Cowie, Marion Raubenheimer and Margie Shone

Associates

2023 was a busy year for the Associates. The Steering Group has been especially pleased to be working with Sister Trudy alongside us. Her wisdom and insightful comments have been very helpful and we much appreciate her support. In particular we are very grateful that Sister Trudy has been working her way through the list of Associates making phone calls to them, which we know is greatly valued by Associates, especially those who are no longer able to travel to Wantage. The Steering Group is keen to make every effort to keep in contact with all Associates. Catherine puts together our newsletters to be sent by email and Sue prepares these to post to those who do not use computers. We hope that these newsletters are useful in keeping you updated and help you to feel connected. We are always delighted when Associates send us news to include and we welcome your prayer requests.

Rosey, our Retreats Secretary, organised an inspirational programme for us. For those who are able to travel, in spring we had a lively Quiet Day at the Convent, led by Associate Rev. Angela Butler on Matheson's lovely hymn "O love that wilt not let me go". In October we held our Conducted Retreat in the Convent, led by Christopher Chapman, by popular request. In November we have our Advent day, but this is held on Zoom, designed especially for those who cannot access the Convent easily. The subject is "Journey to Emmanuel: God with us", led by Revd. Miles Wellborn.

In September Associates' Day was held at Wantage and we were able to offer the day on Zoom as well. We are getting better with the technology and were even able to have some brief chats with those who joined us from afar. Father Nicholas Cheeseman led the day for us, presiding at Eucharist and giving us a very stimulating and fun afternoon session, including inspiring us to express ourselves in Lego! We were delighted that the Sisters were able to join us for the day and we enjoyed a superb lunch, whilst catching up on all our news. We much appreciated being able to hold the day in the Maribel Centre, which lends itself so well to a flexible day.

During this year, we have been delighted that several people have expressed interest in becoming Associates and four have been admitted, Naomi Dilling (in January), Joy Hance (in May) and Judy Longworth and Seamus Jennings at Associates Day in September. We already have three who are in discussion with Debbie and who hope to be admitted at Candlemas next year. It is a

great blessing that there is such a growth in interest in the Associates and our relationship with CSMV.

I should like to thank Sister Elizabeth Jane for all her support for the Associates, Sue Thwaite, Debbie Webb, Rosey Feuall and Catherine Mann for all their hard work on the Steering Group and Sister Trudy for her presence alongside us.

Sue Sowden

News from Wantage Overseas

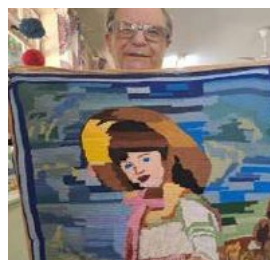
Irene Homes, South Africa

Enabling people with intellectual disabilities

Irene Homes provides residential and day care support and skills training to women and men who are intellectually disabled, of all Christian denominations and other faiths, with the goal of improved self-awareness, self-growth and job creation.

The staff and residents of Irene Home have enjoyed another jam-packed year of events. Alongside regular events such as the “let’s catch up” picnics and the sociable “braai”, there have been monthly visits from TOP Dogs therapy dogs and the annual holiday trip to Forever Resorts. As always there has been singing, dancing and birthday celebrations throughout the year. The residents enjoy supporting other causes close to their hearts such as knitting outfits for Precious Blessings, a project that cares for abandoned infants, as well as giving much needed love and attention to animals being cared for at the local animal shelter.

Creativity is paramount to the therapy objectives of Irene Homes. Artistic and productive endeavours offer important opportunities for skill development, self-expression and relaxation. This year has seen embroidery, splash painting, baking, textile painting, gardening and creative science experiments to name just a few projects - some of which are pictured below.





A healthy lifestyle is important for all at Irene Homes, with regular walks and exercise being part of all the residents' weekly activities. Events such as this year's sports day organised by Special Olympics South Africa and the Rotary Team also provide an inclusive and fun-filled opportunity for everyone to get active; pictured above.

Irene Homes also has a very active choir, led by Lehante Jooste as a wonderful choirmaster. Not only do they enlighten and bring joy to all the Irene Homes events, but they also take part in local festivals. In 2023, the choir won the vocal category at the Raca Gala event, as well as a diamond prize in the Raca Eisteddfod earlier this year. Later this year, they will also perform at the Department of Social Eisteddfod. The choir are pictured below.



We thank the residents, staff and volunteers at Irene Homes for all they do and for keeping us updated on all their exciting news and wonderful photographs throughout the year.

Visit our website <https://csmv.co.uk/projects-in-southern-africa/> for a full annual report from Irene Homes.

Earlier this year, CSMV trustee the Rt Revd Olivia Graham, Bishop of Reading, and Steward Keith Glenny visited Irene Homes. An account of their visit follows.

It was a particular pleasure for us to pay an all too brief visit to Irene Homes at the end of September. As first-time visitors, we learned the history of the Homes and how they have developed to reach today's position, providing residential and day care support and skills training to women and men who are intellectually disabled. We heard from Estelle (CEO) and Melinda (Fundraiser) about the joys and challenges they face, the impact Covid has had and how the fundraising environment has become more demanding.

The connecting thread back to Wantage is proudly maintained: we saw the chapel where the community gather enthusiastically each Wednesday, photos on the wall of Sisters in bygone years and Mother Maribel's work in the grounds. We were privileged to be shown round 3 of the 6 houses, to meet many of the resident ladies in their home environment and to see how they are provided for and cared for. Their welcome and delight in meeting us was warm, natural and obvious. One or two longer-standing ladies shared fond memories of CSMV Sisters they remembered.

We visited (unavoidably) on a National Holiday, so were unable to see the place in full swing – the protective and therapeutic workshops were closed, as was the highly regarded charity shop. These links to the local community are vital and affirming, as are the occasions when the choir is out and about. The choir treated us to a short but powerfully moving and inspiring selection from their repertoire – an unexpected highlight for this singer (Keith).

There will always be a sense that more could be done – for example, improvements to the physical facilities, extra space for more residents, installation of more solar panels and invertors to counteract the frequent occurrences of load-shedding (power cuts) which create disturbance and confusion for the ladies. All would require more funds, but the financial resources and donations received in various kinds are clearly put to best use. The dedication of the staff and the depth of faithful prayer that undergirds Irene Homes is admirable and humbling.

Later we were also delighted to spend some time in the company of Ann

O'Mahony (Associate) and Prue Cowie (Oblate), hearing their individual perspectives on Irene Homes, on how their respective groups work and what the future might hold. Such personal contact is invaluable, building on relationships established by email, and strengthening the links between South Africa and the UK. In the short time available, we barely scratched the surface of all that we could have talked about, but we were immensely grateful for their time, hospitality and wisdom.



Olivia Graham (Trustee) & Keith Glenny (Steward)

Pictured above: Keith (seated) with (left to right) Melinda, Olivia, Lehante and Estelle

Botswana

Working with the Communities of Gabane and Gaborone

Our donations to causes in Botswana are gratefully managed by CSMV Associate Margaret Taylor. Together we support The Holy Cross Hospice, Gaborone for the elderly and terminally ill as well as the Gabane Community Home Based Care Centre offering pre-school education and care for local families and orphaned children.

Holy Cross Hospice is one of only a handful of agencies in Botswana focused on delivering end-of-life and palliative care services to people with HIV, AIDS, cancer, and other life-limiting illness. The largest focus of Holy Cross Hospice is the operation of an adult day care centre operating four days a week providing cooked meals, medical advice, and nursing care. Home visits are made to those who cannot attend the day centre.

The pre-school is doing well under new leadership after a change of staffing due to retirement. Below are some photos of the children practising for an upcoming event at the community centre. There are two classes, one for younger children and one for older, but for this practice they were all together.



Through Margaret's contacts with the local community, we are also able to offer individual help to families in need. Recently we were able to help a mother whose change in circumstances meant she needed support with paying a deposit for a pre-school place for her child. This secure childcare provision enabled her to continue to work and bring much needed money into the family.

We thank Margaret for her continued efforts in supporting the ministry of CSMV and keeping us updated with news and photographs.

The Society of St Mary the Virgin India

Providing care and education to women and children

The Society of St Mary the Virgin India, based in Pune, provides valuable services for the local community, building on the foundations of the work started by the Sisters of CSMV in the late 19th Century.

Three schools educate children from ages 3-16 years, St Hilda's School, Epiphany School and the Shanti Sadan School. As India faces the pressures of the global financial situation and high unemployment, more children are forced into poverty, while others are obliged to leave education and enter the labour market. Amid these pressures, SSMVI strive even harder to maintain the education of its students. The schools of SSMVI support their students to attain a high level of excellence in their state exams, as well as encouraging and facilitating the enrichment and development of pupils through sporting events, cultural celebrations and fun filled activities.

At St Hilda's School a special tree planting ceremony was held as the local fundraising Lions Club donated trees and educational supplies to the school. Each sapling was planted with a detailed information plaque about each tree (*Pictured below*).



Epiphany School students in years 7-9 recently debated the topic of 'Artificial Intelligence' in their Inter House Debating Competition, while three students excelled in their sporting achievements competing at state level in both football and weightlifting. Students also enjoyed watching the historical launch of Chandrayan 3, celebrated Indian Nature Conservation Day with a School Quiz and took part in a tote bag painting workshop. (*Pictured opposite*).



This year, St Michael's Hostel celebrated 135 years of providing residential and social care for 190 vulnerable girls aged 5- 16 years. The children cared for at St Michel's Hostel are at high risk, coming from underprivileged and difficult family backgrounds. A celebratory event was organized where the girls took part in several different cultural performances as part of a friendly competition. The function was attended by a renown social activist and political leader Mrs. Pratibha Dhagekar, who awarded prizes to the winners. (Pictured below).



St John's Home is a residential care home caring for ten elderly ladies. Their medical and care needs are well met with the support of 'Help Age India', but just as importantly too are the needs of their social wellbeing with joyous celebrations and events planned throughout the year. A visit from the girls of St Michael's Hostel benefitted both the women and girls in building inter-generational relationships as they tended to the gardens and communal spaces of the home.

All these services, and more, are so valuable to the communities of Pune and the surrounding area and CSMV are pleased to be able to support the work of SSMVI as they continue to care for those in greatest need.

Medaille Trust

Refuge and Freedom from Modern Slavery

In 2023 the Medaille Trust increased its capacity to provide refuge to survivors of Modern Slavery in the UK by opening its tenth safe house in Swindon and expanding the provision at an existing Safe House in Liverpool from ten beds to eighteen. The expansion of safe house spaces enables the trust to fulfil its mission to provide refuge and freedom from modern slavery and maintains its position of one of the largest providers of safe house beds in the UK.

Prevention of modern slavery is high on the agenda at the Medaille Trust, and so the Albanian Entrepreneurship Academy was launched by the Medaille Trust in partnership with Ethical Goods and several NGOs. Statistically, Albania is the highest source country of victims of modern slavery in the UK and has been for many years. The initiative aims to support up to five Albanian small businesses to thrive and offer employment in their communities, so people are not tempted into the hands of traffickers in their struggle to find work.

In 2023, the academy committed to supporting one such business in Fushë – Arrëz. The creation of a social enterprise engaged in the collection, processing and sale of herbs and forest fruits at local markets has seen fifteen women gain employment and skills in this successful scheme, and with further investment from the Medaille Trust it hopes to grow its reach. With large proportions of Fushë – Arrëz's youth population migrating to the UK, the town's mayor, Hil Curri, emphasized the need for interventions that can help retain and support local labour forces and talent.

Having spent time with some of the staff of the Medaille Trust it is very clear to CSMV that they are a passionate group of engaged in hugely varied, worthwhile and challenging work. CSMV are pleased to be able to support them in fulfilling their charitable objectives and give thanks for their valuable work.



Pictured above: Left: the processing room for drying produce in Fushë – Arrëz. Right: Medaille Trust CEO Garry Smith meeting with the project team.

BeSpace

Creating space for prayer and reflection in schools and communities

BeSpace have had another busy year visiting over thirty schools and community spaces with their wonderful array of creative ways to encourage children to take time to reflect and contemplate.

Starting 2023 with a series of Narnia themed Prayer Spaces, three village churches were transformed by BeSpace into a winter wonderland, with the children having to walk through a 'wardrobe' to start the experience. The 'wows' from the children as they entered the church and the response received from the children and staff was inspiring. The completed activities from the different spaces were taken into local schools and made into a lovely display board for all to see, reaffirming the importance and value of prayer and reflection spaces for all.



Left: A prayer activity inspired by the book character Aslan. Below: a wall display comprising of the many activities from a Narnia themed BeSpace.



A prayer space at a secondary school in Oxford earlier this year consisted of ten activity stations guiding the Year 7 children through the story of Easter. The students appreciated the calm atmosphere, with several taking the opportunity to return to the spaces later in the day for time alone. The school chaplain also used the space to spend additional time with a group of students with special learning needs. Furthermore, several teachers were welcomed into the space and enjoyed a moment of quiet during their working day, making this single prayer space take on a multitude of functions for the whole school community.

This summer, BeSpace welcomed a new team member, Harriet, as project co-ordinator. If you would like to speak to Harriet about organising a Prayer Space in your community do get in touch on harriet@bespace.be

Discovering Prayer

Inspiring a joyful and fulfilling relationship with God

Discovering Prayer is part of the body of Christ called to promote the religious life to a new generation. We use technology to pass on the teaching we have received from nuns and monks so people can enjoy a joyful, fulfilling relationship with God.



Olivia, for example, said she experienced 'a deep feeling of homecoming, which was incredibly moving' when she prayed with us.

Over the last year, CSMV's prayers and generosity enabled us to create a new, free prayer course, *Still Small Voice*. Its aim was to help people uncover the riches of a range of ways to pray rooted in the ancient paths of Christianity, including regular morning and evening prayer. We also added twenty new guided prayer times to our *Absorbing God's Word* series, a slow, meditative Lectio Divina journey through the Gospel of St John.

Learning to pray and stay in God's presence in this way has been transformative for many members of our growing community. Here's what two told us:


'I stumbled on Discovering Prayer at a time when I truly needed God. I now understand there is a time and a place for all prayer. I've got more out of this than the three years I have been on this journey. I now know my God is truly alive and listening to me, and me to him.' – David

'People have seen the change in me.' – Alex

If you'd like to join us, please sign up at www.discoveringprayer.com – it would be a privilege to pray with you.

Michelle Eyre

Founder and Director of Discovering Prayer



The Community of St Mary the Virgin at Wantage is a Charitable Incorporated Organisation registered with the Charity Commission (registration number 1181510)

The trustees of the charity are:

The Ven Christine Allsopp

Sandie Capel

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Michele Foot

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