



Equipping women, children and families
in India to discover a brighter future.

Cathedral Relief Service Newsletter Spring 2026

In this edition,
Neil Swan, editor and trustee
of Friends of CRS
writes

Dear CRS supporter

'Inspired' is the word people use most frequently when describing how they feel after witnessing what CRS does. Karen Laister and Crispin Scott both use it (or a variant of it) in their reports of their visits in this edition. Karen knows CRS well and the fact that she still feels inspired is testament to her continuing regard for the work she saw being done. For Crispin it was a first trip. He writes not only about the impact his trip had on him but also about the way an earlier trip made by his daughter Lydia influenced the direction of her life. We are delighted that one outcome of his trip has been that he has become a new trustee.



Rig David, Cheryl George and the CRS Team give a series of reports on the work of CRS, all of which in different ways show how lives are developed and changed for the good. If that claim sounds bold, it is borne out by the stories. What CRS achieves with so little money is a reproach to those of us who sometimes use lack of funds as grounds for inaction. What CRS knows is that much can be achieved by love, dedication and rolling up your sleeves.

The financial report is a reminder that while CRS can make a rupee stretch a long way, it still needs a supply of those urgently needed rupees if it is to serve its communities. If you are already supporting CRS financially, your contribution is a vital part of the whole operation. If you do not yet support CRS financially, I would urge you to do what you can. Even if you can only afford a small monthly donation to Friends of CRS, it all adds up and a regular income stream makes budgeting easier. It would be a wonderful symmetry to think that our generosity might inspire the CRS team.

A Visit Filled with Hope: Reflections from CRS in Kolkata

by Karen Laister

I never fail to be inspired and moved when I visit the Cathedral Relief Service (CRS) in Kolkata and see how people with compassion, dedication, and vision are transforming the lives of women, children and families in city neighbourhoods and rural communities across West Bengal.



One of the highlights of my recent trip was a visit to Nari Dana. More than a workplace, Nari Dana is a community where women find dignity, confidence, and freedom – the values that CRS is trying to give them. Nobody had to tell me that; I could sense it from the pride that the women take in their work and the way that they told me their stories.

The programmes that educate and empower women are important pillars of CRS's mission. Acquiring skills at the training facilities (or 'empowerment centres' as they are called) gives them confidence, ambition and an identity. I was impressed by their dexterity and artistry. The centres are fortunate in having a stable group of teachers and trainers who bring warmth, professionalism, and commitment to their work. Many have served for decades.

The health programme provides health monitoring and care for people who would not otherwise receive it. At St Luke's Centre in Bosekati, I saw the compassion and dedication of the CRS doctors and staff. The queues of patients were testament to the necessity of the services.

Behind all the work is a remarkable team of CRS staff who have an average length of service of nearly 30 years. Their loyalty is a reason why wisdom and knowledge have been retained in the organisation. One of the reasons why people like to stay with CRS is that it has a leadership style that seeks to empower and support individuals rather than tell them what to do. Some of the team are now approaching retirement and CRS is drawing up succession plans so that leadership and knowledge pass on to the next generation. The love and trust that CRS seeks to have with its staff also sets the tone for the relationships it has with the communities it serves. But steady commitment is the heartbeat of the organisation.



During my trip, I met the CRS Executive Board and cathedral leaders who expressed a wish to strengthen and expand the work that CRS does. To achieve that objective, they recognised the need to expand local fundraising; develop Nari Dana commercially; refresh the branding and communications; and prepare for future leadership transitions..



Perhaps the most poignant moment of my visit occurred in Jharkhali, a remote village where CRS had had to close an empowerment centre because of covid. The passion with which the women asked for its return and the dignity, courage and determination with which they made their request were powerful reminders of why CRS exists. The encounter was heartbreaking. But it was also hopeful because it showed that the women had developed the confidence to make their case. For me it was a call to action to make sure that we can do what we can to help.

CRS shows what happens when compassion combines with commitment. Its programmes restore dignity, empower women, nurture children, and bring healing where it is most needed. I was impressed yet again by the creativity and resilience of the CRS staff and their unwavering belief that a brighter future is possible for the communities they serve. I left with a feeling of gratitude and renewed purpose.

Lasting Impressions of my trip to see the work of CRS in Kolkata

by Crispin Scott

I first became aware of CRS when my youngest daughter, Lydia, visited Kolkata in 2019 on a trip organised by Derby High School and Friends of CRS. As so many have found, the visit was a life changing experience for her. Not only did it influence her decision to go to do a Bachelor of Arts in Human Geography but later she decided to base much of her dissertation research on the work of CRS.

Last year CRS became a mission partner with Ashbourne Methodist One Church Circuit and as Mission Co-ordinator for the Church, I was keen to see its work at first hand. What follows is a summary of my lasting impressions.



For a non-governmental organisation (NGO), CRS is relatively small. Yet I was astonished at the range and number of works it carries out with the funds it has available. It appears to be well-structured and highly effective.

As with any organisation, the quality of its staff determines its success. The volunteers and staff are the heart of CRS. They are exceptional. I found it inspirational to meet so many people who have devoted their lives to the work of CRS.

In overwhelmingly difficult circumstances, the schools provide a safe place for the children to learn, develop and have fun. I will always remember their smiling faces as they sang and danced. I was also especially interested to learn about the work of Nari Dana and the skills this project provides women, allowing them to improve their lives in the communities they live.

My lasting impressions can be summed up by three lines from the Prayer of St Francis.

**Where there is despair, hope.
Where there is darkness, light.
Where there is sadness, joy.**

If I were asked to select one word to describe the work of CRS it would be "hope".

Making of Clerical Items by Nari Dana Women's Project by David Rig, Cheryl George and the CRS Team

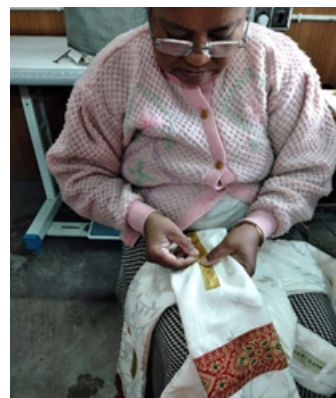
At the Nari Dana production unit, the gentle hum of sewing machines carries more than the sound of work — it carries stories of resilience, dignity, and new beginnings. A dedicated group of women from the community are currently engaged in preparing clerical items for orders received from the Calcutta Diocese (Church of North India), turning skill into sustainable livelihood.



Cutting out the Stoles



Sewing the Stoles



Completing the Stoles

These women, many of whom first joined us through our sewing training programme, have grown in both confidence and competence. What began as learning how to handle a needle and thread has now developed into professional craftsmanship. From carefully stitched altar cloths to neatly tailored clerical garments, every piece reflects their attention to detail and pride in their work.

The Nari Dana Women's Project is an initiative that empowers women through skill development and sustainable livelihood opportunities. One of its activities is the making of clerical items such as surplices, stoles and altar cloths. These items are carefully handcrafted by trained women using quality fabrics and traditional tailoring techniques, ensuring the the designs are both durable and dignified.

Through this project women gain practical skills in cutting, stitching, embroidery and finishing, enabling them to earn a stable income while working in a supportive environment. The production of clerical items not only meets the needs of the Diocese of Calcutta but also promotes dignity, self-reliance and economic independence for the women involved. The Nari Dana women's project thus combines faith-based service with social empowerment and community development.



Stitching Strength, Creating Change – Sanchita Halder’s Journey

by Rig David, Cheryl George and the CRS Team

Sanchita Halder, an ex-student of the sewing training program at the Kestopur project, is a wonderful example of how skill development can transform lives. Living in a joint family with her in-laws, Sanchita carries significant responsibilities at home, including caring for her disabled brother-in-law. With limited family income, meeting daily expenses has often been a struggle.

Despite these challenges, Sanchita chose to step forward with determination. After completing her training, she began using her skills and creativity to support herself and her family. Today, she is actively engaged in preparing handcrafted items for Nari Dana, where her work beautifully blends traditional techniques with fresh, innovative ideas. Each product she creates reflects patience, talent, and pride in her craft.



Through her efforts, Sanchita is contributing not only to her household income but also to the larger vision of building sustainable livelihoods for women in the community. Her journey has increased her confidence and independence, proving that with the right opportunity, women can rise above difficult circumstances.

Sanchita’s story continues to inspire other women to believe in their abilities, become self-reliant, and take steps toward economic empowerment. She is not just stitching products — she is stitching hope, dignity, and a brighter future for her family and community.



Business as usual at the Sukantanagar Education, Health and Women's Empowerment Centre **by Rig David, Cheryl George and the CRS Team**



Anyone who has ever had building work knows how satisfying it can be when completed. But they also know there is a price to be paid in disruption and dislocation while the work is being carried out. The Sukantanagar Centre is facing that disturbance now as construction work continues at its premises. To enable it to continue to provide the services on which so many people depend, it has moved its operations to a temporary shelter.

Inevitably the shelter does not have the same space or equipment that the staff are used to, but they have found imaginative ways of overcoming problems to enable work to continue as close to normal as possible.

Teachers have tried to make the temporary classroom and lessons feel as close to normal as possible so that the children from the community continue to receive their education in a familiar environment.

The supply of primary healthcare - so vital to families in an area where there is only limited access to other healthcare providers – continues uninterrupted. The full range of services which cover routine health check-ups, health awareness sessions and guidance on hygiene and nutrition are all still available.

The women's empowerment programmes which are so important to building confidence, establishing a degree of financial independence and making more informed decisions, have also continued to be run. As a result, women can continue to learn skills and take part in other developmental activities.

The temporary relocation has revealed the strength of the resilience of both the staff and the community. Their cooperation, flexibility and shared purpose enabled business to carry on as usual. It was uplifting to see.



Christmas Celebrations Across Project Locations

by Rig David, Cheryl George and the CRS Team

The spirit of Christmas came alive at all our project locations in the slum communities as children from the education programme and women and girls from the sewing training joined together for joyful celebrations. The event created a beautiful space for learning, sharing, and togetherness beyond the regular programme activities.

A special highlight was the Christmas crib lovingly made by the children. Their creativity and teamwork were clearly visible, and the crib stood as a symbol of hope and peace for everyone present. The children added to the festive cheer with delightful singing and energetic dance performances, filling the atmosphere with happiness and excitement.



The celebration concluded with all participants enjoying cake and festive eateries, making it a memorable day for the children, women, teachers, and community members alike. The Christmas party not only spread joy but also strengthened the sense of unity and belonging within the community



We Welcome a New Trustee

Clive Brown

We are very pleased to say that Crispin Scott has agreed to become a Trustee of the Friends, and he was formally appointed at a meeting on the 9th March.

Crispin came to know of CRS through his daughter, Lydia, who visited Kolkata with a party from Derby High School in 2019, and who subsequently made CRS the centre of the dissertation for her university degree. Lydia wrote about this in our autumn 2025 newsletter, and the profound effect that visiting CRS had on her. Crispin became a supporter, and last November visited CRS personally so that he could see the work at first hand. He and his family are active members of Ashbourne Methodist Church, which has become one of our regular supporter churches.



Crispin has a marketing background, and is keen to use his expertise in a fund-raising role. It is a great pleasure to welcome him on board.

Financial Report - Spring 2026

Clive Brown - Acting Treasurer

As we approach the end of another financial year, it is pleasing to report that there has been a slight improvement in donations to the Friends, although with income to date of £26,400, we remain well short of our target of £40,000. This year, we have sent donated funds of £22,311 in response to requests from CRS. We shall make another payment in April or May.

The accounts of CRS show that they are at present in surplus for the current year, but remain heavily reliant on income from foreign donors. The CRS budget for 2026/27 anticipates income of £85,700, of which £74,300 is expected to come from overseas sources. Efforts are being made to raise funds locally, and the Cathedral is making regular payments which are being used to rebuild the reserve fund (known as the "Corpus") which became severely depleted during Covid.

Supporting CRS

To make a donation by credit card or by setting up a direct debit, visit

www.friendsofcrs.co.uk

To give regularly by standing order or bank transfer, email

secretary@friendsofcrs.co.uk

Send cheques to: Friends of CRS c/o Reverend Anita Matthews

St Peter's in the City, St Peter's Street, Derby DE1 1SN.

Registered address: 22 Sunningwell, Nr Abingdon OX13 6RB

Email: secretary@friendsofcrs.co.uk Website: www.friendsofcrs.co.uk Charity Number: 266302