

## **Arunima Hospice Visit November 2019**

Ray and I have recently returned from visiting the Arunima Hospice, part of our linked diocese, The Church of North India in Kolkata. We felt it would be useful to provide members within our diocese the opportunity to hear what happened during our visit, and to give an update on the wellbeing of the many children living and supported at the hospice. This trip would not have been possible without the help of others, so it's really important for us that we openly share our gratitude. Thanks to Rev Dr. Hamilton Inbadas and members of the Global Partnerships Committee for awarding a grant towards travel costs. To Bishop Ian, for keeping the diocesan link alive and for his belief in what we do. To Bishop David, the person who introduced us to the hospice and gave insight into ways we could help. Last but certainly not least, to each and every member in this diocese who have prayed, donated, continually sought to ask about the children.

Our recent visit held so many different emotions for me, and I truly believe it was the children that gave me a determination to return for a 2<sup>nd</sup> visit. Travelling with my partner of 16 years also gave a different dimension to this return. To share the joy of seeing the children along with Ray, whom we have worked tirelessly since 2015 to support in different ways, was simply a dream come true.

On arrival into Kolkata (and after a long journey with flight cancellation), we were warmly greeted by several of the children and my dear friend Suvabrota. She had gone to the effort to make a banner with the words "Welcome Ross Uncle and Young Uncle". Ray found this amusing as he was known for the entire week as Young rather than Ray, it did make him feel youthful I'm sure!

Our week-long stay was action-packed and of course, there are many stories that we would love to share with you, some sad and some filled with laughter. But in this short update, it's impossible to convey all that happened during that short week. What we do hope is that many different churches in our diocese will invite us to speak, to share these stories and the many pictures. I think the saying is "A picture is worth a thousand words". It would be a joy for us to share this experience with anyone who would like to hear (Contact details at the end of this article).

Therefore, we felt it would be appropriate to share with you in this short article some of the highlights.

Being able to visit the hospice building and see the major changes that have been made possible from fundraising here in our diocese and further afield was inspiring. The children now have a large recreational room that is used for dance lessons, musical instrument lessons, worship, and playtime. The girl's dormitory has been extended and most notably, each girl has a bed to themselves. The boy's bedroom was redecorated and several new

bunk beds were purchased. The entire facility/compound was fitted with new LED lighting which ensures safety & security at night as well as much reduced electricity bills.

We met 10 of the children who are currently seeking monthly sponsorship which would ensure access to education and the necessary medication to maintain good health whilst living with HIV. At present, the children are supported by the Church of North India for the basic necessities such as food and medicine, but it's impossible for them to be sent to school without sponsorship. Ray and I have agreed to sponsor two of the children, at a monthly cost of £32 per child. If you or anyone you know would be interested in doing the same, please do contact us for more information. I know that Bishop Paritosh would be delighted to have your support.

On another day we were invited to dinner with Bishop Paritosh and several of the Office Bearers and Clergy. It was so wonderful to meet with Bishop Paritosh once again, and lovely that he remembered both Ray and me from his previous visit to Fife College in 2017. During dinner, we discussed many different topics and some great humour regarding the delights and bizarreness of some Bengali Cuisine! What was really impressive was the importance placed upon our diocesan link and what changes have been made possible from this. Bishop Paritosh invited us to a more formal meeting at Bishop's House a few days later, where we were able to hear the vision for the Arunima Hospice and how that may look with assistance here in Scotland. Integral to this relationship is our two-way relationship built upon prayer. It was heartfelt for me to learn that we are included in their intercessions and the children have been praying for our return.

A highlight of our visit was taking all 38 of the children and 10 staff/volunteers to Nicco Park with unlimited amusement rides and tasty lunch. This was a time when we saw the children at their happiest. Children being children, screaming on the rides, holding hands, laughing continuously and a feeling of family. It was a little strange for Ray and me, being the only westerns in the entire park. Not because of our ethnicity but more so the fact that people stared and moved their own children away from us, proving great stigma still surrounds those living with HIV in an area like West Bengal.

Towards the end of our visit, it was important that we also saw the other projects being administered under the Arunima Hospice. We visited slums, both of which have a high level of sex workers, including very under-aged girls to mature women in their 60s. It would be a lie if we said it was an easy experience, especially when meeting the underaged girls and seeing the horrid squalor in which they work and live. The hospice offers monetary and nutritional support in order for two clinics to operate. Project workers at each clinic support women against violence, identify human trafficking cases and educate in the prevention of HIV. One good point is a social enterprise that was started by the Diocese of Kolkata several years ago called Nari Dana meaning "Women's Wings". This social enterprise empowers women by supporting them through education and skills training, ensuring the poor and disadvantaged have opportunities other than being forced into sex work. We purchased a

number of handmade items from Nari Dana and plan to sell these in our own diocese, sending back the proceeds to go back into their communities.

In this update, we really could go on and on with many more experiences and stories. We hope that this short article will give you a taste of what life is like living in Kolkata. It would be wonderful to offer presentations to anyone who may be interested. There are so many ways other individuals or groups within our diocese could become involved.

Please continue to keep the children in your prayers, for their health and a bright future.

Ross and Raymond Stirling-Young





