

TALKING POINT Sebastian Muir has just returned from India. He explains to **Anita Boniface** how SVP groups in England and Wales can twin with SVP groups in India enabling, for example, the less well-off to be educated and to give people hope for the future

The work of SVP Twinnage in India

"IT ALL starts with a simple pedal powered sewing machine", says Sebastian Muir, Trustee and Twinnage Officer of the St Vincent de Paul Society (SVP) in England and Wales. "From there come garments which are sold, then a small tailoring business, some profit, some more sewing machines and more money to pay for the children to go to school and the family to be fed", he continues.

Sebastian is telling me about the microloans scheme that the SVP in India facilitates through Western donations to communities of villagers. Without these microloans the villagers would be stuck in poverty.

"It's a virtuous circle", Sebastian says. "SVP members in England and Wales make a collective donation of maybe £300 to the National SVP in India. This gets very carefully disseminated through an efficient organisational structure of Central Council, District Council to local Conferences (SVP groups) on the ground, who loan the money to villagers.

"The villagers buy something with money - maybe a sewing machine for garments to sell, or a pair of cattle. From the cattle they get calves which in turn give milk and meat that can be sold for profit. It grows from there. They pay back the interest-free loan and then keep the remaining profit for their families.

Sebastian is keen to point out that in this model, it is the Indian villagers who are working and repaying the loans. "It's not about creating a culture of dependency," he says. "It's about empowering local Indian people to make something of their lives, just as the SVP does in this country."

Likewise, there's also a huge focus on helping with education. When a village family member dies, perhaps a father running a rickshaw business is tragically killed or injured in a road traffic accident, it means the breadwinner of the family is no longer able to sustain his family. Often the eldest child - maybe a teenager - will be pulled out of school so that they can work instead, thereby bringing in money for their family. Through SVP Twinnage programme whereby UK Conferences are partnered or 'twinning'



The Indian SVP Ladies Conference, Cochin, Kerala, with members of the SVP England and Wales, Sebastian Muir, Terry Brown and Ken Madine

with poorer Indian Conferences, a donation can be made that helps with schooling costs or scholarships to encourage the family to keep their child education. This in turn improves the prospects for the child who can then often go onto university and get a job which will later support his or her younger siblings and remaining parent.

Sebastian has just returned from a visit to India together with former SVP Twinnage Officer Terry Brown and Head of Fundraising, Communications and Marketing, Ken Madine. Together they witnessed some of the vital work made possible thanks to donations from SVP members in England and Wales.

While an Indian family needs around £75 a month for a very basic standard of living, most daily workers will only earn between £25 and £70 a month at the most. This has to cover rent, tax, food, utilities and fuel, elec-

tricity (if available). It leaves little over for any emergency medical needs or for schooling. School fees start at £25 a year and can rise to well over £600 - especially for the professions. For some workers this is at the least, 10 per cent of their annual income. It means they can't afford to educate their children, and remain trapped in a cycle of poverty. So the SVP Indian Scholarship Scheme is vital for enabling youngsters achieve their potential, break out of the poverty trap and then support their broader families.

Poverty can be extreme, and Sebastian describes the many Biblical scenes he encounters during his visits to India. "There may be people with leprosy and a range of significant diseases that the local SVP Conference are helping to clothe and care for, or people who have little or no family support and are simply abandoned. It's dusty and it's hot. Giving someone on the street a sim-

ple cup of clean water and a meal makes a huge difference. 'I was thirsty and you gave me to drink' as Jesus said has huge relevance in India" says Sebastian.

There is plenty of opportunity to put spirituality and faith into action. It is this faith that equips SVP members where ever they are in the world with the strength to cope with the poverty they are helping to alleviate.

A women's Conference Sebastian met with attend 6.30am Mass on a daily basis and return to church for evening prayers followed by the rosary. It is not uncommon for SVP members in India to attend daily Mass and it is important to the note that faith is foremost in many people's lives.

The Church is extremely active in supporting people suffering poverty, and "each diocese will have an Archbishops Social Service Society which will help fund and run clinics, schools and pro-

vide some welfare such as clean water projects for the local community and income generation schemes including kitchen gardens," says Sebastian.

The Archbishop's Social Service Society will work closely with the SVP, and there is a very close relationship between the clergy and the Conferences. Sebastian explains that for priests in India their foremost mission is to develop the spirituality of their parishioners. Therefore there will be a lot of formation work being done which helps members of the SVP renew and strengthen their faith. This in turn equips them to go and reach out to people who are in poverty, no matter how troubling their circumstances.

The laity are actively encouraged to live out their Christian faith through good works - visiting people living in poverty, befriending families, alleviating hunger, providing clothing and enabling and empowering people to im-

prove the quality of their lives both physically and spiritually.

For Sebastian, faith allows members in both the UK and around the world, to draw from a deep well of resource, and then feed those around them with something life giving that brings renewal.

Religious Sisters also have a vital role to play in helping the local community. For example, in a remote region of Assam the SVP has funded a dispensary where two sisters are in place to help with first line medical assessment and treatment. Without the Sisters, the local community would have to travel 60km to the nearest hospital where local doctors are in short supply.

The Sisters provide a range of immediate medical help, long term treatment, and preventative programmes curing a highly prevalent condition called Lymphatic Filarrosis, commonly known as Elephant's Disease where invasive worms cause mas-

some limb swellings.

The SVP's contribution of £200 per quarter goes a long way towards purchasing medication and the upkeep of the dispensary. Sebastian tells me that the model of the dispensary close to the community and linked with a school and church is very effective at helping people of all faiths. He stresses that the community ethos that is so strong in India is something that works really well.

"The strength of community spirit means that the SVP Conferences can really get to know a village" says Sebastian. "Members do home visits and befriend people of many different faiths, Christian, Muslim, Hindu, Jain for example, all living close to each other. By getting to know one family you might get to know their neighbours and all of a sudden members are fully aware of their needs."

When in Kerala the homes of some villagers were destroyed by a cyclone, Conferences adopted a family and helped rebuild their house, as well as raising money to support them with basic food and schooling fees.

"This is a perfect example of how SVP Conferences provide a foundation for families to build their lives. By providing a home and food, the Conference then helps the family with the basic building blocks they need to look after their children and maintain a livelihood," says Sebastian.

Twinnage works. According to Sebastian: "By giving relatively small sums of money to a twinned Conference in India ordinary compassionate and caring SVP members in this country can make a huge difference to some of the poorest people in the world".

It's a matter of transformation and empowerment through the efficient and regulated structure of the global SVP. "It gives them hope", Sebastian says.

■ Anita Boniface is Senior Media and Communications Officer for the SVP (England and Wales).

■ You can donate to the SVP's Twinnage programmes by telephoning 0207 703 3030 or visiting <https://www.svp.org.uk/donate-now>

Become not just a reader, but a Catholic Times Member

The Catholic Times is a light to guide the world, and a glass to reflect it. Your annual Member contribution will help us to continue that vitally important work.

It is the task of the Catholic press to balance, to complete and, if necessary, to correct the news and comments about religion and the Christian life. At one and the same time it will be a glass that reflects the world and a light to show it the way.

Communio Et Progressio, Pastoral Instruction on the Means of Social Communication, Written by order of the Second Vatican Council.



Treat yourself to a spiritually uplifting gift that will last throughout the year. Become a Catholic Times Member today and you will receive not only your regular weekly copy of The Catholic Times delivered to your door, but also the following:



- 1) A beautiful inspirational Catholic gift to uplift and inspire you; one sent to you every three months.
- 2) An additional bonus Catholic gift, specially selected by us to thank you for your loyalty as you renew your annual subscription each year.
- 3) A quarterly newsletter giving all the latest news and developments across all our publications.



- 4) Regular special Members-only discount offers in The Universe Media Group online shop.
- 5) VIP opportunities around the UK to meet the people involved with our publications
- 6) Members Prayer Intentions printed in The Catholic Times FREE at any time needed, where all our readers and clergy are asked to pray for our Members. **Save £29.50 per insertion.**



(ALL GIFTS SUBJECT TO AVAILABILITY. ALTERNATIVES WILL BE OFFERED)

All this can be yours for just ...

Annual membership
£90.00 UK ONLY

for a years guaranteed delivery of The Catholic Times gift subscription to your door every week, plus enrolment in Catholic Times Members.

Catholic Times basic annual subscription
£62.00 UK ONLY

for guaranteed delivery of The Catholic Times only to your door every week.



I wish to become a Catholic Times Member/ basic subscriber...

Name: _____

Address: _____

Tel No: _____

Email: _____

I enclose a cheque for £ (Sterling) _____

payable to **Universe Media Group Limited**

Please charge my VISA/Mastercard/Maestro/Switch/Delta -

Card Number: _____ Last 3 digits on back of the card

Expiry: _____ Valid from: _____ Issue no. _____

Signature: _____

Contact us now

Call us on 0161 908 5301
Monday - Friday 9am - 5pm

Complete and return this slip to address shown below

Or go online at www.catholicuniverse.com/store

Post subscription to: The Catholic Times Subscription/Membership, Guardian Print Centre, Longbridge Road, Manchester M17 1SN