

Sally Mair Trust

Here is Sally's account of her work in India and the establishment of her charitable trust.

I left Edinburgh on 1st January 1997 with a group of 25 others from Scotland charged with introducing the [Cursillo Movement](#) to the town of Tirunelveli in the southern state of Tamil Nadu. My visit to India lasted for three weeks. During that time we visited the cathedral which was being extended to seat an additional 2000 people! I met those with leprosy, visited projects which provided sewing machines to women's groups to allow them to work for their own income, projects which cared for the homeless, which provided food and clothes for beggars and church building projects where churches were being built in areas where there were none. I came home, having done the job intended, but also with a huge affection for those I had met.

To my delight I was invited to attend the rededication of the expanded cathedral. I rekindled and made many more friendships. To my great surprise, I realised I had found a place which I was going to both feel at home in and where I had many, many friends.

Following on from my initial two visits in 1997 and 1998, I maintained my interest and involvement with [Tirunelveli Diocese](#). I made several other visits between 1998 and 2004 in conjunction with the Cursillo Movement to train and encourage the members there.

Over the years, I developed a number of links and friendships including one with the Principal of the [Bishop Sargent School](#). This school is managed by Tirunelveli Diocese – the Diocese runs a number of schools, higher education facilities and hospitals in the area. Bishop Sargent School is very special to me, though, as it works with children with disabilities, especially those who they still call 'mentally retarded'. As I am a special needs teacher here in Edinburgh, I found myself drawn to this school and made sure I spent time there on each visit. In 2004, the Principal Mr Chandramohan and I hatched a proposal that I go and spend six months at the school. The idea was that I would work with teachers and pass on some of the methods and approaches which I used here.

I returned to Edinburgh and although it all seemed rather a pipe dream, I continued to plan. I obtained six months unpaid leave from my post at The Royal Blind School and set up a charitable trust. With my husband Colin's support and the aid of some friends, I went on a very steep learning curve! Through support from Holy Cross and a number of grants and fundraising activities, we raised sufficient money to support me in India and to make a £2000 cash grant to the school. So, not without a number of fears and misgivings, in November 2007 I went to live in India.

For a 53-year-old, not-very-well-travelled (up until this point) woman, this was quite an adventure. I was determined to be independent and managed to find a house to rent for the duration, despite warnings from my friends that such a thing would not be possible.

As I had feared all along, my initial plans were changed for me and I found myself meeting a different need. As well as working with teachers, I established a group in the school for severely disabled children and their parents who would not otherwise have any access to education. Our first referral was seven months old and the oldest nine years old. We refurbished a classroom and provided all the equipment needed.

Over the period I was there, I ran a morning class where I saw, in total, approximately 36 children and their parents. In the afternoons I worked with the two classes of the most disabled children and their teachers.

We had a lot of fun and I managed to stay healthy throughout, apart from one dose of sickness on Christmas Eve. I went to bed and meanwhile, the electrician I had employed to repair my ceiling fan told my neighbour I was ill. The neighbour then phoned one of my friends and ironically, I ended up on a drip in the hospital whose opening function I had attended only the week before. They got me home so I could sleep in my own bed over Christmas Day.

Since 2007, I have made four follow-on visits to continue to support and encourage the work of the teachers in the school. The project has continued to run in Bishop Sargent School on a small scale with a regular turnover of pupils and parents. We are working very closely with the school physiotherapist; she now focuses each morning on our group. This is a very new development – prior to my visit, teachers and physiotherapists did not work together.

Referrals to the group come from paediatricians, local churches and word of mouth from other parents. One referral came from Kashmir over 2000 miles away at the other end of the sub-continent. It came via an army officer whose child had attended my group when he was based in Tirunelveli – fame indeed!

I have been able to meet my dream of taking out £1000 each year to support the work of the project by contributing to its running costs and generally supporting the school.

I am happy to talk to anyone who is interested in what is going on and have several thousand photographs to show anyone who would like to see them!

Sally Mair, September 2011