

FreeSchools—A Life-Changing Experience

by Saskia Raevouri



Sister Crescence and a FreeSchool class in Bihar

Introduction

For a while I had known that my friend Sue Tennant was supporting Mark Bloomfield's work in India and Thailand and had established a Canadian charity, FreeSchools World Literacy, to sustain it. I had even been making a token contribution monthly, so when Sue suggested that I accompany her and Mark on a tour to see the schools firsthand—Dutch treat, of course—I thought it would be an interesting way to spend my vacation. Little did I know that it would change my life and give it a whole new meaning and purpose.

How it Began

This story begins in India, with Englishman Mark Bloomfield. Not only is Mark a world adventurer and devoted Urantia Book reader who has seeded the revelation on all continents, but a humanitarian extraordinaire. It was in the early 1990s when working with Mother Teresa that he first met Sister Crescence of the Sacred Heart Sisters who live and work in India's most undeveloped state, Bihar. Mark had organized temporary "eye camps" in Calcutta where volunteer doctors performed corneal surgery for the poor, and Sister Crescence was one of the patients. She told Mark about the conditions in Bihar, where thousands of villages were cut off from the twentieth century, with no modern conveniences, no medicine, and most of the people illiterate with no hope of rising out of their situation. The Sacred Heart Sisters had convents in most of the larger towns—Patna, Muzzafarpur, Motihari and Bettiah—and for 80 years they had provided medical aid through their dispensaries and education through their formal schools. But some families were so poor that they could not even afford the \$3 per month tuition plus books and uniform, and others were so ignorant that they saw no reason to send children to school who could work to help bring in an income or take care of their younger siblings while the parents went out to labor in the fields.

Sister Crescence told Mark about her dream to open non-formal schools for "untouchable" children to attend two hours a day, using existing classrooms and structures, even porches or backyards. Regular teachers, preferably female, would be hired and earn overtime pay to teach basic Hindi, English and mathematics. Sister Crescence had no funds to implement this plan, but Mark shared her vision and for the next few years he raised the money and sent it to her. A little goes a long way in India,

and she soon had several non-formal schools functioning in Bettiah and neighboring villages, wherever the Sisters could get an “in.” Some villages were so primitive and the inhabitants so superstitious that the Sisters had no way of making a connection. In the past it was mainly through their medical services that the Sisters were able to penetrate the villages. Because the Sisters did not attempt to convert these Hindus to Christianity but simply helped to improve their lives, they were soon trusted and welcomed wherever they were known.

With the Bihar schools established and in capable hands, Mark moved to Fang, in the far north of Thailand, and began establishing free schools using the Indian model for Burmese refugees and hill tribes who would otherwise never learn to read and write. With no Sister Crescence to bring together pupils and teachers and classrooms, Mark found a way to work with existing school authorities, and today a score of fledgling schools are beginning to function. In March 2007 Mark left the Thai operation under the supervision of Australian Ben Bowler and his Dutch partner, Jildou, and moved on to Africa where he hopes to find more Sister Crescences with whom he can work to start more schools.

When Sue Tennant heard about Mark’s work with Sister Crescence at a Silver Springs Urantia gathering, she was inspired to form FreeSchools World Literacy, a Canadian charity with a board of directors and the mission of supporting, sustaining and expanding the work worldwide. For the past year or two Sue has been raising money and sending it to Sister Crescence in India and Mark in Thailand, filling in out of her own pocket when necessary.

Now that we are back we would like to invite all of you to pitch in, and there are several ways to do it. Please go to the [Fundraising Page](#) for various options.

2. Thailand