“I was a stranger and you welcomed me”
This logo represents the hand of Christ that blesses the cup, the hand of love that offers the cup, and the hand of suffering that receives the cup.

The Society is a lay Catholic organisation that aspires to live the Gospel message by serving Christ in the poor with love, respect, justice, hope and joy, and by working to shape a more just and compassionate society.

The St Vincent de Paul Society in Australia wishes to acknowledge that we are on Aboriginal land. We pay respects to all traditional custodians.

Warning: This publication may contain the names and images of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people now deceased.

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No fanfare – but results

The St Vincent de Paul Society was founded in Paris in 1833 by a Catholic university student, Frederic Ozanam and his companions.

Just as we, quite rightly, show respect to the First Peoples of Australia, in many ways the heart of the St Vincent de Paul Society is a profound sense of respect for the people we serve.

As Saint Vincent de Paul, our patron, expressed it: ‘The poor are where we seek, and find, our God.’

We were actually founded on the basis of a dare among uni students in Paris. One bunch of students challenged another bunch to prove their beliefs could be translated into actions. The early meetings of that founding group of uni students became known as Conferences. This was founded in Paris in 1833 by a Catholic university student, Frederic Ozanam and his companions.

Today, the St Vincent de Paul Society is active in 148 countries. We have 950,000 members, 1.3 million volunteers and 51,000 conferences.

No work of charity is foreign to us. No person is left out. No person is alone to us. We are obliged to discern and analyse all new and developing forms of poverty and inequality.

As Frederic Ozanam wrote: ‘You must not be content with tiding the poor over the poverty crisis. You must study their condition and the injustices which brought about such poverty, with the aim of long term improvement’.

We have never believed that our good works can be carried out without attending to the causes of poverty and inequality. This is why we are afraid to speak out against injustice, even though at times we come under fire from those who would prefer us to be silent.

Neither do we accept the somewhat fashionable position apparently supported by both sides of politics that charity should be the default position for our nation, or indeed our world, in its approach to poverty and inequality.

As Frederic put it so eloquently: ‘Charity is the Samaritan who pours oil on the wounds of the traveller who has been attacked. It is the role of justice to prevent attack.’

As volunteers in a global movement of both charity and social justice we quietly go about pouring oil on the wounds of the traveller who has been attacked, to use the language of the Good Samaritan parable. The absence of fanfare is central to our understanding of respect for the dignity of the people we are assisting. It is unbelievably hard for a person to ask for help. The moment often comes when they feel they have no choice because they look at their children and know that without help their family will be made homeless or that they are about to have their electricity cut off. This scenario is played out every day of the week right across Australia, from the remotest of rural communities to Canberra, the nation’s affluent capital. We are not interested in fanfare because we have no desire to make it even harder for the people who request our help. We just do it. We don’t need to hang a lantern on it!

There is a certain sacredness about the encounters we have with the people who are doing it tough in prosperous Australia. There is a sense of closeness; a sense of solidarity and friendship you feel when someone trusts you so much as to bear their soul and ask for help. This encounter is to be treated, therefore, with the greatest sensitivity and respect. We are not just giving material assistance or personal support; we are sharing with them the reality that it is society that must change if we are to prevent the attack in the first place, going back to the language of the Good Samaritan parable.

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When we advocate with legislators or in the public arena it might seem like we are going for the fanfare instead of the results. Nothing could be further from the truth. We have an obligation to speak out because of the stories that have been entrusted to us, because of what we see and what we hear, and because we want to prevent poverty and inequality at the same time as we reach out to the people who suffer from poverty and inequality.

We need to embrace an alternate vision of society. Our mission statement tells us to “help shape a more just and compassionate Australia”. We have a duty to not remain silent in the face of the most pressing social issues in Australia today. We have a duty, for example, to not remain silent in the face of a growing experience of poverty and deprivation of people who are struggling to survive on social security benefits. For a single Newstart Allowance recipient, the battle to survive on $35 a day is no picnic. But it’s not just the people on social security benefits that we are called on to assist. We are seeing a growing cohort of people who are sometimes described as the working poor.

We are seeing women and children, for example, fleeing domestic violence being forced into homelessness, sleeping in cars or on the couches of their friends. We are seeing families with one or even two members in low-paid work being forced out of homes because we want to prevent poverty and inequality.

I would like to see a society that did not lock people out of the prosperity that has been generated in this wealthy country. Understandably we have developed a real island nation mentality, nowhere more in evidence than in our shameful treatment of asylum seekers. But no matter how far we think we are from the rest of the world, I repeat: the reality is that what’s happening there is happening here. The only difference is that here we ignore it. What we are seeing here are the people who have effectively been made to feel that they are surplus to the economy. These people are the tip of the global iceberg.

That is what you get a sense of when you belong to a global organisation. This is why we insist on being a voice for the voiceless. We are criticised by some for being too soft. We are accused of allowing ourselves to be “ripped off” because we do not discriminate; we do not accept the false and malicious division between the so-called deserving and undeserving poor. We see a need and we try to meet it. We see a social problem and we try to speak out about its causes. As the Irish proverb reminds us:

“We live in the shelter of each other.”

Saint Vincent de Paul said: “If a needy person requires help during prayer time, do whatever has to be done with peace of mind. When you leave prayer to serve some poor person, remember that this very service is performed for God.” This, Saint Vincent de Paul is saying, is your priority. This is what God is asking of you. And that is what God is asking of us in the St Vincent de Paul Society.

Anthony Thornton
National President
CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER'S REPORT

I was a stranger and you welcomed me

In a prosperous nation such as ours those who are struggling on a low income are punished and made to bear the brunt of economic insecurity.

The First Peoples of this country are punished for having been colonised and dispossessed.

Sole parents, people with disabilities and people experiencing long-term unemployment are blamed for being excluded from the labour market.

And people living with a mental illness are stigmatised and left without the services they need or the respect which is their human right.

Research released by SANE Australia reveals that more than one third of people with a mental illness live on incomes below the poverty line. Further to this, up to 96 per cent of this group of people are, at times, forced to make a choice between having good treatment for their mental illness and buying essentials such as food.

The effects of inequality are not limited to the few. Rather these effects shape an entire society.

The members of the St Vincent de Paul Society see the human face of marginalisation in Australia. We are filled with a sense of sadness at the fact that we see the persistence of structures that push people to the edges.

We are also filled with a sense of hope that the solutions to social problems lie at the very heart of the problems.

We are deeply committed to a vision of society in which the dominant values and priorities are completely turned upside down.

The tradition we come from is one that has always sought to turn things upside down. The prophet Isaiah, for example, writes beautifully of the way that this tradition views the world. Isaiah 3:15 has God passing judgement on the wealthy ruling elite, condemning their exploitation and oppression of the people and directly linking this injustice to the accumulation of their wealth:

“It is you who have devoured the vineyard, the spoil of the poor is in your houses. What do you mean by crushing my people, by grinding the face of the poor?”

It is absolutely clear that the people that God refers to as ‘my people’ are neither an ethnic group nor a religious group; they are the poor.

It is then no surprise that Jesus should teach that our lives are to be measured only in relation to those with whom God has unconditionally sided:

“I was hungry and you gave me to eat. I was thirsty and you gave me to drink. I was a stranger and you took me in; Sick and you visited me; Imprisoned and you came to see me.”

(Matthew 25: 35 -36)

It is also no surprise that we should be told in the story describing the earliest beginnings of the community of believers that “they recognised him in the breaking of the bread.” (Luke 24:35)

This is important. It is no coincidence that the act that is presented as the one in which Christ is consistently recognised is the breaking of the bread,

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CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER’S REPORT

The “lucky country” is at a stage of its history where families, even if they have one or more members in paid work, are turning to charities for assistance with such essentials as paying the rent or paying for prescription medicine. In the age of infinite choices mothers and fathers are faced with impossible choices such as the choice between going to see a doctor regarding a serious health condition or paying for a child’s school excursion. Further to this, we believe that people are much, much more than merely economic beings. Made in God’s image and likeness we are called to be fully human, following the wise adage of St. Francis, the great second-century theologian that: “the glory of God is the human being fully alive!” Struggling families are unable to provide their children with such important life-forming and life-affirming activities such as the opportunity to learn to play a musical instrument or to attend ballet classes or to have books of their own. Even sport has become so expensive as to be out of the reach of many families, with some working families reporting that they can only afford to allow one child a year to play a sport.

We build massive walls around people on the basis of their race, class, gender or disability. The same people are then condemned for lacking the “aspiration” to scale these walls. Our task is to have the humility to listen to the people who can teach us how society needs to change. It is about committing ourselves to join in the long-haul project of tearing down the walls that we have built around people, locking them out, or locking them up. It means laying claim to the words of Jesus of Nazareth that the Kingdom of God is among us. It means, as Paul of Tarsus put it, hoping against hope and fighting against all odds for a more just and compassionate society. It means, in the words of the poet Paul Eluard, who is really paraphrasing the words of Christ: There is another world but it is in this one.

Dr John Falzon
Chief Executive Officer
Advocacy and research

When we speak about social justice we go to the heart of what the St Vincent de Paul Society stands for.

We follow the teachings of the Scriptures: “Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, protect the rights of those who are helpless. Speak out and pronounce a sentence of justice, defend the cause of the wretched and the poor.” (Proverbs 31:8-9)

We are called, as Vincentians, to feed, clothe, house and assist our brothers and sisters who are pushed out. We are also called to ask why they are left out and forced onto the margins of society. We are called, as Vincentians, to feed, clothe, house and assist our brothers and sisters who are pushed out. We are also called to ask why they are left out and forced onto the margins of society.

We set out in 2012 to challenge the growing political consensus on how to treat the poor, a consensus that can be summed up by the disgraceful belief that people are to be treated as inferior if they are on the margins of society. This is most evident in the treatment of asylum seekers, Aboriginal people, people experiencing unemployment and sole parents. Homelessness continues to be a scandalous sign of long-term policy failure which the government is at least committed to addressing. The Society has advocated on a wide range of issues, noting the urgency with which we are bound to be a voice for those who remain unheard. The issues that we have spoken on in over 200 media interviews, in public forum, and in meetings with Ministers and with other community organisations include: income adequacy, insecure work, homelessness and social housing, mental health reform, problem gambling, NFP reform, Human Services reform, social determinants of health, compulsory income management, School Enrolment and Attendance Measure (SEAM), education reform, health reform, human rights, tax reform, place-based initiatives, family poverty, asylum seekers, racism, payday lending, Aboriginal justice, incarceration, post-prison homelessness and hardship, youth unemployment, aged care and poverty, disability reform, utilities pricing, cost pressures on low-income households, welfare reform, pay equity, family poverty and social division and discrimination.

Inequality continues to be the key to understanding these problems.

Following the May Budget we still failed to see any real change in the government’s position on people who are outside the labour market. Whilst there are individual members of parliament on both sides of politics who share the Society’s concerns it is fair to say that there is a political consensus between government and opposition on resisting any change to the current practice of keeping people below the poverty line if they are outside the labour market.

The Society is supportive of an employment participation agenda as long as it results in an actual improvement in living standards and is respectful of the dignity and specific needs of the people involved, especially in the case of sole parents, people with disabilities and people who are unemployed and who experience multiple obstacles to participation (such as functional illiteracy, health issues, lack of access to training and childcare, etc). We do not, however, accept the argument that keeping people below the poverty line in the meantime is a useful incentive. This simply shifts the problem rather than addressing it.

An example of our advocacy in this regard is our call for an Inquiry by the Joint Parliamentary Committee on Human Rights into the position that around 100,000 sole parents will find themselves in once they are shifted onto a lower benefit.

We saw in 2012 the tabling of the Houston Report and the concomitant resurrection of the Pacific Solution as a policy response to asylum seekers. The Society welcomed the commitment to an additional refugee intake whilst criticising the demonisation of asylum seekers and the embrace of off-shore processing as a deterrent.

We also saw the passing of the Stronger Futures legislation, opposed by the Society along with the Catholic Bishops Conference, the Catholic Religious of Australia, Aboriginal Catholic Ministries and the major churches, all of us simply calling for a way forward that begins with Aboriginal People determining the best solutions to the inequality they experience.

The Society is respected as an uncompromising voice for the voiceless.

Speeches, Papers, Presentations

Being socially nothing, Keynote Speech to NSW Legal Aid Civil Law Forum, Sydney, 4 November 2011

A critique of economic correctness, Keynote Address to The Way Forward: Austerity or Stimulus? 13th Path to Full Employment and 18th National Conference on Unemployment University of Newcastle, 7 December, 2011

The factory where we’ve made, Keynote Address to Adult Literacy and Numeracy Council Conference, Sydney, 9 December 2011

Stand for freedom, Stand for Freedom Rally, Parliament House, Canberra, 28 February 2012

The language of the unheard, Social Justice in the City Forum, Melbourne, 29 February 2012

The cursing of consultation, Guest Lecture, What’s Next? Seminar, Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, Canberra 7 March 2012

Power from below: the Clemente Programme, Speech at the Launch of the Older Australians DVD, ACU North Sydney, 29 March 2012

On the side of the oppressed, Lecture to Little Company of Mary Lanplighter Programme, Sydney, 18 April 2012

Love is the heart of everything, Speech to the Social Justice Forum, St Vincent de Paul Society Tasmanian State Council, Launceston, 21 April 2012

Another world, Speech to the 2012 CEO Sleepout National Media Launch, Sydney, 7 December, 2011

The intrusion of the excluded, Keynote Address, WACOSS Conference, Perth, 10 May 2012

Under the guiding stars of struggle and hope, Presentation to ACTU Congress, Sydney, 16 May 2012

Crossing the boundaries, Panel Presentation to Australian Women’s Leadership Symposium, Canberra 3 July 2012

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Tipped over to the philosophy of those who have no bread. Keynote to St Vincent de Paul Society National Youth Congress, Melbourne, 3 August 2012.

Re-framing Australian social policy. Address to the Australian Catholic Commission on Employment Relations, Canberra, 8 August 2012.


Perspectives on social inclusion, Panel Presentation, Australian Public Service Commission Q&A, Canberra, 20 September 2012.


Sacredness and liberation, Guest Lecture, School of Theology, Australian Catholic University, Canberra 24 September 2012.

The struggle to be human, Anti-Poverty Week Lecture, Melbourne 16 October 2012.

The intrusion of the excluded, Social Justice in the City, Melbourne, 17 October 2012.

All that is solid melts into air: economic uncertainty and human rights. Anti-Poverty Week Human Rights Conference, Melbourne 17 October 2012.

Welfare and work, UnitingCare Web Conference, Canberra, 7 November 2012.


A decision to resist. Speech at the Book Launch of A Decision to Discriminate, ANU, Canberra 15 November 2012.

The struggle to create a new humanity. Speech at the Book Launch of The language of the unheard, Canberra 7 December 2012.

PUBLICATIONS


“We’re part of our own solution”: Social inclusion through community embedded, socially-supported university education, ARC Linkage Final Report.

“Love is the heart of everything”, The Record, Winter 2012.


“The sense of struggle and the need for hope”, Insight, August 2012.


INQUIRIES

Submission to the Senate Community Affairs Committee re: Stronger Futures in the Northern Territory Bill 2011 and two related bills.

Submission responding to the Definition of Charity Consultation paper.

Submission to Treasury Review of Not-For-Profit Governance Arrangements.

Submission to DIAC: Australia’s Humanitarian Program 2012-13 and Beyond.

Submission to DoHA re: Draft 10 Year Roadmap for National Mental Health Reform.

Submission to the Coalition’s Policy Discussion Paper on Gambling Reform.

Submission to the Independent Inquiry on Insecure Work.

Senate Inquiry into Stronger Futures and two related bills.

Submission to the Australian Refugee Rights Alliance on current issues of concern to refugee populations.

Joint submission with Australian Churches Gambling Taskforce to the Senate Joint Select Committee on Gambling Reform’s Inquiry into the Prevention and Treatment of Problem Gambling.

Submission to the Philanthropy and Exemptions Unit, the Treasury on the “Revised exposure draft, in ‘Australia requirements’”.


Parliamentary Joint Committee on Human Rights initial hearing on Inquiry into the Social Security Legislation Amendment (Fair Incentives to Work) Bill 2012.

Submission to the Standing Committee on Economics Inquiry into the Australian Charities and Not-for-profit Commission Exposure Draft Bills.

Submission to the Inquiry into the Australian Charities and Not-for-profit Commission Exposure Draft Bills.

Submission to the Inquiry into the Social Security Legislation Amendment (Fair Incentives to Work) Bill 2012.

Submission on the Homelessness Bill 2012.

Submission to the Inquiry by the Education, Employment and Workplace Relations References Committee into the adequacy of the allowance payment system.

Presentation of evidence to the Canberra Hearing of the Inquiry by the Education, Employment and Workplace Relations References Committee into the adequacy of the allowance payment system.

Submission to National Centre for Culture and Recreation Statistics for inclusion of cultural attendance by income group measure.

Submission to the Select Committee on Electricity Prices.


JOINT CAMPAIGNS

Australian Churches Gambling Taskforce: Australians for Affordable Housing.

Coalition of Organisations Committed to the Safety and Wellbeing of Australia’s Children.

Campaign for the establishment of a National Commissioner for Children.

Campaign to raise unemployment allowances.

Payday Lending Reform campaign.

National Families Week Ambassador 2012.

Campaign to establish a Senate Inquiry into Social Determinants of Health.

Cleanstart Campaign.

Campaign for a Human Rights Inquiry into Cuts to Sole Parents’ Benefits.

Campaign to prevent Stronger Futures legislation.

Education and Equity Campaign.

Request to Parliamentary Joint Committee on Human Rights for review of the Migration Legislation Amendment (Regional Processing and Other Measures) Act 2012.

Campaign to place limits on offshore processing.

Urgent communication to the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the proposed introduction of the Social Security Legislation Amendment (Fair Incentives to Work) Bill 2012 in Australia.

Stop the Cuts to Sole Parents Payment Campaign.

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RESEARCH PROJECTS

ARC Linkage Project: Promoting inclusion and combating deprivation: Recent changes in social disadvantage in Australia (UNSW) (final stages)

Residents’ Voices, Place Communities and Disadvantage, UWS, Loyola University Chicago

Clemente and Social Inclusion, ACU, Curtin University, Edith Cowan University

Early Intervention Project

ACOSS Poverty and Inequality Project (UNSW)

JOINT MEDIA RELEASES

Energy Rules must change- consumers and big business agree, 25 November 2011 (with Consumer Action Law Centre and others)

Cooperation not intervention: a call for a new direction in the Northern Territory, 23 November 2011 (with ACOSS and others)

MEDIA RELEASES

Rare opportunity to minimise pokies risk, 3 November 2011

St Vincent de Paul Society says thank you to volunteers, 5 December 2011

Remembering the Apology, 12 February 2012

Time to stand up to payday lenders’ ‘vested interests’, 2 March 2012

End child detention now; 22 March 2012

Increased demand from Australians living on ‘Struggle Street’, 29 March 2012

Easter message: Time limits on detention make sense, 5 April 2012

St Vincent de Paul Society respectfully supports Yolgnu Elders, 2 May 2012

Vinnies: Surplus on the back of sole parents and the unemployed, 8 May 2012

Vinnies volunteers- everyone counts, 14 May 2012

National Families Week 2012 Statement, 15 May 2012

National Reconciliation Week Statement, 1 June 2012

Refugee Week 2012 helps restore hope, 19 June 2012

‘A sad week for human rights’ – St Vincent de Paul Society, 29 June 2012

NAIDOC Week celebrates hard-fought struggles, 3 July 2012

Minister is on the right track: Homeless Persons Week 2012, 7 August 2012

Vinnies celebrates International Youth Day, 12 August 2012

St Vincent de Paul Society rejects Pacific Solution rehash, 13 August 2012

St Vincent de Paul Society condemns government inaction on Newstart, 28 August 2012

St Vincent de Paul Society welcomes Human Rights Committee findings, 20 September 2012

Anti-Poverty Week 2012 – give people a fighting chance, 15 October 2012

Let’s work towards an Australia free from homelessness, 12 November 2012

A welcome development in homelessness funding, 14 November 2012

St Vincent de Paul Society condemns latest decision on refugees, 22 November 2012

No social inclusion without social security, 26 November 2012

Inquiry acknowledges Newstart inadequacy but fails to fix it, 29 November 2012

PARTICIPATION IN

Australian Social Inclusion Board

Digital TV Switchover Taskforce

Service Delivery Advisory Group

Low Income Measures Assessment Committee

Household Assistance Working Group

Energy White Paper Roundtable

ACNC Implementation Taskforce Governance Reporting Roundtable

Churches Gambling Taskforce

Australian Council of Non-Government Organisations on Mental Health.

National Council Members

Anthony Thornton National President

Norm Moore National Secretary

David Bresnik National Treasurer

Claire Victory Vice President

Tony Muir Vice President

Graham West Vice President

Peter Lyall Vice President (until late 2012)

Vin Hindmarsh TAS President

Donnie Lagana SA President

Greg McCormack NT President

Ray Reynolds NSW President

Brian Moore QLD President

Clint Astuce WA President (until mid 2012)

Jeff Trew WA President

Evan Brett Territory Council of Canberra Goodham President

Frank Brassil Territory Council of Canberra Goodham President

Tony Tome VIC President

Sarah Crute Youth and Young Adults Representative

National Council Staff Members

Dr John Falzon Chief Executive Officer

Donna Scheerlink PA to President and CEO

Emilia Beljice National Research Officer

Rik Sutherland National Research Officer

Vincent Nguyen Cau National Website Manager

Lydia Will National Youth Coordinator

Colleen O’Sullivan National Website Editor and Media Officer

Lachlan Harley Administrative Support Officer

Kimberly Watson Assist a Student / Administration

Michael Moran Archivist (Volunteer)
Providing crucial housing for young people

In outer Sydney, the St Vincent de Paul Society is providing a crucial service that assists young people who are homeless or are at risk of homelessness. Vinnies Youth Housing Macarthur addresses the often high need areas of the Macarthur Local Government area and surrounds.

The service provides safe, affordable semi-supported medium to long term housing for young men and women aged 16 to 21 years, and sole parents and young families in the same age group. Vinnies Youth Housing provides a safe and supportive environment for up to two years, which allows a focus on maintaining family contacts and restoring the young person back to the family home if safe to do so.

Each client is assigned an individual case manager throughout their tenancy to assist them to develop life skills, complete their education, develop their parenting skills, maintain their tenancy and prepare them for independent living.

One young woman easing back into independence is Laura, a 21-year-old woman who says she feels like she has been homeless forever. Laura has been in and out of homelessness since she was ten, the product of a dysfunctional home with a mother who suffered from mental health issues and drug addiction. At far too tender an age, Laura was left to her own devices.

"To me homelessness is feeling isolated, desperate and inferior. It's meant struggling just to complete everyday life tasks and fight to try and build yourself a future, a brighter future," said Laura.

Having never met her real father and not knowing where to turn after her mother kicked her out of the house, Laura went from one temporary solution to another, often finding herself on the streets.

After sleeping on a friend's couch for some months, Laura eventually ended up in foster care away from her school and the few friends she had managed to make a connection with. Feeling isolated and lonely, Laura eventually called her mother asking if she could return home to Sydney.

Laura ended up living back at her mother's house for about a year. During this time she remembers the mental and physical abuse she had to endure. After one violent altercation, Laura was once again forced to flee what should be every child's safe haven – her mother's side.

"Not having any friends and no family I was left with no other option but to go to a crisis refuge. When I got to the refuge I was shocked and scared I didn't know what to expect," she recalls.

For years, Laura went from crisis refuge to crisis refuge, to friends, to boyfriends, couch surfing, then on to medium term refuges.

"I was exhausted. It seemed no matter how hard I fought and how strong I stayed, I would have to start all over again somewhere new," explains Laura.

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Feeling at her lowest point, Laura was eventually put in contact with Vinnies. Laura was placed in a property and explains that, for the first time in a long time, she felt comfortable and safe.

"I have my own room and my own privacy. This experience has had a really positive impact on my life."}

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"I have my own room and my own privacy. This experience has had a really positive impact on my life."
Tutoring Program

In 2012 there has been an influx in student enrolment and attendance with approximately 70 students attending the Program each week. Students come from diverse cultural backgrounds, with the majority of students from Sudanese, Afghan, Sri Lankan and Vietnamese origins. Over 80 per cent of students are from families who do not speak English as their first language and many students report being unable to get homework help from family members at home due to language or educational barriers.

The Dandenong Homework Tutoring Program, currently in its fifth year of operation, supports students from refugee and new migrant families at risk of becoming detached from formal education.

The program aims to help students to have a positive educational experience in order to remain connected to education. The focus is on the educational needs of the students and their Literacy and Numeracy skill development. Of equal value is the social development of students in terms of their confidence, self-esteem and social interaction with mentors and peers. It is hoped to maximise the opportunities for these young people to pursue further studies or desired employment.

Currently the program receives student referrals from local Conferences, local community and welfare groups and the City of Greater Dandenong Council. Much support comes from the Dandenong Regional Council and local Conference members. Relationships are being built with local schools and groups in order to have a strong network to support the students who attend.

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Fortunately, the influx in student attendance has been matched with a steady growth in volunteer tutors, with approximately 40 tutors in attendance each week. This dedicated and skilled team of volunteers represent a variety of cultural backgrounds, age groups and professional experience. Some tutors have been in Australia for generations and others have been migrants themselves; currently senior school or university students and retired professionals. The ongoing commitment and skill of the volunteer tutors is invaluable.

The Program provides regular training to augment the skill set of the tutors and to maintain a common vision and style of interacting with students. The training covers topics such as creating a safe and interactive learning environment, catering to different learning styles, understanding the refugee experience and addressing the particular needs of students from EAL (English as an Additional Language) backgrounds.

The Program has built up a bank of resources including textbooks, educational games and supplies for regular use, all of which are targeted at the specific needs of the student group. As the result of a Learning Beyond the Bell Grant through the Centre for Multicultural Youth, laptops are also available for student use. The pool of resources continues to help students to participate in a variety of learning experiences and to support the development of fundamental skills.

At various points throughout the year, families, students and tutors are surveyed for their responses to the Program. The feedback has been overwhelmingly positive. Families and students report an increase in students’ participation in school, an improvement in learning outcomes and grades, enjoyment of the Program and a great appreciation of the tutors who help them. The tutors report an appreciation of the management, format and training at the Program, a love for working with young people in a positive educational environment and a sense of being able to make a difference in the lives of others.
Welcoming the stranger in Dandenong

Thousands of refugees live in the Dandenong Regional Council area, many from war zones. Many of these people arrive with very little if anything. They yearn for compassion, hope and understanding.

Early in 2011 a small group of Society members came together to form the Dandenong Region Integration Project (DARSIP) to offer assistance to conferences in the provision of specialised close support for refugees, asylum seekers and migrants during their special journey of settlement.

DARSIP under the leadership of the Regional Council President brings the spirit of the Society into the homes of “new arrivals” and also an understanding of the challenges which refugees and asylum seekers people face under a variety of sub visa categories; with severe restrictions placed on them and an uncertain future.

Referrals are received from conferences, AMES, Asylum Seeker Centres, CatholicCare, Parish Centres etc and also through personal contact.

The DARSIP group has touched the lives of many people from different lands not least from the Tamil people who have been coming into our region in large numbers but also Pakistanis, Central Africans, Afghani, West Africans from Liberia and Sierra Leone and many others.

“Refugees have many corners to turn on arrival. They stumble like all of us during what for many can be a long and arduous journey, even whilst in this new land.”

“We bring Christ to their homes through the humble St Vincent de Paul Society mission we have been given because hope is the paramount need of refugees when settling in this land,” said Dandenong Regional Council President, Michael Cashman.

“Refugees have many corners to turn on arrival. They stumble like all of us during what for many can be a long and arduous journey, even whilst in this new land. The Society is in a unique position to show Christ’s Leadership,” Michael added.

“We are often confronted with very difficult challenges when we are with these good people and find ourselves asking what Christ would want us to do, not what the politicians or so-called experts would ask us to do. Just what would Christ want us to do? Ours is a prayerful mission.”

DARSIP reflects the spirit of Frederic Ozanam by coming into these lives and offering practical initiatives and leaving them with hope. They have greeted the St Vincent de Paul Society warmly.

Many Tamils have suffered – there are women whose husbands have disappeared, children killed, widows who escaped the ravages and children with little education and men with serious wounds desperately needing operations and care.

President Michael Cashman concluded: “The Society is privileged to be able to meet them, assist them and pray for them and will continue to welcome the stranger in the Dandenong Regional Council.”
People who are homeless are among the most marginalised in our community and those people the St Vincent de Paul Society assists have often suffered profound disadvantage.

The Vincentcare facility in Woodbridge focuses wholly on homelessness and is one of Society’s largest Special Works in Western Australia. It provides whatever services are needed by consumers at the facility to assist with their mental health and wellbeing, and lives up to the Vincentian motto, Support With Dignity.

Vincentcare Manager Yvonne Pallier said men came to Vincentcare for different reasons. Most access the 28 high dependency single bed units because they have severe or persistent mental illness. The one commonality they share is being homeless with nowhere else to go.

Many have been in hospital for months on end or they are incapable of living alone because they have severe or persistent mental illness. The one commonality they share is being homeless with nowhere else to go.

At Vincentcare in the past three years, an advanced UK developed program called the Outcome Star is successfully helping these consumers to reach their recovery goal.

The consumer driven process enables case managers and consumers to work together on a program leading to independent living.

‘Many young men who come in with first episode psychosis, usually drug induced, respond well to our intensive care program,’ Yvonne said.

“We find the quicker we get them on to the treatment the better their chance of a good recovery. Others work at a slower pace but that is OK. What matters is a good final outcome.’

Decades of experience help Vincentcare staff to assess when the consumer is ready to move into the community and they are offered accommodation at Vincentcare’s group and share houses, town houses or units in well located Perth suburbs. There are also some transitional houses for men and families in Albany.

“Community and family acceptance of mental illness is also better, possibly due to the high prevalence of acute depression and anxiety in the community.”

Vincentcare Manager Niall Rhatigan says young workers strive to draw teens in to the centre by providing the things they want, such as breakfast, hot showers, Internet. They can also receive letters, have access to youth workers, street doctors, Centrelink and other allied services.

“One particularly successful engagement was made with some homeless young mums with new babies who came to Passages for breakfast and showers. Youth workers initiated a young mums group for the women to get together with their babies and share experiences. Youth workers also put them in touch with other agencies that could support them. Intensive environmental and life skills programs are also run to attract young people with a lived experience of homelessness away from the street culture and crime.

In early 2013 Vincentcare will open Tom Fisher House, an acute shelter and a safe sleep for chronic rough sleepers or those who are unable to be accepted by other shelters due to their aggressive behaviour or drug use.

But while all these facilities serve Vincentcare and Passages well, both Yvonne and Niall say without a house to live in, the services are limited – and houses are getting harder to find.

“When people live on the streets they just lurch from one crisis to another and you spend most of your time dealing with the crisis and not the problem causing it,” they say. “It would be so much more effective to work with people who are settled.”

Homelessness is not a choice

“Community and family acceptance of mental illness is also better, possibly due to the high prevalence of acute depression and anxiety in the community.”
Taking the journey together

The St Vincent de Paul Society in Queensland offers language and settlement support to refugee families in South East Queensland. Currently the Society’s 720 volunteer tutors support over 169 families to access opportunities.

The program began in 2004 and assigns a minimum of three tutors to each family. This tutoring relationship typically continues for between one and three years until the family no longer requires support.

In addition to teaching English the tutors help families to access other opportunities by helping parents understand their incoming mail; showing them how to make an appointment with the doctor; or arrange a test so a young person can obtain a learner’s driver licence. A new “Homework Club” service is also being developed.

The program’s tutors have so many wonderful stories to share as a result of the relationships they develop with the participating families.

Two tutors shared that one of the young girls they had been working with for a year and a half stood in front of them and rehearsed a presentation she was going to give at school the following day. The tutor said they both had a lump in their throat as this young girl, who could hardly speak English when they first met, now possessed the confidence to address her peers.

Another tutor rang into the office, excited that the mother of the family they tutor had cancelled the session. Her reason for calling off the session was she had been invited for coffee with new friends. This was the first time the mother had gone out with friends and a great step forward for her socially.

Part of the reward for the tutors comes when they have done all they can to help a family and they graduate from the program. Recently a few of the program tutors had their family graduate and reflected on how far they had come. One family who spoke very little English when they first joined the program, now have both parents in fulltime employment, an eldest daughter getting distinctions at university and a younger daughter finishing school and planning to go to university.
Sudden loss - Renee’s story

Matthew Talbot Homeless Services (MTHS) provide a range of pathways out of homelessness not only for men in urban areas, but for the gamut of people who find themselves facing life without a roof over their heads.

From Quamby House in Albury to Freeman House in Armidale, these services offer hope to families, older women escaping domestic violence, single parents and accompanying children, young men and women, and people with special needs such as mental illness and developmental delay.

The services encompass a holistic approach to homelessness wherever possible, so that clients are able to improve life skills, gain education and employment, maintain family connections, address addiction, learn non-destructive coping strategies, and generally get their lives back on track.

Renee knows this from personal experience.

In late 2010 Renee was evicted from the flat she had rented for five years. The owner just wanted vacant possession and so Renee and her family had to go. She applied for many places but for the first time in her life she was unsuccessful in securing another tenancy. As Renee explains, being an unemployed single mother of two teenagers does not look good on a tenancy application.

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It had not been a good year — her teenage daughter was getting into trouble with the law and drugs, disappearing sometimes for weeks on end, and Renee had given up her job to supervise her, even walking her to and from school at times. She would get phone calls from police at all hours of the day and night to pick her up from police stations all over Sydney.

“I lost count of how many times I had to report her missing. Once I even hired a private investigator to find her, and once she was hospitalised,” Renee said.

With no family in Australia, there was no-one to turn to, nowhere to go. A friend offered Renee the use of his walk-in wardrobe to sleep in. He wasn’t joking. Renee and her kids stayed in three different motels in a month, courtesy of Housing NSW’s emergency provisions.

The situation was dire. Providing nutritious food was extremely difficult on a limited budget with no kitchen. Privacy was non-existent and basics like laundry became major undertakings that had to be planned and budgeted for.

Whole days were consumed by queues at Housing NSW and getting forms filled in by various professionals.

Renee’s health and that of her kids went downhill shockingly quickly.

“I was offered a place in a refuge which would only take myself and my daughter, but not my 13 year old son. I declined. I would have preferred to be on the street as a family rather than abandon him,” said Renee.

Then I got a call to say there was a vacancy that could take the three of us. We arrived with our bags, not knowing what to expect. It was clean and light and had a garden. It felt safe.

“After intake we were each given a quilt made by nuns. I sat on the edge of the bed with it wrapped around me and relaxed for the first time in months. I could finally see the light at the end of the tunnel,” Renee said.
My life is good now

A quest to find a permanent home in Canberra where her children could be warm saw Sundanese refugee, Adom put in contact with the St Vincent de Paul Society in the Territory Council of Canberra Goulburn. Adom said it was her key to life...

My name is Adom, I am 31 years of age and I am a mum with two children – Sarafino and Beatrice. I am from Sudan and came to Australia in 2003. Before that I had spent time in Syria and Lebanon – the life there was very hard – we had no documents – it was hard to get a job – I worked mainly as a cleaner in offices and a restaurant for nearly six to seven years. Eventually I was put in jail with my one year old daughter because we had no documents. My relatives put in money to get me out of jail. I applied to the UN to leave and was rejected. A cousin living in Australia sent a form for me to apply to come to Australia. I had to wait three years for a visa to come to Australia. Once in Australia I lived with my husband and two children in Sydney. In 2005 we broke up because of violence in the relationship. I left Sydney with my two children and went to live in Wagga where I had a cousin. I lived in a women's refuge for three months and then went to live with a friend. In 2010 I decided to come to live in Canberra because I had more friends here. At first we just stayed with friends – it was very crowded – already many people lived in the one house and we could only sleep on the floor and the kids were getting sick. My friends wanted me to find somewhere else. We stayed for a while in a refuge at Queanbeyan but we had to leave there after a couple of weeks. It's very hard with kids when you have nowhere to stay and you are moving from place to place and you can't get any help from anyone, it's really hard. The kids were really suffering. It was so cold.

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Finally I was so lucky, the migrant resource centre gave our number to the St Vincent de Paul Society – this was to be our new key to life! The St Vincent de Paul Society found us a good place to stay and we were so happy. God bless everyone who works there. We got Kathy looking after us and she found us accommodation. They helped us with housing too – how to find a house – this was really, really good. Me and my kids were happy we got our own house. They found us a tutor to work with my kids and that was really, really good – my English is not really good for reading and writing so it is good for my kids to have someone to help them. My kids now are doing really well with their homework and school work. When I see my kids doing well I am so proud and so happy. I am working part time as a carer in a nursing home and I am trying to get my certificate as a carer so I can get a good job.

My life is good now – my children and I are happy and safe. I can see a real difference in the kids now we have our own place to stay – everyone needs their own place to live – when we were moving from place to place I could really sense the kids were not happy.

I would like to help kids and people who are suffering like me – homeless people – because St Vincent de Paul teach me how to help people. When I improve my English in the future I would like to study and help suffering people also.
Facing the social concerns and consequences of homelessness the St Vincent de Paul Society Queensland, through its housing program, is determined to stand by those whose circumstances make it difficult for them to access safe, secure and affordable accommodation.

The Society advocates on their behalf, striving to provide them with appropriate support services and other housing options and encourage them to become part of the local community. To this end, the Society dedicates its resources to the services of those in greatest housing need.

As part of the housing program the Society offers families, at risk of or experiencing homelessness, a fresh start providing accommodation and support programs to empower them to improve their situation. The facility, called Families Back on Track (FBOT), is located on the Gold Coast and consists of 27 units of independent accommodation for the short to medium term.

FBOT gives families secure accommodation while they access intensive support through case management and other support programs. The programs offered include: parenting classes, counselling, addiction assistance; childhood education, budget counselling, and cooking and hygiene classes.

The families that access this facility are treated with dignity and respect and are empowered to become better caregivers for their family and successfully integrate back into the community.

One mother that stayed at FBOT and successfully exited the program into social housing shared her story:

"Before I came to Families Back on Track I’d hit rock bottom. I’d suffered through years of abuse; had lived on the streets for several months of my first pregnancy; been addicted to drugs; and had resorted to prostitution. Then I lost custody of my first son. I was 22 years old.

I was with my partner for another two years before he went to jail. Finally he was away from me. I had no friends, no family and all I owned was a small bag with a few clothes and cosmetics.

I was scared, ashamed and didn’t trust anybody. I had lost all hope. I had no direction and didn’t even know where to start. I was numb. All I knew was that I missed my sons terribly. I managed to get myself clean and into supported accommodation. It was very hard at first as I trusted nobody. My feelings of heartbreak and despair were crippling at times. But over time and with a lot of effort, I learned to trust again. I was nurtured and supported in more ways than I could have imagined and I’ve finally found myself again.

I only wish I had done this sooner, maybe things wouldn’t have been as bad.

I moved into the Families Back on Track unit and my confidence soared. My unit was wonderful, furnished and I felt proud to be living in a nice, safe place. The support I got, not only from my caseworker, but everyone working at Families Back on Track is immeasurable. I was able to do programs and they arranged lots of great stuff for the children too.

I’m just about to transition into a house. I’ve got the majority of my furniture through op shops and help from the St Vincent de Paul Society helpline. I’ll have my own car very soon, which I’ve saved up for through a savings plan I set up with Families Back on Track every week, and most importantly my boys will be coming home to me full time.

It’s been a long, hard road and at times I didn’t think I would make it. Constant struggling and worrying every day is no longer. I’m happy, healthy, confident and like where I am now with myself. I’m proud that I’ve got through this.

If it wasn’t for St Vincent de Paul Society and similar agencies I’d probably be in jail or most likely dead. I know my future for myself and my children is very bright. And I’m so grateful for the help and continued support I’ve received to help me get where I am today."
Seeking Refuge

The Bakhita Centre in the Northern Suburbs of Darwin is a hostel providing food, shelter and a listening ear for homeless men. Their stories are many and varied and illustrate the numerous ways that people can become homeless and struggle to stabilise their lives.

Raffi is an intelligent, quietly spoken Afghan man. Prior to arriving in Australia, Raffi had been working with the US Army as a civilian interpreter, a job that was well paid but dangerous and for this reason he never told his family, who remained in Afghanistan, about his profession. Raffi said he once saw it listed as the world’s number one dangerous job. Working as an interpreter, he was able to save enough money to leave Afghanistan.

“I originally wanted to go to Europe, but after flying to India and speaking with other Afghans who were heading to Australia, I decided to travel to Indonesia instead,” Raffi said.

From there, Raffi and 99 other refugees fled on a wooden boat that arrived three days later on Christmas Island.

“I was very scared before I left and couldn’t sleep for four days beforehand,” he said.

Raffi had never seen the sea before and couldn’t swim but he weighed up that having a chance at another life was better than going back to Afghanistan and the risks that involved. Although it would be a shameful death to die on the voyage, as many do on a trip that can take up to two weeks, if he succeeded, it would be worth it.

Nowadays Raffi is very happy he was sent to Darwin.

“Darwin is a small city and it is much easier to access facilities. I now have my driving and security licences and have six months of experience working in security. Many of my friends who were sent to larger cities have not been able to obtain work or their driver’s licence. I find people in Darwin very friendly, peaceful and law abiding,” he said.

Darwin as a location was never talked about by other refugees, and the teacher at the detention centre had said that people who really wanted to go to Darwin needed a mental health check!

Raffi has been very happy at the Bakhita Centre where he intends to stay until he can find a more permanent base. He said he spoke to his family every day by Skype and sent money home regularly.

“Once I receive citizenship I plan to join the military because it is a permanent, stable job where the work pathway is clear,” he said.

One of the other residents at the Centre, Peter has been in the Bakhita Centre now for a couple of weeks and finds the environment peaceful. Peter volunteered at the Bakhita Centre Warehouse for four months about two years ago and this year came back as a resident. Peter worked in accounts at a tertiary education institution for four years until he unfortunately had a breakdown due to severe depression.

He said that at the time he became unmotivated and packed up his things, donated them to Vinnies and moved down to the beach. He said he ended up on suicide watch in Cowdy Ward (the psychiatric unit of the Royal Darwin Hospital) which terrified him. Despite Peter coming across as very friendly and articulate in the interview he said he was diagnosed with social phobia. He said he received counselling through the Somerville Centre, which helped him with his self esteem and with his social issues but when he went back to part time work, he still could not cope so he dropped everything and fled again to the beach.

Peter said he stayed down the beach for another two months. He used to go to the library and borrow books to read during the day. He would rarely eat. When he finally ended up at another shelter in town he said he had lost 14kg and the water running off him in the shower was black. Like many homeless people, Peter found it hard to explain why he did not have ID, an address, a mobile phone or email.

“I feel the homeless are treated as rejects. Not having even a telephone number made it very

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difficult for me to go to the library, Medicare, bank or Centrelink. I dreaded having to explain yet again that I was homeless and had destroyed my ID during one of my mental health episodes,” he said.

Peter said there are a few things that would really help the homeless get back into the community. He said when he was living rough with his depression, he found it very hard to find a point of contact to get out of that situation. He felt that it would have been easier if somebody could check on those that were making their home on the beach, as “not even the police checked on us”. Secondly, although he had not accessed the food vans, he said many did and they were great – but a clothing van would also be appreciated. He also would have been very grateful if services could come to the hostels to provide assistance. Lastly, he felt mental health was not given the priority it should have.

“I was in a bad place and went back to get my mental health assessed a second time from the same place that had referred me to Cowdry Ward and was told they didn’t have room,” Peter said. He had to find his own GP, who then told him he also had to find his own psychiatrist. After being told that, Peter went back down the beach because it was the easiest thing to do.

For Peter, the Bakhita Centre has provided him with enough safe interaction so that he can concentrate on the homework that his counsellor gives him to overcome his social phobia. He really enjoys the work roster at Bakhita which he did not have at one of the other men’s hostels.

Peter said living at the Centre provides him with a sense of self respect, belonging and purpose. “It defines the sense of community” he said. Peter plans to get his mental health in order again before searching for more work as he has been assessed as not suitable for a disability pension.

Both Raffi and Peter are isolated from support networks. Peter does not have any family and prefers a less social life, and Raffi is far from his family and the world he knows. Staying at Bakhita has meant to them a safe and friendly environment to get re-established. They are both are immensely grateful for their current circumstances. Peter said that without the support of places like Bakhita and Somerville he would be down the beach again, or most likely, dead. ♦
Who is really helping whom?

The Chief Executive of the St Vincent de Paul Society in South Australia, David Wark, recalls his first days working for the Society and how volunteering for Fred's Van changed his perception of what it means to welcome the stranger.

It seems like only yesterday that I was being inducted into the Society in South Australia with diligence from the OHS staff member. Despite their best efforts to not be seen the apprehension and stolen looks around various corners by many staff were amusing and understood for there was a new boss. Before long I was ‘invited’ to attend Fred’s Van - a glorious service that provides 23,000 meals per year to people who find themselves in need of a meal from any one of the eight sites the Society operates from in South Australia. Keen to embrace every aspect of the Society I fronted at the Hawthorn Family Centre, the epicentre for Fred’s Van activity and the place where all the food preparation occurs for the service conducted in the CBD.

I arrived at 4.50pm for the 5pm start and was greeted by the Fred’s Van co-ordinator - working out of hours again and beaming with pride knowing the experience I was about to have. The Team Leader introduced himself and before 5.01pm every team member had arrived, introduced themselves and taken their position in the production line. There was a mother and daughter from the other side of town, a university student, teacher, office manager and accountant. This was their team who consistently works together and seemed comfortable with their self-generated nickname of the ‘A Team’. It was with military precision that the food was prepared. Meat cooked, sandwiches created, sweets packed and fruit allocated in an estimate of clients for the night.

With a deal of anxiety I drove into the city, Gawler Place to be precise and parked deliberately outside the beautiful and proud Cathedral. The A Team arrived in the Fred’s Van mini-bus and continued there jovial repartee with the now familiar gait of action and purpose. I then saw the clients and was immediately placed in a world of zero familiarity and in turn, way out of my comfort zone and sense of esteem. There were 70 people queued relatively neatly some mumbling to each other, others laughing boisterously and most in silence. They just wanted some food. We served them, one at a time, with dignity and respect to a person the clients showed real appreciation. Many wanted to engage with the new bloke fumbling around the water container trying to keep cups filled.

There were plenty of “g’day mate” and “how ya goin’ brother” from people this bloke had never seen but more pertinently never noticed. There was footy banter and weather chat and many warm handshakes and introductions. It was the clients asking the questions and showing interest in who I am. When all the food had been distributed I looked up to see people disappearing into alleyways and behind pillars supporting buildings. Their life experiences had meant they had learned how to disappear, without a trace and before any farewell was offered.

Sitting in my car at the end of the night I realised the lessons of the night. My blank canvas expectation of the night had been filled with a kaleidoscope of colour. I had wanted to make people feel comfortable, appreciated and provide them a meal prepared with affection. I was hoping to hear a story or two and provide a sounding board or offer advice. I planned to make a difference to at least one person’s life that night. However it was I who was welcomed, educated, made to feel important.

It was the shivering young girl who said thank you for the blanket that gave me an insight into the real priorities in life.

“I planned to make a difference to at least one person’s life that night. However it was I who was welcomed, educated, made to feel important.

It was the shivering young girl who said thank you for the blanket that gave me an insight into the real priorities in life.”
There was only a small crowd at Sharon's funeral. Three days previously she had been rushed to hospital with an asthma attack.

She had had such attacks on other occasions, but this time it was fatal. She went into cardiac arrest in the ambulance, and not able to revive her, the medics pronounced her dead on arrival. She left behind a husband and three young children.

Sharon had presented many times at St Vincent de Paul Society, and was well known to Conference members. There were three members who assisted her over a long period of time and each had their lives changed by her presence. As one of the Vincentians said:

"Each time, Sharon showed she never fitted the categories. At one time she was homeless, another time she'd come in just to talk, then she'd come in with a proposal to set up a business and want to know if Vinnies could help her. She was just different from anyone else."

Sharon started her teenage life by running away from home at the age of thirteen. Her father was a university academic, who had died five years previously, beginning a life-long drinking habit by her mother. By the time Sharon was ten, the roles at home were reversed. Sharon had taken on a caring role for her hopelessly alcoholic mother which lasted for two years. Then she cracked and ran off to a youth refuge. This became her way of life for the next five years. Another decade followed where Sharon drifted, in and out of relationships, jobs, health and states of mind. She began relating to Vinnies whenever she was precariously on the brink and by the time she was in her late twenties, she formed a relationship with an older man with the aim of creating a stable family life.

"The world shifted as a result of the stranger becoming our friend."

This happened, up to a point. Her partner was loving and caring, and together, they had three children. Given her state of health, the children did not inherit their mother's medical history, and they took up residence half a street away from the local Vinnies store. It was a lifeline for Sharon. They were able to shop for children's clothing, receive assistance with food, and the local Conference took them on as an 'adopted family.'

To the end, the Conference found Sharon's circumstances unique. In spite of a fragmented education, Sharon was highly articulate, had an encyclopedic knowledge of music and artistic subjects, and now had a focus with her three children. But her past dogged her. She was low on living skills, her health was deteriorating dramatically, and her lack of dental care meant that she had lost most of her teeth by her mid-twenties. Her alternative behaviours also earned her the unfortunate community nickname of the 'Bohemian witch.' This was re-enforced by her newly acquired habit of talking to herself when wandering the streets of the town.

One day when the conferences members were sharing a spiritual reflection entitled, Welcome the Stranger, one member related the reflection to Sharon. "I felt," he said, "that in welcoming a person like Sharon, it's enabled us to see parts of ourselves as a Conference that we weren't aware of. Sharon came to us as a stranger and then joined the Vincentian family. The world shifted as a result of the stranger becoming our friend."

Three weeks later, Sharon suffered her last asthma attack. The Conference members attended her funeral and assisted with expenses with the burial. Five years later, they continue to assist the family from time to time. ♦
When we think of the passage, “I was a stranger and you welcomed me,” we automatically place the more fortunate in the role of the ‘Welcomer’; however, this is a different story. It is a story that shows the beautiful, welcoming heart of Jesus in so many of those that the St Vincent de Paul Society of Australia assists overseas.

In 2006, Overseas Development Committee Chairperson for Victoria, John O’Brien, visited a Seminary in Manila in the Philippines. The two young Bishops there were keen to show John their areas of Vincentian work, including a shanty town settled under a bridge and along a fast flowing river.

A very cheerful lady was there to greet them at the bridge, as she wanted to show the group her home. The lady had stayed home from work that day and sacrificed a day’s pay, which she could not afford. The lady lived in the house with her husband and two school aged children. John said that the thing he noticed the most was how content she was with her lot. She was not ashamed but proud of her home. John was a stranger and this lady welcomed him with what she had, her hope, her joy and her home.

The lady lived in the house with her husband and two school aged children. John said that the thing he noticed the most was how content she was with her lot. She was not ashamed but proud of her home. John was a stranger and this lady welcomed him with what she had, her hope, her joy and her home.

♦

Finally when he reached the home he realised that the house was suspended by rope from the bridge, six metres above the river. She was not ashamed but proud of her home. John was a stranger and this lady welcomed him with what she had, her hope, her joy and her home.

**DISASTER RELIEF**

(for the 2011–12 Financial Year)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country or Region</th>
<th>Amount Given</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Horn of Africa</td>
<td>$25,912.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>India</td>
<td>$5,000.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thailand</td>
<td>$20,000.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Philippines</td>
<td>$40,000.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fiji</td>
<td>$20,000.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total AUD in Disaster Relief:</strong></td>
<td><strong>$110,912.00</strong></td>
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</table>

**ASSIST A STUDENT**

(students sponsored for the 2011–12 Financial Year)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>No. of students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cambodia</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fiji</td>
<td>470</td>
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<tr>
<td>India</td>
<td>1182</td>
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<tr>
<td>Indonesia</td>
<td>833</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kiribati</td>
<td>299</td>
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<tr>
<td>Philippines</td>
<td>802</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PNG</td>
<td>938</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thailand</td>
<td>374</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vanuatu</td>
<td>133</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total Students Sponsored:</strong></td>
<td><strong>5131</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Freedom from fear

**Fleeing your country and leaving behind all that you know is a difficult and heart-wrenching experience for most refugees.**

The St Vincent de Paul Society assists many people in the difficult journey of making a new home by providing many services including material assistance, educational support and help in finding short term accommodation.

For Achen, a refugee from Uganda, moving to Australia was difficult, especially at first, when she says she “did not know where to start”. Fearing for her life and with no adequate protection, she made the very difficult choice of leaving behind her family and friends to come to Australia.

As Achen tells her story, she fights away tears as she thinks of the son she left behind when fleeing the violence in her home country. Many days she feels that she is unable to go on, her heart heavy from missing him so much.

Once in Australia, the Society offered her support with a basic living allowance of $30 per week for four months, but it was not just the money that helped her but the warmth of the people within the organisation.

“The warmth of the people put a smile on my face to replace my everyday tears,” says Achen.

Despite the language barriers, Achen is currently working in a welfare centre and studying to complete her Social Work degree in which she is achieving mainly distinctions and high distinctions.

When asked what she would like to be doing in two years’ time, she says she would like to be working as a social worker, particularly assisting refugees who have had similar experiences to herself.

“It is always important to have hope because tomorrow will be a better day,” she says.

Achen’s story reminds us that it is not always about what the individual gets from Australia but more importantly what Australia gains from opening up its doors and hearts ✿
Society Financial and Property Resources

People-in-Need Services
Provision by conference members on a one-to-one basis of:
- food, clothing, household goods, furniture
- accommodation and rental assistance
- assistance with utilities and transport expenses
- medical, dental and allied needs
- school clothing and equipment
- legal and related assistance
- representations to Centrelink and other government entities
- companionship and friendly assistance on personal and family matters.

Homeless Services
Facilities owned and leased by the Society, providing for homeless women, men and families:
- accommodation, meals, clothing
- medical and dental services
- legal assistance for victims of domestic violence
- services for people with alcohol and drug addiction problems
- training and learning services to encourage and assist homeless people to return to independent living with security and dignity.

Vinnies Retail Centres
Vinnies properties owned by The Society, enabling:
- people in need of help to make contact with the Society
- the provision of people-in-need services
- the receiving and processing of donated goods
- the sale of donated goods surplus to the provision of people-in-need services.

Funds raised by the sale of goods are applied by conferences and councils to the delivery of services for the poor and disadvantaged.

Mental Health Services
Assistance to people living with mental health problems to obtain:
- professional services
- volunteer friendships for social activities
- training and productive work in supported employment facilities.

Expenses 2011–12 $326,911,783

Aged Care
Accommodation and services for aged people in need of low to high-care in Society-owned and leased premises:
- independent living units with access to care services
- home care services.