

## **St Vincent de Paul's History of Work with Migrants and Refugees**

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The St Vincent de Paul Society, or Vinnies, is a lay Catholic charity, operating in 149 countries around the world. In Australia, we work in every state and territory, work carried out by more than 60,000 members, volunteers, and employees. Our mission is to provide help for those who are marginalised by structures of exclusion and injustice, and our programs assist around 2.5 million Australians each year. These include people living with mental illness, people who are homeless and insecurely housed, and people experiencing poverty.

It goes without saying that recent migrants and refugees or asylum seekers have always been some of the most marginalised and vulnerable people in Australia. As such, the newly arrived have featured prominently in the work of Vinnies for over a hundred years. As well as assisting migrants and refugees through many of our general services, for example subsidised housing, paying utility bills, providing food, etc, Vinnies has, over the decades, run a wide range of specific programs tailored for the newest arrivals to Australia.

Some of our earliest records going back a hundred years refer to the care given by our volunteers to newly arrived migrants. For example, in 1910, the Victorian branch of Vinnies reported that "The suggestion of His Grace Archbishop Carr as to meeting Catholic immigrants on their arrival at this port was being adopted. Catholics coming to these shores would receive all possible attention, and nothing would be left undone to bring them into touch with Catholic life in the city."

Also, we know that, in Tasmania, volunteers used to actually board the ships that people were arriving on, meeting migrants before they even set foot on Australian soil, and then assisting with accommodation and other emergency needs.

But it was really after the Second World War that Vinnies became heavily involved with the influx of migrants to Australia. In fact, a Society circular from 1948 headed 'Migrants and Displaced Persons' suggests that the Vatican itself had requested the Society to consider the issue.

In Melbourne, there were very large numbers of people arriving from overseas, requiring significant help to resettle. In the Victorian Annual Report of 1950, it was noted that "From week to week parties of children varying from 50 to 150 are taken by bus from the holding camps at Broadmeadows and Maribyrnong to the homes of parishioners in many suburbs. The children in twos and threes are entertained at lunch and the evening meal in the homes of the parishioners, and then taken to the parish church for evening devotions. ... newcomers are informed of the time of Mass in the parish and are invited to associate themselves in all parish activities."

In 1952, the assistance being provided by Vinnies to migrants in Victoria became coordinated under one programme, presided over by Frank Murphy – who went on to receive an Order of the British Empire for his work for migrants and refugees. One of the first jobs of the programme was to provide migrants with housing and schooling, and to establish how many of the new arrivals were Catholic. It also ran a facility for people at Maribyrnong Hostel, where many migrants were housed, and organised annual variety concerts which showcased the talents of the new migrants for over twenty years.

Meanwhile, over in Western Australia, in the mid-1950's, the Society had purchased a very large residence in North Perth, and set it up as a hostel for English boy migrants. It was administered by

the Our Lady of Victories conference. A very large number of boys were housed here over the following decade, and were generally welcome to stay until they found their own employment or private accommodation.

In 1960, in Melbourne, the Society was also running substantial accommodation services. We had there had built six homes for refugees in Brighton, with funding provided by the UNHCR and the Federal Catholic Immigration Committee as it was then. The community was rather quaintly known as "Vincentville", and was so successful that the Society purchased more land and built a further 9 dwellings for new arrivals in 1965, in a community named Vinton, in Preston. That same year, a Migrant Enquiry Centre was opened in Little Collins Street, which within the next three years handled over 1,000 interviews involving a variety of problems from all over the state.

The next phase of the Society's assistance to refugees began in the mid-1970's, with the arrival of people from Vietnam and Timor, and a little later from Lebanon and South America.

In September, 1975, the first 150 refugees from Timor arrived in Western Australia. They were housed by the government in hostels, and Vinnies immediately got involved with taking the asylum seekers on outings, connecting them with other services, and organizing Christmas parties for them. A year later, the arrival at Geraldton of Taiwanese fishing boats caused a political stir in Western Australia, as the boats were moored offshore but the passengers not allowed to disembark. Just as volunteers had more than fifty years before, Vinnies members got on to boats where the men were effectively detained, and brought them food, clothing, and blankets until the men were freed.

Increased need saw Vinnies volunteers stepping up all around the country. In the ACT, a special group was established to assist people from Vietnam and Laos – the Caritas Christi conference. It managed to locate a convent that was no longer in use, and repurposed it to provide accommodation for unaccompanied minors in the ACT region.

In Melbourne, two more Special Works were in within hostels at Eastbridge and Midway. In 1976 alone the Society in Victoria helped over 1000 refugees from Asia resettle, providing goods worth more than \$70,000 at the time. Donations nationwide were flooding in – there was even a report of a family who had saved to buy a television instead deciding to give that money to the Society for redistribution to refugees. In August 1978, the Society took a more direct approach: under national guidelines, in Newborough, Victoria, a group of St Vincent de Paul volunteers directly took responsibility for the resettlement of four Vietnamese men. Over the next few years, the Society in Victoria assisted re-settlement of over 500 refugee families all around the state.

In the late 1970's, the government was starting to express reservations about migrant intakes, given local unemployment, the cost of settling refugees, and perceived threats caused by the new Australians. The shift in attitude prompted the Society's National Council, in March 1977, to write to the government and plead for the true facts about refugees to be known, and for government to increase the number. It read:

"We ... take note of the fact that Australia is a comparatively rich country compared with those which are presently holding refugees such as Thailand, where 76,000 people are now living in near hopeless conditions in the refugee camps.

In our experience since the arrival of the first group of Vietnamese in June 1975 we believe that Indo-Chinese refugees make excellent citizens and have caused little disruption if any to the economy of our country. We know that they have found employment and accommodation and have proved to be good workers and good friends of the Australian people."

In 1986, the Society's National Migrants and Refugees Committee was established, to keep state committees informed of changes in government policy and of important statements by the Pope and

other world leaders; and to encourage positive attitudes towards acceptance of migrants and refugees especially through the regular publication of the Holy family Newsletter, which was also forwarded to all MPs and Senators. The Committee was headed by Ted Bacon, a founding member of the Refugee Council, and the committee also administered the loans scheme CALFRIC, which the government established to make interest-free loans available to refugees from Indo-China. These loans really enabled refugees to help themselves, mostly by empowering them to move out of hostels and into private rental.

A letter to that committee in 1986 shows, once again, that the most important thing to new arrivals was human contact:

It is essential to try and establish their needs ... on 10 point to zero [scale]with priority at 10. I could only rank one need at 10 then everything else fell below 3. ... The big 10 was friendship, visiting with non verbal communication, gesticulating, laughing, smiling and the like. They would go without food for a week just to have an Australian shake their hand, smile and show friendship and love.

Meanwhile, Queensland was seeing growing numbers of refugees, particularly from Latin America, and in 1988 Queensland formed its own Migrant and Refugee Committee to deal with the growing need. Given the particular needs of that refugee group around torture and trauma, the Committee formed a partnership with the Mater Hospital's Torture Trauma Centre, where volunteers from the Society helped with therapeutic activities, and then assisted people to find jobs when they leave the centre.

There is further evidence here that many of those that the Society assisted would later return and volunteer with us. This seems true for many from South America, and also some from Vietnam. Indeed, in NSW, the president of the Migrant and Refugee Committee in 1990 made a statement to all volunteers about the importance of including migrants and refugees as volunteers, given the special skills and knowledge they bring. There was already a Spanish-speaking group of volunteers within the Society, and it was felt that "Australian Catholics from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds...will add a new freshness to our Society and enable us to understand more deeply the problems and concerns that migrants and refugees may well have in settling in Australia."

In the 1990s, there were also annual national meetings of the various Society migrant and refugee committees around the country taking place. The minutes from 1990 show that the Society had been campaigning nationally against forced repatriation, as well as for people sent back to refugee camps in Hong Kong. Two years later, the head of the National Migrant and Refugee Committee, John Atkinson, witnessed the conditions in refugee camps there himself: he noted the depression that permeated the camp, as people slowly gave up hope, including many children there.

In 1991, the National Committee published a set of national guidelines for working with migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers. The guidelines emphasised the need to respect the individual and their unique needs in every case, and our vision of an Australia that welcomes everyone, regardless of religion, skin colour, or language spoken. Again, there was also an emphasis on recruiting people from non-English-speaking backgrounds.

Mandatory detention began in Australia in 1992, and, a year later, a Parliamentary Inquiry into the policy was launched. The Society's 23-page submission vehemently opposed mandatory detention, arguing then, as we do today, that it is hugely harmful to all involved, as well as incredibly expensive. We highlighted, more than twenty years ago, the egregious impact on children, and referred to the research that supported our assertions about the mental health impact of detention.

That same year, 1993, we published our first national policy for Migrants and Refugees. That document identified three stages at which the Society could get involved, including arrival,

resettlement, and development, and the importance of advocacy. Homelessness, loneliness, and communication problems were identified as of central importance.

Meanwhile, at the state level, a wide range of on-the-ground support for refugees continued to be provided. In Tasmania, the Society was renting at least one house to provide accommodation for refugees in West Hobart, as well as organising annual Society Outings for migrants and refugee families. In 1991, this event was a cruise to Bruny Island, followed by a barbecue, and around 260 people attended. In NSW, a group of Vinnies nuns was tutoring English and providing in-home assistance. The Society had also by this point opened up a regular dialogue with the Iranian Welfare Association, and with members of the Lebanese community to discuss how the Society could better assist migrants and refugees from those backgrounds. The Society also received funding for at least two years (in Sydney) for a counsellor to work on torture and trauma victims, and, perhaps remarkably, was running *discos* for detainees at Villawood. Apparently these events were somewhat circumscribed by Immigration Department restrictions on noise levels, and, one suspects, by the ages of the volunteers organising the events, but they provided an opportunity for asylum seekers to meet with people outside the detention centre, including young members of St Vincent de Paul.

At that time, much as today, the government's asylum seeker policy was not only being criticized by many in the community, but was being challenged in the courts. In August, 1993, the Federal Court handed down a decision in the case of *The Minister for Immigration, Local Government and Ethnic Affairs v Tang Jie* which rendered the detention of 26 asylum seekers from China unlawful, and that the government had exceeded its constitutional mandate for detention. However, the court was immediately faced with the issue of where the released detainees would be housed once released. Happily, the Society in Western Australia was there to assist, and the Court mandated that the asylum seekers were to live in the Society's Camillus House while their claims were processed.

Meanwhile, in New South Wales, from 1994 Eastern Migrant and Refugee Committee (ESMRC), managed by Joanne and Graham Russell, managed three properties and offered accommodation for up to 20 newly-arrived migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers in Randwick and Bondi. Then, in 1999, came the Kosovo refugee crisis. As part of Operation Safe Haven, the Department of Defence established initial processing of people at East Hills, near Sydney. As many as 50 Vinnies volunteers were on call for every plane that arrived, to help with issuing of travel documents, health checks, clothing, phone cards and the first instalment of a weekly cash allowance. A detailed report from 1999 tells us that a total of over 1000 volunteers were involved, and that Vinnies had distributed 57,904 items of clothing to nearly four thousand refugees. Maitland Diocese was very much involved with over 150 volunteers involved with two flights transferred from East Hills to Singleton Army base.

Today, there is a lot that we have learnt from our history of working with migrants and refugees.

- 1) We have stopped targeting our assistance at Catholics, or including attendance at mass etc as part of our work. We now provide material and emotional support to any refugee who needs it, regardless of background.
- 2) Since the 1980s, the importance of national coordinated advocacy has been recognised, and has been increasing.
- 3) It is clear looking through the archival documents that what we have observed asylum seekers wanting, perhaps more than material assistance, is a sense of belonging and community in their new homes. I hope that the Society continues to provide the human touch, through our large network of unpaid volunteers who are driven by compassion and humanity.

For the last decade, and up to today, the Society has continued to run a wide range of programmes for refugees, including tutoring, settlement assistance of all varieties, material aid, housing, white goods, legal assistance, visits to detention centres, and much more. And at the national level, we

have continued our advocacy for the rights of refugees and asylum seekers – the latest edition of our magazine, *The Record*, features a 9-page spread on this issue.

We recognise that refugees pose one of the largest moral issues of our time, and we hope that – learning from the past – the Society can help move Australia’s policy and practice in this area towards a better future.

Thank you