

# the Record

Autumn 2020



St Vincent de Paul Society

NATIONAL COUNCIL of AUSTRALIA Inc.

*good works*





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.

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 Record is published regularly each year by the St Vincent de Paul Society in Australia's National Council.

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

This publication may contain images of deceased members of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community. They are used with the greatest respect and appreciation.

Opinions expressed in this publication are not necessarily those of the publishers.

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The St Vincent de Paul Society in Australia consists of 60,000 members and volunteers who operate on the ground through over 1,000 conferences located in individual parishes across the country.



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If you need help, or are in a position to donate, please call the St Vincent de Paul Society on 13 18 12.

# Young and Old: We're in it together

BY CLAIRE VICTORY

Just before Christmas, my Nan, Vonnie Victory, passed away. Five weeks later, my Granddad, Pat, also passed away. Both were aged 89, and had recently celebrated their 65th wedding anniversary. I was close to Nan and Granddad, and while their passing was obviously sad, it gave our big, geographically diverse yet tightknit extended family multiple opportunities over the summer to gather, share memories, celebrate, and make plans for future family celebrations to ensure that we would continue to gather even in the absence of our matriarch and patriarch.

Nan and Granddad were also my primary Vincentian role models. Having lived their lives in Broken Hill until moving to Adelaide for health reasons in 2012, they were heavily involved in the life and works of the Society in that town and the Wilcannia-Forbes Diocese. Upon their passing, I was blessed to receive, from Vincentians in that part of the world and beyond, messages of condolence relaying stories and observations about Nan and Granddad's works, character and impact. It was a privilege and a comfort to me, and to my family, to hear about the role that Pat and Vonnie played in the lives of so many people beyond their children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren.

One of the things that struck me about the emails I received from my grandparents' Vincentian friends and colleagues was the extent to which the stories they shared – about their memories of working with my grandparents, or how my grandparents had recruited, trained and formed them – was that all of these things had happened when Nan and Granddad were well and



*Vonnie and Pat Victory.*

truly past retirement age. These were not memories from the distant past, when our community and the Society were vastly different; they were recollections from when my grandparents were already in their 70s and 80s, taking on new challenges, accepting new roles and responsibilities, and learning new things as they did so. In her eulogy for Nan, my sister listed a number of encounters and attributes that made Nan great, but then noted “And if this was it, she would have been an excellent Nan and a nice little old lady. But that would be to underestimate her entirely... I remember how, into her 80s, she was telling me about a conference she'd been to about mental health issues, particularly Bipolar and the interplay between disadvantage, mental health and homelessness and how it would impact her role with Vinnies.”

These reflections served as a reminder of the active and essential role played by St Vincent de Paul members in their senior years. It often concerns me that in our efforts to recruit and retain more young members, we too readily dismiss the identities and contributions of members who do not fit within the ‘youth’ definition. We all know that we need to constantly attract new members from across the age,

gender and cultural spectrum; but I feel that too much negative talk about ageing membership or our membership ‘dying off’ can actually be counter-productive, and risks causing our older members to feel devalued or dismissed. Some senior Vincentians have been members of the Society for decades (like Granddad, who started in a youth conference at age 15), whereas others have joined once the pressures of paid employment and family care responsibilities eased a little; each has their own Vincentian journey and story from which we'd do well to learn, and it would be a mistake to consider any Vincentian's age their only (or most interesting) feature. Just as we should value younger Vincentians for the skills, wisdom and experience they can bring to our conference and works (not simply their youth), so too should we recognise that older Vincentians – whether they're new to the Society or are life members, or somewhere in between – have a lot of energy and new ideas to contribute, and that they too can learn new things and develop further in their own skills and spirituality through their participation in the Society. ♦

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Claire Victory is National President of the St Vincent de Paul Society National Council of Australia.

# We will get through this



Claire Victory

BY CLAIRE VICTORY

The Society operates at the grass roots and provides material and personal support to individuals and families in local communities across Australia. Our members and volunteers are the heartbeat of the organisation.

As the spread of COVID-19 continues, the St Vincent de Paul Society in each state and territory is responding to the specific needs in those states and territories in line with advice and direction from the authorities.

As the impact of this virus, on the back of the bushfires and drought, will emerge in the weeks and months ahead, we will continue our work with all communities in need.

Through our conferences in local areas, the Society is doing what we can to maintain ongoing contact with people who need support and to engage with people seeking help, perhaps for the first time, in these unprecedented circumstances.

We are absolutely committed to walking with people whatever their circumstances, while doing everything we can to preserve the health and safety of our members, volunteers and companions.

Conferences across the states and territories are doing practical things like food drops at people's front doors and maintaining phone contact with particularly vulnerable people.

The Rule calls us to respond with commitment, compassion and respect and to work with integrity and empathy.

Things are changing rapidly, and the reality of what we're dealing with as a nation will take time to dawn on many of us.

These are uncharted waters, but we will get through this. ♦

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Claire Victory is National President of the St Vincent de Paul Society National Council of Australia.

## Covid-19 prayer

Eternal God

We seek your healing, wisdom and peace in these uncertain times of COVID-19. Be present to all across our nation and globally who have contracted this virus, may they feel the power of your healing through the compassionate care of nurses, doctors, families and friends.

Take away the fear, anxiety, and feelings of separation from people in isolation. Give them a sense of purpose in pursuing health and protecting others from exposure to the virus. Protect their families and friends and bring peace to all who love them.

Holy Spirit, we seek your wisdom daily. Be with people making decisions that affect the lives and futures of our families, communities, countries, and the wider world. Inspire and invigorate people developing better tests to diagnose the virus, vaccines to prevent it, and protocols and communication to eliminate the virus's spread.

May we in Vincentian spirit live in empathy, with strength of faith, certainty of hope and the gift of compassion to all.

Amen ♦

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Adapted and composed from various sources by Leo Tucker  
Executive Director Mission and Spirituality NSW.

# St Vincent de Paul Society Australia response to COVID-19 pandemic

**S**t Vincent de Paul Society National Council President, Claire Victory, said vulnerable people will be deeply challenged by the responses to the COVID-19 pandemic and by the economic impact of the virus.

In a statement to staff and members of the Society's conferences in all states and territories, Ms Victory said social isolation is one of the most common concerns that conference members respond to in communities throughout Australia. The Society operates at the grass roots, visiting people, known as companions, in their homes or assisting them through Vinnies shops and other facilities.

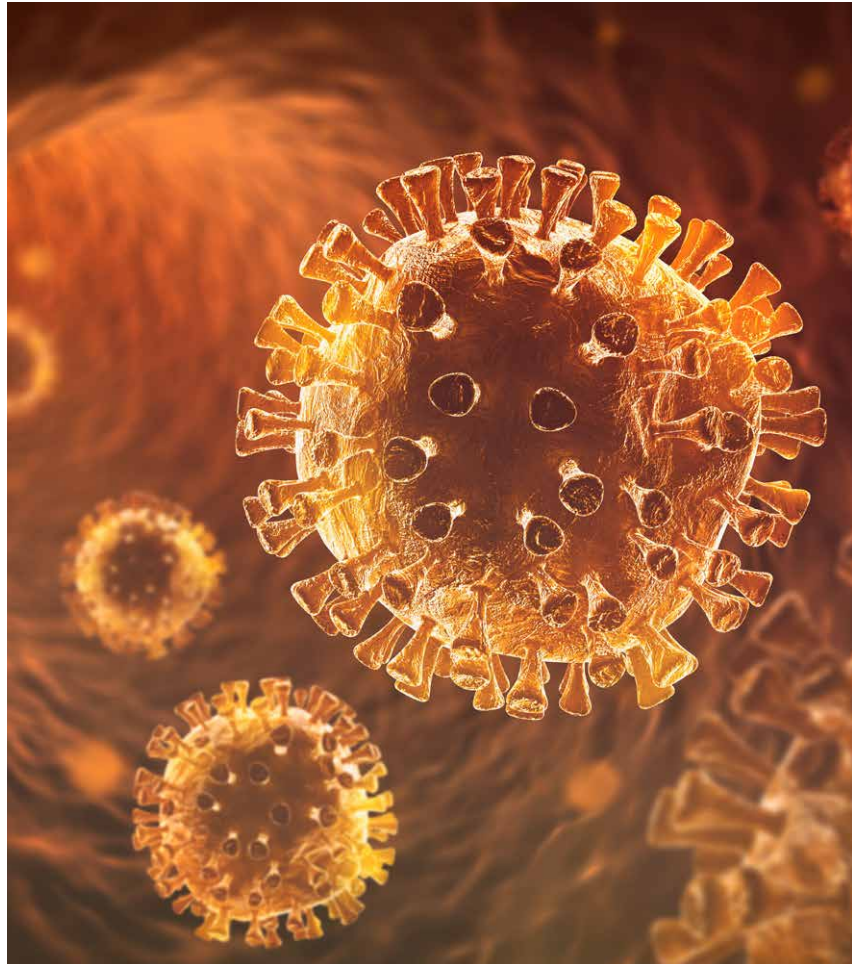
'At a time of enforced self-isolation required by the response to COVID-19, the Society's model of care can continue to meet those needs. But we need to be smart about how we do this so that both the community and our members are safe.

'Many of our members are aged over 60 and most companions are living with existing health issues. Both groups are at higher risk of serious consequences should they become infected.

'At the time of writing, all home-based visitations will cease until further notice from the National Council.

'Visitation will now occur at the discretion of the conference presidents and must take place by telephone or web-based care and support, or at a Vinnies shop or other facility.

'The rooms must have sanitisers and appropriate personal protective equipment



including face masks, and the rooms must be disinfected prior to and after use.

'Visitation through hospitals and aged care facilities can only occur if the operator of the facility approves of ongoing visits and provides both sanitisers and appropriate protective equipment.

'The same rationale applies to visitation to other facilities such as prisons.

'Visitation or volunteering on Vinnies vans will continue until the relevant government authority suspends such activity due to the pandemic, and appropriate practices must be followed.

'If the relevant government authority directs the Society to cease providing visitation through attendance at a centre or vans or at another facility, the Society will provide assistance through telephone and web-based assessments.

'If the relevant government authority directs closure of schools and puts quarantine zones in place with travel restrictions then all conference and council meetings will be conducted by telephone or other use of technology.

'We will continue to monitor the impact of these changes on companions and respond as best we can', Ms Victory said. ♦

# Anticipating new life



BY CASSANDRA BULL

Having had the privilege of working with the National Drought Relief Team since January, the journey towards Easter has felt a bit different this year. Our team in the national drought relief call centre listens to the stories from farmers who are at the end of their tether. As we prepare ourselves to extend support to the western most communities of Western Australia, I feel a much deeper connection to the narrative of Easter, and the season of prayer and preparation.

I feel drawn this year, into a deeper understanding of what it is to anticipate new life.

Each time I speak to a farmer, or hear from the drought relief team, the stories of heartache, hardship and frustration, I find myself in a unique prayer, not just for rain, but for greater empathy and solidarity.

As a child raised in the city, but coming from strong country roots, I know the disconnect that can often be felt between the city and the bush.

But even city folk celebrate the recent rain, regardless of the impact on traffic or social plans.

We all stand in solidarity with remote, regional and rural communities hoping for rain or follow-up rain to fill dams and replenish depleted soil so stock can graze and crops can germinate.

While the rain has started to fall in many areas parched by drought, it will be some time before the benefits flow to depleted bank accounts. And for some, the rain has yet to fall. Help will be needed for some time yet.

As a young Catholic, with a heart for social justice, and a love for the Society, I couldn't be prouder of the work Vincentians are providing on the ground. And every day I work with the dedicated team who are talking to people at the coalface and processing hundreds of applications. At the time of writing, the Society had paid 6,358 applicants, to a total of \$19,074,000 with a further 138 applications due to be paid later that week. (\$414,000).

This is much needed support for our regional brothers and sisters many of whom live in already fragile rural communities.

As we prepare ourselves for the Good Friday fast, and continue our preparation during Lent, focused on the hope and renewal of Easter I am mindful of people in rural communities living with hope and a quest to remain optimistic for the future, preparing their paddocks in anticipation of "new life". ♦

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Cassandra Bull is National Manager of the Drought Relief Team at the National Council Secretariat

# Ben's Story

**B**en is a young farmer who recently suffered a health problem that led to Vinnies stepping in to support him and his family.

"My wife and I have been coping with drought conditions since 2011. We're not ones to ask for help but it's gotten to a point where we decided we needed to accept some assistance from Vinnies."

Since 2011, Ben has had to sell off all his cattle and change to farming sheep and goats as a means to better survive the drought conditions.

After rupturing one of his eyes, Ben has been unable to complete all the farm work he was previously responsible for, with his wife needing to step in to get it done. This has created further

financial and emotional stress.

"Vinnies kindly offered to pay for my medical bills, as this was an added expense we simply couldn't afford on top of running the farm and providing for our two children."

Ben is just one of hundreds of farmers that Vinnies is supporting through the drought. ♦

## A note of thanks

Good morning St Vincent de Paul drought relief personnel,  
On behalf of my family I want to thank you very much for your much-appreciated transfer of \$3000 to us last week. The money came at just the right time to enable me to pay our quarterly farm insurance bill and two new tyres for the farm ute.

I understand your assistance to other communities who have suffered in the devastating bush fires must be a priority, but nevertheless we are very grateful for your assistance to us also, as the drought continues in our area.

Vintage is under way now in the Clare Valley, and we are hearing some very unhappy stories of depleted tonnages of grapes, compared with previous years.

Thank you again and good wishes to you all.

To whom it may concern,  
I write to thank you for the drought relief funds we recently received. I opened our banking to see if we could afford to pay an account today as we were very close to the limit of our overdraft and found that \$3000 had been credited to us from St Vincent de Paul. I cried in relief.  
Thank you so much.

I am not really sure how to express our heartfelt thanks (in its entirety) to you and to Vinnies for all of your very generous support to us in this tough period in our lives!

It is people like you who make a massive difference in people's lives, including of course, ours!

Thank you, thank you, thank you, from the bottom of our hearts! We appreciate your gift so very much!

To you and to all of the team at Vinnies, Thank you again!

God bless you all.

# Spread the word – drought funding available for farming households

The Federal Government has recently extended the number of households and local government areas which qualify for assistance under the Drought Community Service Initiative Round 2.

The DCSI funding provides a one-off payment of \$3,000 funded by the Australian Government for short-term financial assistance to eligible farming households

living or working in eligible Local Government Areas. Eligible households include farmers, farm workers, and farm suppliers and contractors facing hardship due to the drought.

The St Vincent de Paul Society Australia is delivering the DCSI program money in the following areas:

## New South Wales

Balranald  
Bathurst Regional  
Berrigan  
Brewarrina  
Cobar  
Edward River  
Federation  
Gilgandra  
Gunnedah  
Hay  
Hilltops  
Lachlan  
Lithgow  
Liverpool Plains  
Mid-Western Regional  
Murrumbidgee  
Narromine

Oberon  
Parkes  
Tamworth Regional  
Warrumbungle  
Wentworth

## Queensland

Balonne  
Barcoo  
Boulia  
Bullo  
Diamantina  
Maranoa  
McKinlay  
Murweh  
Paroo  
Richmond  
Western Downs

## South Australia

Adelaide Plains  
Barunga West  
Berri & Barmera  
Ceduna  
Claire and Gilbert Valleys  
Cleve  
Copper Coast  
Flinders Rangers  
Franklin Harbour  
Goyder  
Kangaroo Island  
Kimba  
Light  
Loxton Waikerie  
Mount Remarkable  
Northern Areas  
Orroroo/Carrieton

Port Pirie City and District  
Renmark Paringa  
Southern Mallee  
Streaky Bay  
Tatiara  
The Coorong  
Unincorporated Far North SA  
Wakefield  
Wudinna  
Yorke Peninsula

## Victoria

Mildura  
Pyrenees  
Strathbogie  
Swan Hill  
Yarriambiack

## Drought Community Support Initiative Round 2:

List of additional eligible Local Government Areas announced in March:

## New South Wales

Clarence Valley  
Junee  
Kempsey

## Northern Territory

Central Desert

## Queensland

Bundaberg

## South Australia

Barossa

## Victoria

Benalla  
Wangaratta

## Western Australia

Albany  
Bridgetown-Greenbushes  
Broomhill-Tambellup  
Bruce Rock  
Cranbrook  
Denmark  
Donnybrook-Balingup  
Esperance  
Gnowangerup  
Jerramungup  
Katanning  
Kellerberrin  
Kent  
Kojonup  
Nannup  
Narembeen  
Plantagenet  
Ravensthorpe

**If you have already received a payment in DCSI Round 2 (so a payment this year or late last year), you are not eligible for further funding at this stage. But we encourage farming communities to connect with us via our Conferences and assistance lines to see if we can help in any other way. ♦**

Current program guidelines and eligibility criteria for the DCSI are available here: [www.business.gov.au/assistance/drought-community-support-initiative](http://www.business.gov.au/assistance/drought-community-support-initiative)

A list of drought-declared LGAs, including the ones above serviced by the St Vincent de Paul Society are available here: [www.vinnies.org.au/page/Find\\_Help/drought\\_assistance/](http://www.vinnies.org.au/page/Find_Help/drought_assistance/)

Details about the payment, including how to apply are available online at [www.vinnies.org.au/page/Find\\_Help/drought\\_assistance/Donate\\_to\\_Vinnies\\_Drought\\_Appeal/](http://www.vinnies.org.au/page/Find_Help/drought_assistance/Donate_to_Vinnies_Drought_Appeal/) or by calling 1300 846 643.



# Celebration and recognition of 70 years of service in the Northern Territory

BY FAY GURR

The work of the Society is done 'quietly' with members helping companions in any way that they can to relieve poverty and restore dignity. In an organisation with such a broad reach as the Society it isn't always possible to capture the work for the poor which is done with humility so only the companion knows the lengths which members will go to so that the burden of the poor is lightened.

So it is a challenge to uncover the work of individuals in conferences and in the community who work for the Society but recently the Society in the Northern Territory recognised three members who have given years to their work for the poor and have done so – quietly and humbly.

At the end of year celebrations our staff and members joined together with a beautiful Christmas Party. Emeritus Bishop Eugene and Fr Tom from the Cathedral Parish who have each supported our work for years and more than a hundred guests gathered together. It is sometimes a barrier to achieve more when the Society is so small and the work is so great, but at these times when most of our staff, members and volunteers can be in one room celebrating the gift of the Society to the poor in Darwin and surrounds – being small is an enormous advantage!

Our work covers thousands of kilometres through tropical rainforest and desert. The tyranny of distance could defeat us but rather it inspires a resilience and determination in everyone associated with the Society. We work with the most disadvantaged people in Australia who have been dispossessed of land; culture and dignity in many cases. They are often unwelcomed in Darwin



Mike Green

## Mike Green Outstanding and Service

*In recognition of outstanding dedication and service.*

## John Byrne and Mike Green Life Membership Award

*Recognition for those no longer able to be active members due to age or illness and who have completed at least 20 years of service.*



Fay Gurr and Gerry McCormack

## Gerry McCormack Vincentian Cross

*Highest degree of service to the Society and the people it serves having made significant contribution at a leadership level.*

and other towns and when the Aboriginal companions are living 'longgrass' in Darwin they are shunned by many. At our day centre Ozanam House our companions find peace; respect; meals; showers; health care; legal advice; Centrelink support and emergency relief. They are cared for and they are known.

Like many stories of the Society throughout Australia the Territory began humbly in 1949, only a few years after WW II and the bombing of Darwin, which lasted for two years. Last year we marked 70 years of the Society in the Territory

with so much to be proud of in the work of those before us and the work done now.

Three Vincentians were honoured last December. As President I am humbled and in awe of the decades of work these members have given to the community of Darwin and in service to the Territory Council. Congratulations to Michael Green and John Byrne for Outstanding Service and Gerald McCormack in receiving the Vincentian Cross. ♦

Fay Gurr is President of St Vincent de Paul Northern Territory.

# Elaine and Gordon's story



**E**laine and Gordon own and operate an eco-tourism agency on the South Coast of NSW.

On 4 January this year the 'border fire' was threatening their region and residents were warned to prepare as the weather pushed the fire their way.

Elaine and Gordon spent the day preparing the house for bushfire and took all the kayaks and camping gear for their business into Eden. The pair then evacuated to Eden to wait.

They went to the wharf and waited all night at the harbour master's office with hundreds of others.

The next day they knew the fire had gone through their town but didn't know how it had affected their property. They were eventually told their house was standing, but they weren't allowed home yet.

When they were able to return home, three days after evacuating,

they saw the entire property had been burnt, except for the house.

"We did a lot of work to prepare the house – and clearly it was the right thing to do," said Elaine.

However, the sheds, the garden, garage and bridge to the house were all destroyed.

Worried about looters, the couple moved back into the house but spent 17 days without power, water, phone or internet connection.

"Having a shower was a planned event. We were camping in our house. It's definitely not as much fun as our camping trips!" said Elaine.

"This is our busiest season, and we were heavily booked. We were looking forward to the biggest year ever," said Elaine.

However, the damage from the fire, to their property and to the surrounding wilderness, meant that all tours had to be cancelled.

"We have a lot of clients from Victoria, and those roads were closed for six weeks, so even if people wanted to come on tour they couldn't reach us," said Elaine.

Even once they thought they could get back to their tours, the river flooded.

"At first it was, 'Thank God it's raining', but then further tours had to be cancelled - you can't kayak on a flooded river!" said Elaine.

"This year we've also missed out on eight cruise ship tours," she added.

Without income, the couple were starting to feel the financial strain.

"Our house didn't burn down, but we don't have an income," said Elaine.

"We were insured, but, like a lot of people, have discovered we are underinsured. Like, people have told us we should have insured the bridge on our property – but who insures a bridge?!"

“We were eating into our profits, and then the bills started coming in and we had no money for us.”

A few weeks after the bushfire destroyed their property, Elaine and Gordon eventually went to the Bega Recovery Centre to seek assistance.

“It was hard to go in and ask for help. We are usually proud small business operators and support two incomes with our tours and campsites. We are very self-sufficient people.”

“A lot of people aren’t asking for help. People saying, ‘there are people a lot worse off than me’, and we are also among the lucky ones – our house is still standing,” said Elaine.

For all the damage caused, the fires bring out a lot of good in people.

“It’s just amazing how it affected everyone. We are all in this

## **Elaine and Gordon received emergency assistance from Vinnies that allowed them to buy food, pay for fuel, and get back on their feet until their tours could start again, and income started coming back in.**

together. Some days are full of tears, and others are building us up, and other days we are the ones building others up while they have tears.”

Help and support comes in varied and beautiful ways. After Elaine posted on Instagram a picture of a destroyed protea, somebody who had been on a kayak tour two years earlier got in touch to say they worked for a protea wholesaler and delivered some plants to replace the burnt ones.

Elaine and Gordon received emergency assistance from Vinnies that allowed them to buy food, pay for fuel, and get back on their feet until their tours could start again, and income started coming back in.

“We are extremely grateful to Vinnies for the ‘hand up’. We were reluctant to ask for help but we had no option. We needed to get back on the tours so that business could resume, and we could become self-sufficient again,” said Elaine.

“We are so grateful. Thank you.” ♦

### **Arizona lemonade stand**

I write from Phoenix Arizona in the United States! My 9 and 7yr old daughters, Scout and Dot, saw on tv all the horrible things happening to the people and the animals in Australia because of the bush fires and decided to raise money!

They organized and started a kids community service club, The Love Project Club, for other kids to join them in raising money. In total, they organized 7 lemonade stands, 16 kids, and raised a total of \$1,115.77.

They would like to donate \$500 of the total amount to your organization! Before I made the donation I wanted to let you guys know what an amazing job these little kids did! The remainder of the money will go to Koalas in Care!

We appreciate everything you are doing for everyone affected by the fires, and praying for everyone in Australia.

Sincerely,

Aris Starr (mom) Scout (9) and Dot (7) ♦



# A goanna needs a packed lunch to cross this country

BY JOHN AND  
ROSEMARY KEENAN

Several weeks ago my wife and myself were asked to assist the Vincentian from Millmerran (Tim) to help him with visiting people affected by bushfires who needed financial support from the Federal Government and the Society. We were unaware that there were fires at Millmerran during December, however, about 30 kms out of town heading towards Goondiwindi in the Millmerran woods estate and the Cypress Gardens Estate, the fire damage was devastating.

We had read in the press over the past years about these areas and the conditions in which some of these people lived. We met Tim in the township of Millmerran at 7.30am for an early start to the day, wondering what was before us. Tim explained that although their living conditions were harsh and they were very private people he had gained trust with some of the residents from dealing with them in the past with SVDP assistance.

Upon turning into the estates it was so wonderful to be greeted by young children waving to us as they waited with their parents for the school bus. It showed that regardless of how bad things became, children can still be happy. Driving to our first visit, the burnt trees on both sides of the road showed the intense heat that the fires produced. It was only by the grace of God that they were not all wiped off the face of the earth.

The sight was no different to the television images of the destruction on Kangaroo Island. These people seemed forgotten and we felt so proud telling them we were from St Vincent de Paul and offering them financial help even in some small way. Everyone we were able to visit made us welcome offering us cups of tea, drinks of cold water, it was a very hot day.

Tim was right, on this country he said, a goanna needs to pack a cut lunch to cross it. These people were proud at first, refusing our assistance and telling us that someone else was worse off than them and they should be offered the help.

Some people were living in small homes that they had built themselves, while other family members lived in caravans. Fortunately, no main dwellings were destroyed but some had fire damage. They all praised the work of the firefighters and the water bombing. Many outbuildings, sheds, caravans, cars, tractors, tools and other equipment were destroyed and clearly visible for all to see.

Nearly all had their houses insured which was remarkable in itself because many people suffering hardship cancel their insurance policies. One home we visited felt the full force of the water bombing. The load landed on the roof, saving the home but causing damage to the roof and buckling the ceiling inside.

We could not see as many as we wanted because of locked gates, but we left information for them to contact the Vinnies office so we could call again.

The ones who took up to the offers of assistance were so grateful for the donations given to our society. Any assistance they could be given would be life changing.

Tim is a very wonderful person and has been blessed by the Holy Spirit. This was not his first visit to these people nor will it be his last. He has a deep connection to them and his willingness to care for them is infectious. It was a privilege for us to be asked to help Tim and our visit was a tremendous help to us in our lives.

Thank you to everyone who donated and it was great to see your donations go to work and help change lives.

Wishing you all God's many blessings. ♦

# Volunteers make Vinnies a trusted charity in tough times

**K**erry Clarke and Leanne Long are two of the salt of the earth Queenslanders who help make Vinnies a trusted charity in times of disasters such as the bushfires and ongoing drought.

Based in Ipswich, Kerry and Leanne make a fortnightly trip out to the small town of Esk, an hour's drive away to assist people in need like Glynis Limberg.

Glynis turned to Vinnies when the family farm was badly impacted by two bushfires late last year, the worst of which engulfed Glynis' husband Ray's sawmill and woodturning business, leaving it ruins.

As well as the loss of income from the destroyed business and the repairs needed on the property, the family lost 10 of their cattle to the fire, with a horse passing away in the days following the fire from stress.

Though the Limberg home, which Glynis shares with Ray and 11-year-old son Harrison, was spared from the flames, Kerry said the family has a long road ahead of them to get back on their feet.

"They've lost their livelihood and everything on their property, they have to start from scratch. Her husband lost his shed with all of his tools and equipment," she said.

"Their main concern after the fire was fencing so that they could keep their remaining cattle, water for their water tank and feed and water for their cattle."

Thanks to kind donations Kerry and Leanne were able to offer Glynis \$3000 towards the family's costs, help which was followed up with further support to brighten the Limberg's Christmas.

"She was still with us when the \$3000 claim went through and she just burst into tears, she was so grateful," Kerry said.



*Glynis Limberg and her son, Harrison, survey the damage.*

"We took out lots of food for her and the family and some toys for her son, she put all the stuff we had brought for her son into the one bag and told him it had come from Vinnies because she wanted him to know that people were willing to help.

"Glynis is one of those people you really want to reach out to and help, one of those people who make it all worthwhile."

Kerry and Leanne met with Glynis again recently to see how Vinnies

could continue to support the family as they begin the process of rebuilding their lives, Kerry adding that they both enjoy their regular trips out to help the people of Esk.

"We enjoy going out and offering help to people out there, a lot of people just come in for a chat, they don't really want anything but to have a friendly chat," she said.

"I think they are comforted by the fact we come out regularly to see if we can help." ♦

# Above and beyond to help his community – Vinnies' own bushfire hero



**I**n Yeppoon, Vinnies volunteer member Rick Williams is working for a desperate community that still doesn't like asking for help despite an ongoing battle with bushfires and drought.

Williams said much of his work as a Vincentian (Volunteer member) at present has been helping stoic locals re-connect vital services required to return their lives to some sense of normalcy.

"Most of the money we are giving is going to get power and water back on. Even if a home survived, the water tanks have melted, the pumps are destroyed, the electricity's down," he said.

Mr Williams said the bushfires that raged through the area in recent weeks have cost far more than official figures reveal and it's these forgotten Australians he is actively seeking to assist.

"Many people were living in sheds that had been converted to liveable quality but because they were still

technically sheds they couldn't be insured," he said.

"We're just driving around, visiting properties, finding more people to help every day.

"People lost their vehicles, they don't have a phone, so we go and find them because they really don't like asking for help.

"Sometimes when we arrive they need to talk so badly all we can do is listen for as much time as they need. Some days that means we get to one property."

Mr Williams said those in need of Vinnies help are coming from all age groups and demographics in the local community.

"I met one lady, well into her 80s, who lost everything except her house, and she was desperately worried about her 1500 head of cattle," he said.

"We were able to help her with \$900 for hay.

"We had a young bloke come into the shop and he'd lost everything to bushfire except his truck and his dog and all he'd accept was one set of clothes.

"We almost had to beg him to accept more but he just wouldn't.

"But he did come back and ask if we had any dog food. Vinnies will help anyone with a need like that."

Mr Williams plans to keep up his visits for at least another year, work he couldn't do without the support of a generous and caring public.

"We have to just keep being there," he said.

"Disasters don't just go away. We're making sure people know we're not going away. We'll be there, no matter how long it takes.

"We'll give out about 55 Christmas hampers and we're giving vouchers and we're just going to keep going." ♦

# Ineke's story



**I**neke Smith was one of the many evacuated from their home in Batemans Bay on New Year's Eve.

"It was freaky. I've never been in anything like it before," said Ineke.

There was a lot of damage to her property, with the garage, carport, fence and garden destroyed, but fortunately the fires saved her house – though it is covered with soot and black gunk.

"It was very, very hairy, but I know I'm one of the lucky ones. I have friends that have lost everything," she said.

After returning to her property, Ineke was still without power for ten days.

Ineke received financial assistance from Vinnies through the Batemans Bay Recovery Centre.

"The people at the Recovery Centre were just so lovely. It was very well done, and it was so nice to speak to someone face-to-face."

"It was so helpful to get some money to employ a handyman to help clean up the yard, and take things to the tip," she said.

"I am very, very thankful for the money. I will put this money to very good use in order to try and get my property back the way it was before the fires."

"I just want to convey my sincere thanks to Vinnies and the thousands of people who donated, for the generous donation given to me when I visited the Bush Fire Recovery Centre at the Batemans Bay Soldiers Club. The people there were just great - understanding and sympathetic.

Thank you again." ♦



*Ineke Smith.*



**If you need help,  
please call the  
St Vincent de  
Paul Society  
on 13 18 12.**

# Bushfire response – next steps

BY ROSE BEYNON

The Society has been on the ground helping people and continues to be there long-term as people rebuild their lives.

As the response moves from crisis to recovery, our conference members have been following up with affected households to provide further financial assistance and ongoing support as required.

Recovery efforts are informed by local communities, conference members and staff and are being implemented through engagement, development and support activities.

The transition from emergency to recovery can often bring frustration, exhaustion, despair, disappointment and sometimes blame. For community members, caring for themselves, caring for others, taking the time to listen, following up and following through are all extremely important steps.

Language is also important. People providing assistance need to think about how they can engage with compassion and in a genuine way. The people we are assisting are survivors, not victims.

The recovery phase recognises that some of the people assisted during the emergency or crisis phase will need further assistance. It involves providing additional support, which may be specialised and through a case worker, particularly for more complex matters such as addiction, mental health challenges, trauma and /or being at risk of becoming homeless, beyond the temporary dislocation caused by the bushfires. If a case worker has been assigned, they will advise local conference members where ongoing care and support may be required and may recommend that further bushfire financial assistance be provided.



Financial assistance in this second stage will be determined on a case by case basis by a conference member or staff member.

Under the recovery phase, additional assistance of up to \$5,000 (from Vinnies Bushfire Appeal Fund) may be provided.

The applicant must meet the requirements for emergency phase assistance (Tier 1) and:

- must be a bushfire affected person who has experienced significant property loss
- may have lost property that was under-insured or uninsured
- was already experiencing disadvantage prior to the bushfires
- may have experienced some other crisis as a result of bushfire

Amounts greater than \$5,000 and up to \$10,000 are available in exceptional circumstances.

Bushfire donations continue to

be collected but have significantly slowed since the escalation of COVID-19. However, bushfire donations continue to be used to:

- provide food, clothing, essential items and grocery vouchers to people who have lost everything
- pay unexpected bills as people go through the recovery process

Frequently asked questions on bushfire donations and updates on the amount of bushfire donations received and expended are accessible on the website.

At the time of writing the Bushfire Appeal had raised a total of \$22.9 million. \$11.8 million has been distributed to people in bushfire-affected areas who meet the Society's criteria, and \$11.1 million remains for community recovery and the rebuilding phases. ♦

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Rose Beynon is Director Research and Policy, National Bushfire Liaison Officer, National Council Secretariat



# From the CEO

BY TOBY O'CONNOR

Six months ago, who could have predicted the loss, the devastation and the uncertainty that hangs over our nation.

While recent downpours have eased drought conditions in many parts of the country, some communities are still waiting for rain.

And during the summer our communities were devastated by catastrophic bushfires that swept down the eastern seaboard and across parts of South Australia. The loss of life, of homes, of animals and bushland will be with some for a long time to come. The impact is being felt in many small communities.

On top of this there have been floods and destructive storms.

Some communities have been affected by all of these disasters.

And now we must take urgent and dramatic action to try to curtail the spread of COVID-19.

The Society and its members have been at the very forefront of these disasters. For more than a year our conferences and members have lent a listening ear and a hand up to farmers and farming communities as they continue to battle the drought. Without the support from our members we know many farmers would have nowhere else to go to get assistance to help them get through the drought.

The Commonwealth understood the difference we bring to people facing stressful times in their own community when it decided to distribute cash to farmers and farm workers through the Drought Community Support Initiative. The interest and compassion of our members touches so many people experiencing distress because of the drought.



*Toby O'Connor.*

The drought continues. The Commonwealth has recently asked the Society to deliver more financial assistance to more areas. We are now assisting people in every state and territory except Tasmania. Our highest and most immediate challenge right now is to equip our workers to be able to deliver this assistance using an off-site model. We will move to delivering further requests for assistance from individuals in need using telephone contact now social isolation measures are in place.

Our members played a vital role in providing early support and assistance during the bushfires as these raged through a large number of communities and towns. In some areas, the Vinnies were the first to establish responses in their local communities. We did what we do well... respond to people before our eyes who need help. The impact of the bushfires continues and will take many years to fully address.

We continue to provide advice to the National Bushfire Recovery Agency about the Society's ongoing assistance to individuals and

**We see the poor with our human eyes. The poor are here, in front of us and we can touch them and put our hands on their wounds and the scars from their crown of thorns are visible on their forehead ... they are the sacred image of God whom we do not see. Not knowing how to love God in any other way, we do so in the person of the poor. ... They are our masters and we are their servants!**

- Frederic Ozanam

families in bushfire disaster declared regions across Queensland, NSW, ACT, Victoria and South Australia.

The Society sits at a number of government roundtables because we can provide quick advice about the recovery of local communities. This information comes from the presence and the connection our members have within their communities. The challenge for our members in the wake of COVID-19 is how we might continue to assist the many people who will continue to seek assistance and financial support for many months ahead.

*continued on page 18 ▶*

◀ continued from page 17

If these challenges are going to test us our CEOs have identified the biggest challenge we must face in the wake of the virus. We know from our charitable works that at this time the most vulnerable people at risk of contracting and transmitting COVID-19 are our companions who live on the streets, in short-term shelters or other temporary accommodation. My own helping on a soup van in Canberra's CBD brings home to me the gravity of this particular challenge.

On the one hand we know if we do not continue this service on the streets most of our companions will go hungry. And without access to warm clothes and sleeping bags many will not be able to get through a cold winter. Understanding the reality of the impact that comorbidity has on people who are infected means we must ensure more care is available for our companions. We see the Christ through our own eyes. This is at the very heart of why we are called to spread the Gospel message.

On the other hand, the age of some of those people delivering services places them in the high-risk cohort for the virus. But many will ask - how can we as Vincentians shut our eyes to these people who are the most at risk of the deleterious effects of COVID-19? The deployment of protective clothing will help us continue to deliver much needed supports to our highly vulnerable companions. We are seeking immediate support from government for access to these items.

These are the issues our leaders now have to grapple with. Our Councils and CEOs are working around the clock as we seek to mitigate these challenges.

I finish my thoughts with this prayer issued by CGI:

*Gracious God, protector of the defenseless,  
look with compassion on your people  
who are suffering from the dangers  
of this global pandemic.*

*Be compassionate toward us,  
show us your infinite mercy  
and guide the hands of those  
who are attempting to overcome  
this situation!*

*Instill within us a spirit of  
generosity  
so that we might know how to assist  
those who are weakest:  
the elderly, the homeless and the  
impoverished ...*

*those who bear the brunt of this  
crisis.  
Let us approach these individuals  
and assist them in these difficult  
times!*

*Protect the doctors and nurses  
and all health-care professionals  
who are on the frontlines of this  
pandemic!  
Enlighten their minds  
so that they might find a cure.*

*We ask all of this  
through the intercession of Jesus  
Christ, your Son  
Our Lord, the protector of those in  
need. Amen. ♦*

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Toby oConnor is CEO, National Council Secretariat.

## A word of thanks to our supporters

Over the Australia Day long weekend, Catholics from parishes across the country responded generously to the call to support those in bushfire-affected areas. Most donations go directly to the states and territories but the National Council has received around \$1.5 million in donations, of which \$1.3 million was as a direct result of the Australian Bishops' Appeal in addition large numbers of parishioners donated via the website. These funds have been distributed to hard-hit areas, especially the lower South Coast of New South Wales. The Society would like to thank the Australian Catholic Bishops' Conference, which enabled and supported the Australia Day appeal. The Society thanks all those who have donated funds to the bushfire appeal, over many months. Without this support, we would be unable to carry out our important works. The bushfire stories included in this edition of The Record show the heart-felt appreciation for these resources and how they are being used by Vincentians to support those in need, during difficult times. These stories are a small example of what has been happening every day, for months, across the country. ♦

# Policy update

BY ROSE BEYNON

## Social justice policy priorities

Our National Council recently agreed to adopt the following five key social justice policy issues presented by the National Social Justice Advisory Committee:

1. Community housing and homelessness (safe and secure homes and communities)
2. Newly arrived migrants, refugees and asylum seekers
3. Low income support (promoting just and equitable welfare and support)

4. Long term unemployment and the changing nature of work (enabling economic engagement)
5. Personal health including mental health and addiction (health and wellbeing)

These issues will concentrate the Society's national advocacy focus with the aim of achieving long-term improvement of people living in poverty in Australia.

In addressing these five key issues, the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds and people with disability will be prioritised.

## Federal government inquiries

The following is an update on Australian Government inquiries into topics that are highly relevant to the priorities listed above.

### Mental Health

In November 2018, the Productivity Commission began an inquiry into the contribution that improved mental health could have in improving economic growth. Final submissions to that inquiry closed on 23 January 2020. Contributions were sought from across the country and a submission was prepared.

In summary, the Society recommends that the Commission's final report should:

- outline a clear, national vision for mental health;
- present what needs to be achieved across the entire population, including those living in poverty, asylum seekers and refugees;
- emphasise the importance of Aboriginal health services being delivered by Aboriginal Community Controlled Services;

- highlight the links between mental health and other factors including physical health, secure long-term housing, and poverty;
- examine the eligibility issues of the NDIS for those with mental health conditions.

The submission is accessible through the publications page on the Society's website.

The Commission's report is to be handed to the Australian Government by 23 May 2020.

### Newstart

In September 2019, the Society made a submission to the inquiry conducted by the Senate Community Affairs References Committee into the adequacy of Newstart and related payments. The report of that inquiry is to be released by 27 March 2020. The Society's submission is accessible on the website. Since the inquiry, the Australian Council of Social Services commissioned UNSW to review the recommended increase to Newstart, which has now been increased from \$75 per week to \$95 per week. A briefing note is accessible on the publications page of the ACOSS website. The

National Council's Social Justice Advisory Committee met in March 2020 and agreed to support the increase to Newstart to \$95 per week.

### Homelessness

The Society is preparing a submission into the inquiry into homelessness in Australia, announced on 11 February 2020. The inquiry will be conducted by the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Social Policy and Legal Affairs. The parliamentary website indicates that submissions are due 9 April 2020. However, the parliamentary committee is unable to meet at this time and the final submission date is yet to be confirmed.

The inquiry will examine a wide range of factors that contribute to homelessness as well as the suitability of the services available to people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness, including: women and children affected by family and domestic violence; Indigenous Australians; people living with disability; and people living with mental illness. ♦

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Rose Beynon is Director Policy and Research, National Council Secretariat.

# The significance of a Dream

BY LAURA BERES

We live in a land of endless opportunity and a world of possibilities limited only by imagination. I have come to realise however, that this view of the world comes from having lived a life of privilege. We, as a society, can do something about this.

Frederic started the Society to assist the poor. The meaning of poverty has changed significantly since 1833, together with the environment, social interactions and the composition of families. One thing that has not changed however, is the basic human need of relationship. Regardless of age, gender, race or culture, relationship is the foundation of the connections we form with each other, in an attempt to share in a genuine sense of belonging.

At a time where performance indicators and meeting targets are what drive funding and performance, it can be easy to lose sight of the link between poverty and relationship.

The Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD) released a report in 2018 titled *A Broken Social Elevator? How to Promote Social Mobility*. This report indicates that in Australia, at the current level of intergenerational mobility, it takes four generations for the children of a low-income family to reach the average income. The reasons for this are significantly complex and will vary based on a range of different factors. This data tells us that sustained change in socio-economic status can take on average 120 years. These statistics make the work we do with young people so critical to future generations.

In terms of social class mobility, the OECD report indicates that of the OECD countries, Australia has the highest percentage (47%) of 25-64-year-olds whose social class is lower than that of their parents. The next highest percentage is Estonia with 36% of downward class mobility. There are a significant number of factors that impact on these statistics including but not limited to education, migration, wealth and occupation.

For several years, I have had the privilege of working with some amazing children and young people, and I can't help but think that it is this relationship that will make a difference to these young people as they become the decision makers in their families. Being able to open these young people to experiences they may not have had access to, or to build friendships with other young people dealing with similar issues means that we can start to broaden the conversation.

There are youth programs throughout the country, many of which do not fall into the main-stream conference model yet do such important work. Although these programs require a financial investment, this is so very fundamental to genuinely addressing poverty, which is in fact the core work of the Society. These programs provide relationship which helps build a sense of belonging, confidence and resilience in our young people. Opening them up to this world of endless opportunity and world of possibilities. Opening them up to a world where there is hope, and where the future is not just more of the same. If nothing else, an opportunity to dream!

Over recent Buddy days, we have been asking the children who attend, what they dream for their future. We have been absolutely blown away by the number of children who don't know or don't care. Can this be? To dream is to hope. Yet there are so many people in our local communities who live without hope, without a dream for what could be. This is what filters through generations, perpetuating the cycle of intergenerational poverty.

Eleanor Roosevelt said 'The future belongs to those who believe in their dreams'. The fact that we know there are people in our communities who don't have dreams to believe in, suggests there are people who don't see themselves in the future.

Although a simplistic view, this is at the heart of the work we do as the Society. We would not exist if a young man did not dare to dream, and we have a responsibility to do everything we can to convey the importance of hope in all our works. ♦

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Laura Beres is the Youth Representative on the South Australian State Council.

# Vincentian Refugee Network

BY ROSE BEYNON

The Society is pleased to announce that the Vincentian Refugee Network (VRN) has been re established. The VRN has a long history in advocacy on behalf of newly arrived migrants, refugees and asylum seekers. However, in 2017, the Society was no longer able to support the VRN due to resourcing constraints.

In November 2019, the National Council's Social Justice Advisory Committee Priority Areas were approved. Newly arrived migrants, refugees and asylum seekers were identified as a key social justice Priority Area, leading to the VRN being reconstituted.

The newly established VRN had its first teleconference on 11 February 2020. Tim McKenna from the ACT was the acting chair and the 13 members attending were drawn from Queensland, South Australia, Victoria, Western Australia and New South Wales. Tim has since been voted in as the Chair. Members bring extensive experience of asylum seeker and refugee issues to the VRN, with many working in policy, service delivery or both.

Tim is the President of the Caritas Christi Refugee Support Conference for Canberra Goulburn and is heavily involved in assisting refugees previously on Manus, who are now in Port Moresby.

The VRN has already compiled an ambitious work plan for 2020 and identified its priorities, including raising the Society's public profile in this important area of advocacy. ♦

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For more information contact the National Council Secretariat.

Rose Beynon is Director Policy and Research,  
National Council Secretariat.

# Queensland Reconciliation Plan



*St Vincent de Paul Society Queensland acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of the land where we conduct our business.*

*We pay our respects to ancestors and Elders past, present and emerging. St Vincent de Paul Society Queensland is committed to honouring Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples unique cultural and spiritual connection to the land, waters and seas.*



St Vincent de Paul Society Queensland launched its first ever Reconciliation Action Plan in May 2019 during National Reconciliation Week.

As a demonstration of respect, inclusiveness and commitment to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Queensland, Queensland's State Council approved the display of an Acknowledgement to Country decal. The decal is set to be displayed at all Vinnies sites including all 147 Vinnies retail shops, whose locations stretch from as far north as Cooktown to the border of NSW and stretch as far west as Mount Isa.

To support the decal, artwork was commissioned with a theme of honouring the spirit of

reconciliation. Gold Coast artist Tarni Eastwood provided an art piece titled, 'Coming Together'.

Tarni was contacted after being a runner-up in the Reconciliation Action Plan cover art prize which was awarded to Brisbane artist Masud Sanders in March 2019.

'Coming Together' represents a journey. The footprints represent the journey of past, present and future steps towards reconciliation. Next to the footprints is the ocean, which acknowledges our unity and journey alongside Torres Strait Islander peoples. Bordering this is the communities throughout the states of Australia, connected by lines and dots representing the strong relationships built on acknowledging the First Peoples of this land.

St Vincent de Paul Society Queensland State President Dennis Innes said the decal will continue to be a very significant element to the organisation's reconciliation journey.

"We believe in the importance of being both visible and practical in all that we do to clearly show we are open for business for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and peoples and an organisation where they are not just welcomed but celebrated," he said.

"I'm looking forward to seeing the decal and Tarni's amazing artwork in all of our shops, support centres and administration buildings across Queensland." ♦

# Learning to open the heart

BY JOAN CHITTISTER, OSB

To close ourselves off from the wisdom of the world around us in the name of God is a kind of spiritual arrogance exceeded by little else in the human lexicon of errors. It makes of life a kind of prison where, in the name of holiness, thought is chained and vision is condemned. It makes us our own gods. It is a sorry excuse for spirituality.

The sin of religion is to pronounce every other religion empty and unknowing, deficient and unblest. It is to ignore the call of God to us through the life and wisdom and spiritual vision of the other. The implications of that kind of closing out the multiple revelations of the mind of God are weighty: once we shut our hearts to the other, we have shut our hearts to God. It is a matter of great spiritual import, of deep spiritual summons. Openness to the presence of God, the Word of God in others, is of the essence of contemplation.

Learning to open the heart requires first that we open our lives. The home of whites that has never had a person of color at the supper table is a home that has missed an opportunity to grow. The man who has never worked with a woman as a peer, better yet as an executive, has deprived himself of the revelation of the other half of the world. The comfortable contemplative who has never served soup at a soup kitchen, or clerked in a thrift shop, or spent time in inner-city programs, lives in an insulated bubble. The adult who has never asked a child a question and really listened to the answer is doomed to go through life out of touch and essentially unlearned.

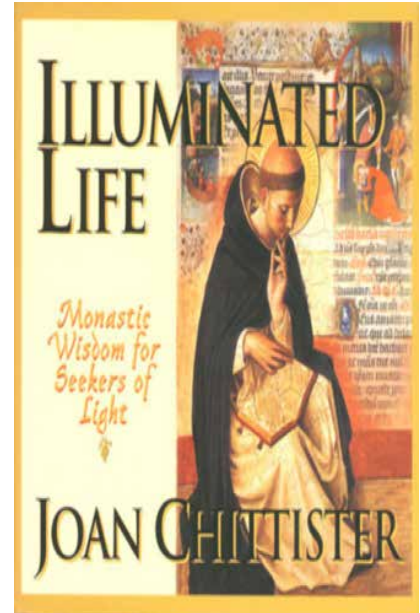
The world they know cannot possibly give them the answer that they seek. "When someone comes to the gate," the Rule of Benedict instructs, "say 'Thanks be to God.'" Say, in other words, 'Thanks be to God,' that someone has come to add to our awareness of the world, to show us another way to think and be and live beyond our own small slice of the universe.

Openness is the door through which wisdom travels and contemplation begins. It is the pinnacle from which we learn that the world is much bigger, much broader than ourselves, that there is truth out there that is different from our own. The voice of God within us is not the only voice of God.

Openness is not gentility in the social arena. It is not polite listening to people with whom we inherently disagree. It is not political or civil or "nice." It is not even simple hospitality. It is the munificent abandonment of the mind to new ideas, to new possibilities. Without an essential posture of openness, contemplation is not possible. God comes in every voice, behind every face, in every memory, deep in every struggle. To close off any of them is to close off the possibility of becoming new again ourselves.

To be a contemplative it is necessary to throw open the arms of our lives, to take in daily one experience, one person, one new idea with which we have no familiarity and ask what it is saying to us and about us. Then God, the Ultimate Reality, the Life beyond life can come to us in deep, in rending, new ways. ♦

From *Illuminated Life* (Orbis Books) by Joan Chittister, OSB. Reprinted with permission of the author; joanchittister.org



# New wine, new wine skins

## Why it is worth staying active in the Church?

BY FRANCIS SULLIVAN

**C**an I find in the practice of Catholicism a way to do life that is legitimate, transformative, relevant and effective? Or, like for the vast majority of Catholics, is it best that I look elsewhere for pathways to a moral, happy life, free of judgement and hypocrisy?

I acknowledge that there are many Catholic identities these days. People come into contact with the Church in formal and informal settings, parishes, schools, hospitals, small prayer groups and regular social get-togethers. There are many understandings of being Catholic and how to associate as a Catholic.

The strict, rules based, obligation-laden Church of my youth, no longer holds any appeal. Not even when our times can appear to be so confusing and even confounding. That rigid Church doesn't do it for me. Not only that, it actually is a definite turn off in an age where personal autonomy, freedom of conscience and self-actualisation are in my mind the fruits of the Spirit that should be nurtured for the good they bring to our lives.

Yet there are too many reactionary noises in our Church that bedevil this individualism and caste it as the signs of decay and demise for our world. Neither can I muster any enthusiasm or even tribal excitement for an institution that stubbornly resists calls to be more representative of the communities in which it exists. I find no confidence in institutional structures and processes that exclude lay people, women particularly, but also openly excludes gay people and even those divorced and remarried.

How will it be possible for the Church to teach on intimate life issues to people who don't even get a mutual voice at the table? What practical value do their lives bring

to the life of the Church? Why do we have to cop the tired assertion that the Church is not a democracy and participation by the baptised is conditional within a hierarchical and demonstrably dysfunctional structure? Why do we have to be publicly associated with inane, even incompetent, statements from Church officials and spokespeople that fuel the flames of social division, demonise particular social groups, and present our Catholicism as just another socially conservative reactionary grouping? Why should we tolerate Church finances being directed to dubious political and media campaigns that inevitably ostracise opponents and only further exacerbate the culture wars in which our voice so often is heard as being harsh, unbending and out of touch?

The simple answer to all this is that we don't need to be that style of Catholicism. Nor do we need to peddle that old-time religion that has run its course.

Pope Francis has said:

“And so, the biggest threat of all gradually takes shape:

‘the grey pragmatism of the daily life of the Church, in which all appears to proceed normally while, in reality, faith is wearing down and degenerating into small-mindedness.’ A tomb psychology thus develops and slowly transforms Christians into mummies in a museum. Disillusioned with reality, with the Church, and with themselves, they experience an ongoing temptation to cling to a faint melancholy, lacking in hope, which seizes the heart like ‘the most precious of the devil’s potions.’

Called to radiate light and communicate life, in the end they are caught up in things that generate only darkness and inner weariness, and slowly consume all zeal for the apostolate.” *Evangelii Gaudium* #83

It may sound depressing, but I find this massively hopeful. To practice as a Catholic is to communicate light and life. That is the gig.

It is not to strictly uphold inexplicable propositions and continue to passively condone unrealistic practices and decision-making structures. Neither is it to passively exist in a disempowered culture where compliance is rewarded and dissent weaponised. On the contrary it is to understand that faith, with its energy, passion and creative imagination, is not contained solely within religious ritual and practice. Ideally, they are intimately connected but sometimes the fire of faith is stifled by the ideological zealotry of those who have captured the loudspeakers!

And when that happens people turn off, become disillusioned, express dissent and in turn become disenfranchised then finally disinterested. The massive fallout from our Church speaks for itself. A faith that communicates light and life involves understanding that to be truly Catholic is to appreciate difference and diversity as manifestations of God.

If we believe that everyone is made in the image of God, then the varieties of human experience and personal development are in turn movements of the Divine. The energy we have put into running a rule over human nature and behaviour has literally been counterproductive. People who feel judged, unaccepted or treated as not up to the mark understandably walk away.

The wisdom of the mystics is much more the mark. Take for example Teilhard de Chardin. He said it plainly, that we are not human beings on a spiritual journey. Rather we are spiritual beings on a human journey. Embracing our humanity, letting God speak through it, is our pathway. And from this comes the mission of a faith-based community.



Believing in ourselves! That we are capable together to sort out how to be a contemporary, relevant Christian community. That we are called to take responsibility not to out – source it to the clergy. That trusting in our collective vitality and a deep sense of integrity we can discern the movement of the Spirit amongst us. That we can determine what it takes to be real and authentic in response to the Gospel call.

There is no need to cling to a patriarchal, medieval rule book. There is no need to be submissive to the clerical caste when we are all equal under baptism. There is certainly no need to accept that only males are created with a capacity to morph into priestly ministry. There is clearly no obligation to stay mute when obvious injustice and down-right prejudice masks itself as religious belief.

What we are being asked to follow, is the pathway opened by Jesus. A roadmap of radical enquiry, self- discovery and intimate loving connection that leads us to a sense of God in our lives. For me this is the purpose of practising as a Catholic.

It is to be transformed into a Christ conscious person. And with that comes a preparedness to confront false certainties and confected presuppositions.

We don't need to keep change at bay out of ignorance. This attitude becomes our new wine and we the new wine skin. Our faith tradition is constantly on the move, only we are the ones who choose to stand still. The wisdom teachings constantly remind us that God is the centre without a circumference. That God comes to us disguised as our life. Simply put we are collection of individual stories in a matrix of hope.

We come with our own stories of family, career, trust, betrayal, love and its failures, excitements, despairs, dreams and their loss. We come shaped by a culture and its conventions, trends, assumptions and the smorgasbord of meaning making. We come mostly with our sincerely held desire to find goodness, truth and beauty.

And in those instances where and when we do catch a glimpse of a reality beyond ourselves, it can be enough to motivate our search, our common pilgrimage to awakening. In my context this is being authentically Catholic. Remaining engaged and open with porous borders is the model of Church Pope Francis seeks. One where messiness and chaos are welcomed.

Where identity politics is left at the door. Where the rights of participation are not determined by a rigid orthodoxy but rather are encouraged by an invitation to seek common ground and mutual respect. Where identity is characterised by difference rather than adherence to a proscribed mentality. Where outreach is the core business instead of a preoccupation with self-justification that can lead to a smug self-assurance.

This is the foundation for a truly pastoral practice for our Church. From this foundation the generosity of our hearts and the imagination of our minds find ways to awaken Christ consciousness in our relations, our communities and broader neighbourhoods. Just as the first believers felt compelled to act, so can we.

Let's shape a Church that looks like the communities we live in. That reflects their aspirations and virtues, fosters their desires for happiness and meaning, human flourishing and self-understanding. That seamlessly connects with people marginalised by circumstance, prejudice or loss of opportunity. One that practically comforts, consoles and champions those who toil against the odds or who struggle to keep life together.

Let's shape a Church that constantly asks whether it is fit for purpose. Flexible, adaptive, attractive to the young and inquisitive. That develops ministers, pastors, deacons and priests that we can relate to, aspire to be and select from within our ranks. Let's drink of this new wine that enlivens through affirming the ever-evolving understanding of human nature, its development and manifestations.

Let's applaud the wonder of sexuality, embrace it as grace and actively resist attempts to demonise, judge and divide. Let's become the wine skins of hope in a future unshackled from religiosity and enthused with a truth that's set us free. ♦

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Francis Sullivan's address to Concerned Catholics of Canberra-Goulburn. He was CEO of the Catholic Church in Australia's Truth, Justice and Healing Council. Reprinted with permission of the author.

# Assist A Student program great success

BY JUDE BLACKLOCK

The Assist A Student (AAS) Program is a special work of the St Vincent de Paul Society in Australia that seeks to help break the cycle of poverty for young people in developing countries through raising funds to assist students from disadvantaged communities with their educational costs. The Program commenced in 1986 as the Adopt A Student Program as a pilot program in Victoria providing \$70 per student sponsored in Australia's Twinned countries. The program became national in 1995.

In 2019, the National Council of Australia requested a review of the AAS Program and engaged Coffey International to conduct the review. The purpose of the review was to examine the impact of the program, and the effectiveness of procedures and systems used in administering the program. The review included written surveys with all current partner countries Kiribati, Indonesia, Thailand, Philippines, Indonesia, Myanmar, Fiji, India, as well as a visit to Kiribati and Indonesia. Focus groups, interviews and surveys were also conducted with Australian stakeholders including members of National Council, State/Territory Presidents and CEOs, fundraising teams and State/Territory AAS Coordinators. The review report was accepted by the National Council in February 2020 and the program was endorsed.

## Review Findings

The main review findings were:

- Current AAS program partner countries see a strong correlation between receiving an effective education and being able to obtain employment and get ahead. The emphasis on supporting students in partner countries to improve educational outcomes is therefore seen to be highly relevant.

- There was a very clear message from partner countries that the AAS program is important and valued by them, and that providing direct and targeted support to disadvantaged students is appropriate.
- There is evidence that the AAS program does assist children to attend and perform better at school, by:
  - assisting with attendance and completion of school (for example by contributing to school fees or transport to and from school).
  - allowing students to fit in at school and want to attend (for example by providing them with uniforms and materials, helping them to feel supported in their education by the broader community)
  - improving outcomes at school (by valuing them and their education, and by requiring them to demonstrate commitment to obtain support where this is a requirement).
- The current model, which supports individual students, is appropriate and effective.
- Both overseas and Australian stakeholders felt that the program could be enhanced by increasing the continuity of funding and the monetary amount of support provided per student.
- Systems are largely in place in partner countries that ensure accountability, but additional support in some countries could strengthen effectiveness.
- Coordination and administration arrangements in Australia are adequate, but could be enhanced to be more streamlined and better engage donors.

## Some changes to the program

### Sponsorship Amount

Sponsorship of the Program will increase to \$100 per student. To allow for changes required to promotional materials and donation slips, this change will take effect by 1 June 2020. As is the case now, any amount can be contributed to the program and this will allow any donors who wish to increase their donation immediately to do so.

### Regular Giving

The online donation page will be updated, again by 1 June 2020, to allow donors to give automatically every month. So for one student per year, the amount is \$9 per month. It is hoped that this change will provide more consistency in funding and also allow donors to better budget their giving.

### Certificates

While certificates will continue to be provided on an 'opt in' basis, they will no longer include the name of a particular student. This is to ensure that the Society is meeting its obligations to protect vulnerable people. The certificate will include the country of the donor's sponsored student, and will include case studies of a student who has been sponsored in that country. To include these changes there will be a slight change of design of the certificate.

There will be other changes to administration of the program, both within Australia and in our partner countries, which are designed to strengthen the effectiveness and transparency of the program.

## What our partners and sponsored students say about the program

**“Students feel a sense of being part of a bigger community. Students strive harder ... and feel that there must be something special in education to have outside help like AAS.”**

Dear Donors,  
I am a student aged 11 years old, studying in the 7th grade in Thailand.  
On behalf of the Thai students who have received the Scholarship from you and kind donors, we would like to express our sincere gratitude to you for your scholarships that help our further education.  
We used your scholarships for buying the school materials such as school uniforms, sport uniforms, shoes, socks, school bags, text books, note-books, pens and pencils. Besides, we used the scholarships for transportation fee to school, meal expenses, extra course fees etc.  
Thank you again for your generosity and support.  
May God bless you and your good works.

Dear Ma'am/Sir,  
Peace be with you!  
I would like to thank you all for the trust and opportunity you have given to me. Thank you so much for your kindness you have showered to me and to my co-beneficiaries.  
It truly helps me a lot to support my studies. I am now a second year student taking up Bachelor of Science in criminology. Even though our President Duterte supports the zero tuition fee in colleges still there are things that needed financial support. Luckily I was chosen to be one of the Assist-a-Student Program of the SSVP that gives the financial assistance I need. I promise that your financial support will be use properly because this is truly a blessing for me. Finishing my studies will help my father in the future and will give happiness to my mother who is now in heaven. And in the future landing a good job will also help me to help other people who needs the same way as I am right now.  
Thank you so much I really appreciate your financial assistance and your trust. No words can define my heartfelt thank you to all of you. May our Lord Bless us always.



**“If students cannot pay school fees they build a debt, so money can be used to pay this off a little bit. When parents get money, they feel relieved. Students also feel happier and can study better.”**

Jude Blacklock is Overseas Development Program Facilitator at the National Council Secretariat. For more information about the Society's work overseas, or to sign up for a bi-monthly email update, please email [overseasadmin@svdpa.org.au](mailto:overseasadmin@svdpa.org.au).

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# Assist A Student: What you need to know

The AAS Program is valued and has real impact as intended in our partner countries.

The amount of sponsorship will increase to \$100 per student, nominally on 1 June 2020 but as is currently the case, any amount (either above or below that for an individual student) can be donated, and is greatly appreciated.

If a certificate is requested, there will be a new design.

Thank you for your support of this important program of the St Vincent de Paul Society in Australia.

**To donate please visit:  
[donate.vinnies.org.au/appeals-nat/assist-a-student](http://donate.vinnies.org.au/appeals-nat/assist-a-student),  
 or complete the donation slip below. ♦**



Yes, I want to **Assist a Student** today!

- I am an individual assisting a student; OR
- I am assisting a student on behalf of a group

NAME (group or individual): \_\_\_\_\_

CONTACT NAME (for group): \_\_\_\_\_

TELEPHONE: \_\_\_\_\_

ADDRESS: \_\_\_\_\_

SUBURB: \_\_\_\_\_

STATE: \_\_\_\_\_ POSTCODE: \_\_\_\_\_

EMAIL: \_\_\_\_\_

**I would like to donate** (Donations over \$2 are tax deductible):

\$50     \$100     \$200    OR  \$ \_\_\_\_\_

I would like to receive a certificate for this donation.

Thank you for your support.

**Payment method:**

EFT: BSB 062-000 Acc 16047336

Debit my credit card (details below)

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Mastercard     Visa                      Card Expiry: \_\_\_ / \_\_\_

NAME ON CARD: \_\_\_\_\_

SIGNATURE: \_\_\_\_\_

Please complete your details and send to:

St Vincent de Paul Society National Council  
 PO Box 243  
 Deakin West ACT 2600