

The Record

AUTUMN 2024



St Vincent de Paul Society
NATIONAL COUNCIL of AUSTRALIA Inc. *good works*



**SERVICE WITH
A SMILE**



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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 quarter by the National Council of the St Vincent de Paul Society in Australia.

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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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Contributions welcome. Perhaps you would like to write or suggest a story and share photos with our readers. We can't track everything happening across the Society, so your involvement would be appreciated. Please contact media@svdp.org.au to discuss your ideas.

The St Vincent de Paul Society in Australia consists of 45,000 members and volunteers who operate on the ground through over 1,000 groups located in local communities across the country.



Available online:
vinnies.link/TheRecord

On the cover...

In the leadup to Christmas 2023, Vincentians and other volunteers, including many Catholic schools, worked hard to assemble hampers for sharing with Australian households in need of festive cheer.

In Canberra, Caritas Christi (refugee support) Conference president Tim McKenna was joined by his wife Margot (front) and Marion Lowery, both volunteers at the Vinnies Narrabundah shop. They were thanked for their commitment by the Archbishop of Canberra/Goulburn, Christopher Prowse.

More photos of hamper donations around the country are on page 6

Photo: Robin Osborne



***‘Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come:
The old has gone, the new is here’***

2 Corinthians 5:17

In the previous issue of *The Record*, I reflected on the many achievements, highlights and sources of Good Works conducted by the Society throughout the year. As I plan my 2024, I can see there is much more to do, and I am greatly looking forward to sharing the many experiences ahead of us with members, staff and volunteers.

The revitalisation journey - as epitomised in the scriptural quote above – that was charted by Congress 2023+ (now Congress+) in Sydney, continues to progress well, with the steady implementation of outcomes developed by delegates and endorsed by National Council.

As reported in this issue, the positive achievements of the event include the vision and roadmap for change, and the identification of 15 action areas across three core pillars: growth & revitalisation, diverse conference models and readiness for change.

I would encourage Congress delegates, along with all our members, volunteers and staff, to visit the Congress site to follow the progress of our agreed actions vinnies.link/Congress-Delegates.

This issue covers a range of important issues, including our qualified support for the government’s changes to the Stage 3 tax cuts schedule. Other stories discuss our support for funding enhancements aimed at closing the gaps in life expectancy, wellbeing and other indicators between First Nations people and the broader population; our deep concern about the ongoing housing crisis, as highlighted in the recent AIHW report; and our efforts to encourage the government to take responsibility for the refugees taken from Manus Island detention and dumped in PNG’s capital of Port Moresby.

Members would be aware of the Society’s founding father in Australia, Fr Gerald Ward. He was born in London in 1806 and arrived in Australia in 1850 after being recruited to minister in the Melbourne mission by the pioneer priest Fr Patrick Geoghegan.

Fr Ward was familiar with the workings of the Society and established the first Conference in Australia at St Francis’ Church in Melbourne on 5 March 1854 – 170 years ago, as I write.

Fr Ward was quoted as saying upon its establishment, ‘The new conference aims to provide relief for the destitute, in a manner as much as possible permanently beneficial and the visitation of poor families’.

On 7 November 2008, former Chief Justice of Australia Murray Gleeson delivered the St Vincent de Paul Society’s Inaugural Gerald Ward Lecture.

In his concluding remarks, Justice Gleeson stated, ‘These brief reflections on the inspiration of Father Ward,

and the work of the Australian Society that he founded, cannot do justice to the large and complex problem of providing for the homeless. They may, however, help to explain, and sustain, the admiration of the Society beyond the Catholic community’.

I welcome participating with members of the Vincentian family from Victoria and across the country to celebrate the 170th Anniversary of the Good Works in Victoria.



Leo McManus and Pat Bull, OAM awardees, with National President Mark Gaetani.

At the invitation of David Kennedy, State President of Western Australia, I attended their State Council meeting on 8 February and was fortunate to meet several Subiaco conference members following Mass three days later. I was also pleased to hear from the leadership team of the continuing success of the Good Works being undertaken in WA, with a particular emphasis on the various homelessness services conducted in central Perth and outer suburbs.

A component of the State Council meeting included the election of the incoming WA State President. Two nominees presented themselves for election and I would like to congratulate Danny Cloghan – WA President elect. Danny will formally take on the role this June.

Prior to the meeting I was fortunate to meet two long serving members – Mrs Pat Bull and Mr Leo McManus. Both Pat and Leo were awarded the Order of Australia Medal on Australia Day 2024.

Their respective awards recognise their selfless contribution to numerous volunteer associations, including St Vincent de Paul Society. Pat has been a Society member for 60 years and Leo has contributed 17 years of service. On behalf of the Society, I heartily congratulate them both.

Finally, I was fortunate to attend the launch of Project Compassion 2024 in my local parish here in Launceston. It was wonderful to witness the enthusiasm of local primary and secondary school students and parishioners, both young and not so young, committed to ending poverty, promoting justice and upholding the dignity of all. **R**



'You must not be content with tiding the poor over the poverty crisis. You must study their injustices which brought about such poverty, with the aim of a long-term improvement.'

– Blessed Frédéric Ozanam

Here in Australia, and of course globally, we are living in momentous and changing times. As was recognised in our Congress 2023+ in Sydney and the ongoing follow-up with delegates and wider membership, the Society needs to revitalise many of its practices in order to meet the emerging challenges. I am pleased to note that significant progress is being made.

The 2022 Federal Election that brought the Albanese Labor government into office has resulted in a light being shone on a range of issues such as costs of living, the housing crisis and food deprivation.

One example was the Rebuilding Employment Services report by the House of Representatives Select Committee on Workforce Australia Employment Services (story page 20).

Today, the words of our founding father about injustice have a contemporary ring.

It is no surprise that the key areas of our advocacy for 2024 are [Income support, Poverty and debt](#); [Housing and homelessness](#); [Australia's First Nations People](#); [People seeking asylum and refugees](#); [A fairer tax and welfare system](#); and [Energy cost awareness](#). We will continue this focus through to the next Federal Election.

We are actively engaged in analysing and assessing the current and projected work of the Albanese Government and providing detailed submissions and public commentary on how we believe things could be done in ways that can deliver [A Fairer Australia](#).

Over the past months, the Society is active in working with experts to prepare a 10-year blueprint plan that will deliver more support and less red tape to the charitable sector.

I strongly recommend our Members refer to National Council's website where the comprehensive range of the Society's advocacy work can be accessed.

The broad suite of the Society's social policies was encapsulated in the pre-May 2024 [Budget submission](#) we lodged with the government before Christmas, when departments were engaged in preparing the 2024-25 Federal Budget.

One of our key long-term recommendations has been to drop the Stage 3 tax cuts, which was partially achieved by reducing the benefits that were to go to the highest wage earners. We have given the government a qualified 'tick' for this decision.

The Albanese Government has announced various policies that are moving in the right direction. However, we still see the threat of poverty, homelessness, housing stress, financial stress, debt, and mental health that hurt the most vulnerable.

The Society and other charities are now seeing more

'middle-income' Australians who have not sought our help before. The information our Members provide us show that requests for assistance have risen by 20-30 per cent across the country.

The strategies to address these challenges include increasing working age income support payments and Commonwealth Rent Assistance. Many people on income support and receiving CRA continue to live in disadvantage and poverty. We welcomed the Government's recent announcement to increase funding to the Financial Wellbeing and Capability Activity, which includes Emergency Relief, by \$114.8M over five years. We are working closely with the National Coordination Group, which advises the Minister for Social Services, on how additional funding should be allocated. This call was included in our 2024 Pre-Budget submission.

The launch of A Fairer Tax and Welfare System for Australia in 2023 was a significant contribution to the tax and welfare debate. It presented three options highlighting modest changes to our tax system which would enable increased income support payments.

Some financial commentators are pursuing a reconsideration of the Goods and Services Tax, introduced in July 2000.

Economists agree that the GST is a regressive tax, a blunt instrument that impacts all equally, regardless of their financial status. We intend to investigate the impact of any mooted increases to the GST, by household income.

In the context of the Stage 3 tax cuts, the upcoming May Budget and the wider tax reform debate, the Society will be commissioning more economic modelling during 2024.

There is likely to be an ongoing discussion about negative gearing and capital gains tax concessions for investment property. These have an impact on housing affordability for both purchasers and renters. We believe homes are for living in, not just for profitable investment by those who can afford multiple real estate.

Another issue of great concern is gambling, increasingly linked with Australians' love of sports and now made much easier to access through technology. This is disproportionately impacting on lower income earners.

It means the risk of missing rent or mortgage payments, even falling into homelessness, and being unable to cover essential costs for oneself or the family, or taking out unfair loans.

I believe a fairer Australia is possible. Along with other civil society organisations, we are always ready to advise and assist on constructive policy development, but the path to lasting reform can only be found through strong legislative action, more funding, more housing, and better services. **R**

Serving in Hope

BY SISTER THERESE HAYWOOD DC

Easter is one of my favourite times of the year. As someone who doesn't enjoy the heat, I always feel a sense of new life as we move into the milder days of Autumn. However, the new life that Easter offers us is much more than that.

In their book *The Last Week*, John Dominic Crossan and Marcus Borg write:

Easter as the reversal of Good Friday means God's vindication of Jesus's passion for the kingdom of God, for God's justice and God's no to the powers that killed him, powers very much active in our world. Easter discloses the character of God.

Jesus stood with the marginalised and weak and challenged those in power and calls us to do the same. The Society follows this example as we advocate for people in need each day in small ways with individuals and in larger more systemic ways.

Another important aspect of Easter is that we need to be people of hope. After every ending there is a new beginning, often not one that we can immediately see or imagine but one that is there, nonetheless. Our founders were people who lived with great hope. They believed that God was present with them even in the midst of struggles and difficulties.

“At this time, we remember the people of Israel and Palestine, the lands on which Jesus walked

As Saint Vincent says:

After the storm comes the calm, and God who puts to death and raises to life, makes joy follow affliction and the effects of His power fulfill hopes based on His goodness (VI:140).

The Rule reminds us that we “serve in hope”. We hold hope for the people that we serve and that our support for them will help them to deal with the challenges that face them. Let us remember the words of Pope Benedict:

Redemption is offered to us in the sense that we have been given hope, trustworthy hope, by virtue of which we can face our present: the present, even if it is arduous, can be lived and accepted if it leads towards



PHOTO: WILLIAM GULLO ON UNSPLASH

a goal, if we can be sure of this goal, and if this goal is great enough to justify the effort of the journey. Pope Benedict XVI, Spe Salvi #1

At this time, we remember the people of Israel and Palestine, the lands on which Jesus walked, and pray that the peace that Jesus promised will reign in the lands and indeed in all the world.

Lord, you invite us to a conversion to hope, even in the midst of our own struggles. You call us to become signs of hope in a world of suffering. Help us to be open to the gifts you give us so freely. Help us cultivate and nurture the seeds of hope within ourselves, our Society and our communities. Let us also be people who create peace around us and work for peace in our world. Amen. **R**

Sister Therese Haywood DC is the St Vincent de Paul Society National Council's Spiritual Adviser.

CHRISTMAS HAMPERS

Sharing some Festive joy





The Society's longstanding tradition of packing Christmas hampers with non-perishable food items and gift-wrapped toys was high on the action list for Members around Australia in December 2023.

Throughout metro and regional/rural Conferences, many thousands of hampers were prepared for home delivery to families and individuals known to be in need of some seasonal joy. Others were destined for collection at central distribution points.

In NSW, Members managed to pack and distribute more than 10,000 hampers. In the less populated Northern Territory, the number may have been less, totalling nearly 500, but the distribution was a mammoth effort, with locations including the Tiwi Islands and the Daly River Regions, as well as Darwin and Palmerston.

In Queensland, Members prepared more than 2,000 hampers, while in Canberra/Goulburn the tally reached 1,410. In Melbourne, a working bee involving teenagers

and younger children, plus Members and Volunteers, including a Soup Van team, wrapped gifts and packed the contents of 1,100 hampers.

In Tasmania, 1,350 hampers were distributed, many of them packed by workers at Vincent Industries, an Australian Disability Enterprise established in 1976 to provide work and training opportunities for people living with a disability on the state's North West Coast.

At this Special Work of the Society, each supported employee gains the opportunity to participate in the workforce in a meaningful way, creating a sense of self-worth and wellbeing. And what better time to share such feelings than at Christmas.

Members around Australia deserve special thanks for their wonderful efforts and certainly that's what they received when they arrived at people's homes in the leadup to Christmas 2023. **R**

Stage 3 tax cuts will benefit most Australians

Having long advocated for the Stage 3 tax cuts legislated five years ago to be dropped or significantly reviewed, the St Vincent de Paul Society in Australia welcomed the adjustments announced in January by the Prime Minister.

‘We opposed the third stage of the tax cuts formulated by the Morrison Government on the basis that they were unfair and would increase inequity,’ said the Society’s National President, Mark Gaetani.

‘Abolishing the proposed cuts on the basis that they would disproportionately benefit high wage earners was a key recommendation of the research paper we commissioned from the Australian National University ([Fairer Tax and Welfare System](#)) and launched in September 2023 at Parliament House.

‘This report showed that in conjunction with a number of other tax, superannuation and welfare related strategies, scrapping or significantly amending the Stage 3 tax cuts would greatly assist people doing it tough, with attention on those people on benefits. If fully implemented, the strategy could lift 834,000 people out of poverty by increasing working age payments.’

After the Prime Minister’s announcement on the eve of Australia Day, Mr Gaetani said the Society believes that all wage earners will benefit from the Stage 3 tax changes because the new schedule is no longer skewed upwards but focused on low and mid-level wage earners.

‘These are the average Australians struggling with the high cost of food, electricity, rents and mortgages and other essentials,’ he said.

‘People on average incomes will see a doubling of their tax benefit and this will help create a fairer Australia, which is the focus of our advocacy positions. The Society is now hearing from many working people who are struggling to make ends meet and who have never contacted a charity for assistance.

‘In recent months, the calls for assistance have risen by up to 40 per cent, making it almost impossible for charities to meet all the demands. We explained this to the Government in our [Pre-Budget submission](#).

‘The reworked tax cuts are considerable and are targeted at providing much-needed help to working households.



Prime Minister Anthony Albanese announcing the revised Stage 3 tax cut schedule at the National Press Club on 25 January 2024.

The benefits will be felt from 1 July onwards. Until then, however, the hardship will continue.’

The National President noted that the cuts were not expected to have an inflationary impact on the cost of living

‘So many things have become unaffordable, such as healthy food and medical bills, and any further upward pressures would be a major impost on working Australians.

‘It was heartening to hear the Prime Minister say that no one will be left behind, but the Society remains concerned that a significant number of Australians may derive little benefit from the revised tax schedule.

‘A number of other economic strategies are needed to assist people doing it tough, with attention on those people on benefits. So many Australians are relying on inadequate welfare payments that keep them struggling day to day. The Government’s own Economic Inclusion Advisory Committee supports working age payments being increased and we also see this as a key social priority.’

Mr Gaetani said the Society holds strong hopes that other relief measures will be announced in the lead-up to the Federal Budget in May or at that time.

‘Our 2024-25 Pre-Budget submission steps out what is needed to improve people’s lives,’ he said. **R**

National Membership, Mission and Spirituality Standing Committee

Member applications invited

The National Membership, Mission and Spirituality Standing Committee is a newly established advisory body to the St Vincent de Paul Society National Council of Australia. The Standing Committee is chaired by Matt Nunan, and current members are Sister Therese Heywood and Brendan Podbury.

The purpose of the Standing Committee is to support National Council to promote membership initiatives and networks across the country, and to enhance collaboration between jurisdictions with a focus on the long-term objectives expressed in the National Council Strategic Plan 2023-2027.

The Standing Committee is looking to represent the breadth of the Society's membership and encourages members from all over Australia, including young members and members from diverse cultural and social backgrounds, to apply.

Expressions of interest for membership are sought from members of the Society to fill three places on the Standing Committee.

Members of the Standing Committee should bring expertise in one or more of the following areas:

- Leadership experience (previously or currently) within the Society; and/or
- Listening and facilitation skills in a group setting; and/or
- Is one of the Congress 2023+ Champions; and/or
- Strategy development and implementation within their jurisdiction.

The National President appoints members to the Standing Committee and the term of appointment expires at the end of the National President's term.

Members are invited to submit a brief EOI outlining their motivation for nominating themselves or another person, and how they meet the membership requirements.

- Deadline for EOI: 19 April 2024
- Email EOI to: cleo.fleming@svdp.org.au

Further information:

Mr Matt Nunan
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AIHW report highlights the homelessness crisis

The week before the release of the Australian Government's annual [report](#) on people accessing specialist homelessness services (SHS), the NSW Treasurer Daniel Mookhey set tongues wagging by warning that Sydney was at risk of having a homelessness problem on the scale of San Francisco's.

Moreover, he added, Sydney's rising rental costs and a lack of intervention to lift housing supply could push the middle class into "destitution". The city, like its coastal cousin across the Pacific, could be hosting homeless camps in tents in view of city hall.

There, Mr Mookhey said, middle-class workers in suits live in homeless shelters and are forced to rely on food stamps.

A few days later came the release of the Australian Institute for Health and Welfare (AIHW) data showing new SHS clients in 2022-23 were more likely to be homeless at the start of accessing support than new clients four years earlier and are less likely to be housed at the end.

The National President of St Vincent de Paul Society, Mark Gaetani, said, 'This annual report by the AIHW is further confirmation that the country's homelessness situation is exceedingly bleak and shows few if any signs of improving. The latest census count of homeless persons was 122,000 but our experience tells us the actual number is likely to be much higher.'

"Our members are seeing demands for emergency relief skyrocketing."

'This detailed study highlights the urgent need for measures to address the shortfall in social housing and to boost the availability of homelessness services, including crisis accommodation.'

'The responsibility to address the shortfalls in the housing market rests with the government, as charities are only able to encourage action, not initiate it. More social and affordable housing supply is a priority right now and will remain so over the next five to ten years.'

'Regarding immediate assistance to people in need, our members are seeing demands for emergency relief skyrocketing. Many people now seeking help are in the workforce, not just relying on government support.'



'The AIHW said financial difficulties are the most common reason for seeking assistance, with housing affordability stress a major factor. Some 35 per cent of new adult SHS clients reported family and domestic violence, with 31 per cent having a current mental health issue.'

'Despite these needs, many agencies, including St Vincent de Paul Society, are finding themselves unable to meet requests for accommodation because there is nothing available at the time.'

'In the Society's 2024 [Pre-Budget submission](#) to the government we described the challenges being faced by more than 3.3 million Australians living in poverty, one-in-six of them children. Our calls include an increase in Australian Government funding to address the cost of living and housing crises, including a 25 per cent increase to Commonwealth Rent Assistance and building the Equal Remuneration Order funding (\$67.5M annually) into the base funding of applicable Specialist Homelessness Service providers.'

'Many families are struggling to get by, especially sole parents, people on low incomes and those experiencing disability. However, the AIHW noted that lone persons were common among new SHS adult clients seeking help. Of all these new clients, 24 per cent identified as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander in 2022-23, vastly disproportionate to the ratio in the general population.'

Mr Gaetani said the rising cost of both the rental and real estate markets is a significant driver of poverty and homelessness in Australia.

'As the UN's Universal Declaration of Human Rights says, housing is the basis of stability and security for an individual or family. It is a right not a commodity. A moral investment in housing should not be to encourage property speculation or tax minimising but to provide safe and affordable homes for everyone in the community.'

'There is no reason this cannot be achieved in a wealthy country such as ours. It just requires the will to bring about a fairer Australia for all Australians, whatever their life circumstances. We urge our political leaders to take heed of the sobering information contained in the AIHW's important report.' **R**

Rough sleepers dying 'alarmingly' young

Studies show people experiencing homelessness are dying much younger than the general population.

Research data on the wellbeing of visitors to St Vincent de Paul Society's Matthew Talbot Hostel in Sydney's Woolloomooloo shows people seeking homelessness support are dying at the low average age of 55.9 years.

Life expectancy in Australia is 85.3 years for females and 81.2 years for males.

This situation has shown few if any sign of improvement over recent years. A [study](#) of the mortality of homeless clinic attendees conducted by medical professionals in Sydney from 2008-2020 found 13.0 per cent of clinic attenders were found to have died at the mean age of 50.7 years.

The authors noted, 'The study confirms the high mortality of homeless clinic attenders in Sydney found in a study from 30 years earlier.'

The more recent study noted that those dying of an 'unnatural' death (drug overdose, suicide and injuries) were much younger than those who died of natural causes: 44.4 years compared to 54.4 years.

Dr Olav Nielszen, one of the authors and a psychiatrist at the Matthew Talbot clinic, said the absence of supported housing was a major factor in poor health.

'We found quite an alarming mortality and that the mean [age] of death was alarmingly low. The mean age of death ... was in the 50s, and for those who had substance abuse issues, it was even younger.'

The client data from Matthew Talbot shows the average age of death to be 52 years and even younger for those suffering from schizophrenia.

The figures are alarming, according to Julie Smith, the hostel's clinic manager, who has worked in homelessness health since 1990. She told [Guardian Australia](#), which has been focusing on homelessness issues, that in that time she has not seen a significant change in the age of death of those experiencing homelessness.

'We have been aware that homeless people die 25 to 30 years younger – we've known forever that they die prematurely and they die, in many cases, of preventable illness, due to their circumstances,' Ms Smith said.

'I remain shocked at the amount of people with serious



Julie Smith, Matthew Talbot Primary Health Clinic manager.

illness, particularly serious mental illness, who remain on the streets, that it's so difficult to get housing and healthcare for these people.

'Sydney is an extremely wealthy, western-style society, and I find it really difficult to grapple with the knowledge that there are so many disadvantaged people living on the streets, living in incredibly substandard housing, and without protection.

'Their vulnerabilities mean they require protection and they require targeted services and they require specific types of housing and care in many places. It's shocking – the number of people with schizophrenia that we allow to remain homeless.'

The [Primary Health Clinic](#) at the Matthew Talbot Hostel is a nurse-led health service and accredited GP Practice that has operated for about 35 years. It is widely recognised as a key provider of primary health care (including preventative care and chronic disease management) as well as specialist medical and allied health care to homeless men and men at risk of homelessness in the inner city of Sydney.

A leading clinician who has worked extensively with people experiencing homelessness said he often regards this group of people as 'prematurely aged or prematurely ageing.'

Tragically, too many of them are also prematurely deceased. **R**

Mini Vinnies in England: The Australian Connection

BY KEVIN SLATTERY

Hawthorn Conference, Melbourne



St Edwards, Runcorn (UK) Mini Vinnies, with Marjorie Lightfoot and Kevin Slattery

In 2008 while visiting England, I travelled up to Runcorn in the north, the place from where Fr Gerald Ward sailed to Australia in 1849 in response to an appeal by Bishop Goad to booster priestly stocks in the fledgling Melbourne town. Fr Ward later founded the first Australian conference of St Vincent de Paul, in St Francis Church, in 1854.

Runcorn in 2008 hosted a vibrant SVDP conference under the dynamic leadership of president Marjorie Lightfoot. During a delightful lunch with conference members, I was asked to give an overview of what was happening in Australia.

In passing, I mentioned the growing development of the Mini Vinnies movement. Marjorie picked this up as it was a concept unknown in the UK. She asked me to send further information on my return home. This I did, gathering up resources from various Australian groups and mailing them to Marjorie.

Fired up, Marjorie then persuaded all those necessary, including the National Council of England and Wales to run a 12-month pilot programme on Mini Vinnies in the primary schools in her area. The result was a resounding success – the children loved it, the schools loved it – everybody loved it.

The children loved it because it was an active way of putting their faith into action, enabling them to see how

they could make a difference by being a member of this huge Vincentian family. The schools loved it because it covered aspects of the curriculum such as Community Cohesion, and most importantly Catholic Social Teaching, putting their faith into action.

The SVDP National Office then decided the programme should be rolled out throughout England and Wales and eventually provided staff at National Office to be responsible for it.

In May 2010 the first Catholic primary school to commission a group of Mini Vinnies was St Edward's in Runcorn, the parish from which Fr Gerald Ward left to begin his ministry in Melbourne in 1849.

In 2023 there are over 400 Catholic primary schools in England and Wales running Mini Vinnies programmes. In Marjorie Lightfoot's diocese, attention has now turned to implementing a Youth SVDP programme, so that Mini Vinnies are able to continue their Vincentian journey when they progress to secondary school.

Some Mini Vinnies schools in Australia have established a relationship with schools in England by way of a pen pal scheme. Marjorie Lightfoot is keen to further develop this relationship with interested Australian schools. She may be contacted on marj.lightfoot80@gmail.com **R**

Letter from Shrewsbury, UK

BY MARJORIE LIGHTFOOT

I have been asked many times about how Mini Vinnies started in the UK. My answer is always the same: "Well it's the work of the Holy Spirit". The story goes like this...

In 1844, the Priest at our Parish Church of St Edwards Runcorn in Cheshire responded to a call from Bishop Goold, Melbourne's first Catholic Bishop [1848-86], to assist in the Melbourne Mission. Fr Gerald Ward hopped on a boat leaving Liverpool and with another priest sailed for Australia.

Having a knowledge of SVDP, Fr Ward, started the Society in Australia and founded the first Conference at St Francis Church, Melbourne in 1854.

In the ensuing years, Kevin Slattery, a Vincentian from Melbourne, would write a biography of Fr Ward, An Enduring Legacy. In May 2009, Kevin decided to visit the UK and asked if he could come to Runcorn and see the places where Fr Ward had been.

I was at that time President of the SVP Conference in St Edwards Church Runcorn, in Shrewsbury Diocese, and we gladly hosted Kevin's visit. It was during lunch when Kevin asked me "How's your Mini Vinnies Marj?"

My response was "My what?"

Kevin explained what the Mini Vinnies were and I asked him to send me some information when he got back home.

On his return to Australia Kevin gathered together all the Mini Vinnies resources the Australians used and very graciously shared them with us.

"It all started by Kevin Slattery [Vincentian from Victoria] saying to me during his visit to Runcorn in 2008 "How's your Mini Vinnies Marj"? – Marjorie Lightfoot

At that time the Chairman of Shrewsbury's Central Council was Mike Brady and I contacted Mike and acquainted him with what I had received from Kevin. Mike, like myself, thought this was a great programme and we duly contacted the National President Michael Worthington and CEO Elizabeth Palmer.

After many months of discussion and consideration they suggested that we hold a 12-month pilot with the Primary Schools in Shrewsbury. A lot of work had to be carried



out before this could be undertaken because firstly the resources needed to be completely rewritten for English schools.

Eventually the pilot scheme was carried out and the result was a resounding success – the children loved it, the schools loved – everybody loved it. Currently 85 per cent of the 20 High Schools/Colleges in the Shrewsbury Diocese have active Youth SVP Groups. In England and Wales we have just over 430 active Mini Vinnie groups and 150+ Youth SVP Groups.

National Office then decided that the programme should be rolled out throughout England and Wales and eventually asked Staff located at National Office to be responsible for this programme.

Here comes the best bit of this whole story – the first Catholic Primary School to commission a group of Mini Vinnies was St Edwards Catholic Primary School, Runcorn in June 2010.

The Holy Spirit continues to guide this Programme: after many years of making no progress to implement the Youth SVP into our Shrewsbury High and Secondary schools we have now signed up nearly half of those schools in our Diocese. This means that our Mini Vinnies are able to continue their Vincentian journey when they leave their primary schools

We shall always thank the Good Lord for sending Kevin Slattery to Runcorn and for asking me "How's your Mini Vinnies Marj?"

This [northern hemisphere] Summer, 75 Mini Vinnies and Youth SVP members will join adult members at the SVP National Meeting where they will be able to witness the great works of the Society and meet other members. Young members from the Shrewsbury Diocese will form part of this group.

There are also several Masses and gatherings taking place across the country, including our own Shrewsbury Diocese where Mini Vinnies and Youth SVP members will gather to meet other members of the Vincentian family. **R**



Our Congress journey continues

Workbook Three helps chart pathway to revitalisation

The third in the series of Workbooks relating to the Society's ongoing Congress initiative and the associated revitalisation agenda has now been released. *Workbook Three*, available at this [link](#), summarises the journey to this point, including the co-design approach used to consolidate the outcomes of last October's Congress 2023+, along with the many learnings from the Listening Forums held since then, most recently this February.

For the benefit of the 202 delegates who attended Congress, as well as the many Members wishing to engage in the reform process, *Workbook Three* outlines and explains the essential and agreed outcomes of the three-day event.

Focus areas emphasise inclusivity, leadership development, flexibility, enhanced communication and collective engagement. The key achievements from Congress include a vision and roadmap for change, now known as the Congress Framework, which incorporates 15 action areas, or 'sub-projects', across three core pillars.

Outcomes were decided by Delegates at Congress and have been endorsed by the National Council of St Vincent de Paul Society in Australia.

PILLAR ONE – GROWTH AND REVITALISATION

1. Goal is to address the decline in membership and to build the pool of emerging leaders by attracting and retaining a more diverse range of people who shared the Society's commitment to social justice and enabling pathway for this to happen.
2. Six sub-projects
3. One already delivered (see graphic on next page).

PILLAR TWO – DIVERSE, FLEXIBLE CONFERENCES FOR IMPACT

1. Goal is to ensure that new Members could find Conferences that suit their needs, motivations and availability, from traditional Conference models to emerging ones, that could support a more diverse membership base.
2. Five sub-projects.

PILLAR THREE – READY FOR CHANGE

1. Goal is to create the necessary conditions to drive change, reflecting on where change had been hard, and what the Society needs to do differently this time.
2. Four sub-projects.

Congress+ (as the current iteration is named) is focused on conversations around transformation, renewal, and the journey towards a revitalised mission in Australia.

3. The focus now is on implementing the Congress Framework. This involves local engagement; supporting 'Champion-driven' initiatives and creating a digital platform for State/Territory Councils and their members to link with Congress ideas.

Every level of the Society is encouraged to commit to small, frequent actions regarding doing things differently. These and our related commitments will be the building blocks towards our larger Revitalisation goals. The Congress+ framework has been designed to foster a culture of innovative change and adaptability. Each incremental action can have a cumulative impact.

The success of the Framework will lie in each member, Conference and Council agreeing to implement or pilot parts of the Framework, and remaining *Faithful to the spirit of our Founders, constantly striving for renewal, adapting to changing world conditions.* (*The Rule*, Part I, 1.6).

Supporting Members to advance Congress Initiatives

A series of supports have been developed, which include:

- A network of project Champions who will ensure conversations and plans continue.
- A digital Teams platform has been implemented to assist with communication and idea generation within the project teams
- Website content where project updates are provided – this is for internal access only, accessible via [vinnies.link/Congress-Delegates](#)
- The implementation of Congress projects, which will remain a standing Agenda item for National Council meetings.



Our Shared Story

St Vincent de Paul Society
good works



Who are we?

We are a community of ordinary people building a just society through advocacy and good works for vulnerable people.
We are a lay Catholic organisation that welcomes all people. Together we build a more inclusive community with a deep commitment to Social Justice.

What do we do?

We offer a 'hand up' to empower and enable individuals to create change in themselves and their wider community.
We amplify the voice of the voiceless through advocacy.
We operate with compassion, dignity and respect.

Why do we do what we do?

We believe that all people are worthy of love, respect, time and a second chance.
Inspired by the love of Jesus, we come together to create community and support each other to put our faith into action.

These smaller sub-projects aim to encourage a sense of ownership and accountability amongst all Members and provide a space for youth and emerging leaders to be involved in designing and even leading the desired change.

As well as the 15 identified action areas, the Congress Framework identifies five strong themes that emerged from Congress Delegates:

- **Inclusivity and Welcoming Approach:** Emphasising openness to individuals aligned with our social justice mission, with efforts focused on a national recruitment campaign targeting diverse audiences.
- **Leadership Development:** Committing to support emerging leaders within the organisation through training and mentoring programs.
- **Flexibility in Conference Formats:** Being comfortable and supportive of exploring more flexible Conference models that accommodate a variety of member preferences and that will coexist alongside traditional forms.
- **Enhanced Communication:** A shift towards (i) decentralised communication models that foster direct connections among Conferences and Members for mutual support and knowledge sharing; and (ii) new ways to communicate to all the Society's members with an immediate focus on building a communication channel for all Congress Delegates so they can advance the Congress Framework.
- **Collective Engagement in Change:** we are a member-led national organisation and it will be vital that all our Members are welcomed to actively participate in the change process through reflection, action, and interactions within their Conferences and Councils. **R**



William (Bill) Fitzgerald 1925-2023

Former NSW State President of
St Vincent de Paul Society.

Born in inner Sydney on 3 April 1925, Bill Fitzgerald spent most of his childhood in Darlinghurst, attending the local Christian Brothers school. It was a tough environment, not for the faint hearted, and undoubtedly contributed to him developing a keen interest in boxing.

It also contributed to his unwavering protection of those on the margins.

Joining the Sydney City Council at age 16 was the beginning of a lifelong career leading to him becoming Director of Health and Community Services. His time with the Council was only interrupted by his joining the RAAF towards the end of WWII and serving in far north Queensland as a radio operator.

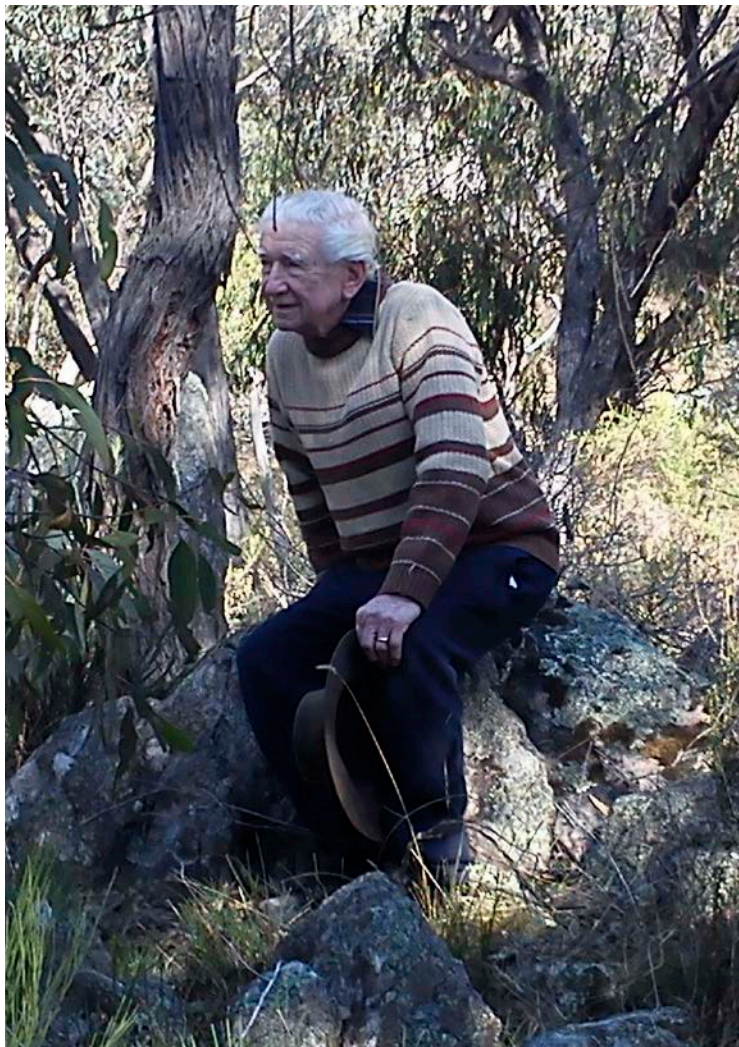
In 1947, he met and married Shirley, his lifelong partner until her death in 2008. They shared his love of breeding, showing and judging dogs, his involvement in multiple parish activities, raising three children and accompanying him on his many Vincentian ventures.

In the mid-1970s Bill was made a Member of the British Empire for his services to the community - though he never wore the medal or badge. His acts of support to community groups and acts of kindnesses to individuals are countless and often recorded with great appreciation by those affected.

Rich or poor, powerful or oppressed Bill had your back if you needed it.

In 2007 Bill was awarded the 'Cross of Honour' Medal by Pope John Paul II. This is one of the highest honours that can be given to a lay member of the Church.

Bill believed faith needed to be put into practice and he was recognised for his 75 years of membership and service to the St Vincent de Paul Society. He had joined as a youth member in his teens and went on to become President



of the Maternal Heart of Mary Conference operating out of the Society's head office at Circular Quay. He was also President of the Stella Maris Club for Seafarers, the Society's NSW State President and National Council Vice President for Overseas Twinning.

Bill remained connected to local conferences at Dulwich Hill, Forestville and Portland and later supported the Bathurst Diocesan Council in the development of their Centres. He was a committed supporter of the Society's Social Justice Advocacy, never timid in the defence of the poor.

During his term as State President, he was especially proud of the Society's expansion of Aged Care and Homeless Persons Special Works and the growth in female membership. He was proud of the Society's work with women escaping domestic violence. He believed the Society could be the best of Church - faithful, compassionate and relevant especially to those in need. **R**

Gerard Landon

Vincentian who kicked the goal of life.

In January, hundreds of people attended St Kevin's church in Eastwood, Sydney to farewell the long-serving Vincentian and local rugby union legend Gerard Landon, who died at the age of 76.

More than fifty years earlier, his father had been the president of the St Vincent de Paul conference, one of the oldest in Australia, that bears the church's name. Some three decades later, Gerard would also become the president, stepping into the breach when he was needed. He had first become involved with the Society at the age of 15.

His willingness to take on new challenges, despite a long-standing health condition, is what prompts Michael Hill, now 88, to describe Gerard as 'truly a person who didn't know the meaning of the words "can't do"... people didn't realise how much he could achieve, but over the years we found out.'

Mr Hill, who thought Gerard had regarded him as something of a 'second father', reeled off his friend's many achievements since they had worked together at the Ozanam workshop that Mr Hill had managed.

'I spent a lot of my life involved with Gerard,' he recalled.

'For decades he was involved with Eastwood Rugby Club, playing, coaching, refereeing, selling programs, doing everything he was asked, even touring overseas with the club's Golden Oldies. He was the very first volunteer for the Sydney 2000 Olympics, his photo was everywhere, including as a torch bearer.

'When he felt he lacked confidence in front of people, he took himself off and did the Toastmasters program... he didn't recognise any barriers.'

'Gerard didn't know the meaning of the words 'can't do'

Gerard Landon was born in Cootamundra, south-central New South Wales, the town through which he would one day carry the Olympic flame. He was a long-term volunteer for Wheelchair Sports Australia and the Sydney Special Olympics Team.

'Gerard lived out his faith by loving God and loving others,' said his youngest sister Therese Wilkinson in her words of remembrance at his funeral.



'He was independent and travelled the world with his friends. Nothing seemed to stop him from doing what he wanted and the way he wanted it, yet he ensured that he was available if anyone needed help.

'He was recently appointed as a member to the senior advisor committee at Epping RSL and when asked why he did this he simply said "that everyone deserves a voice"'

Eastwood Rugby Club general manager Robert Frost said, 'Everyone in rugby knew who Gerry was' and his catch cry of "programs!" was known throughout Sydney.

'He was an accredited touch judge, ball boy, team manager, statistician, hoarder of memorabilia and somewhere along the way he became a genuine icon,' he said.

Gerard is survived by his six siblings, 19 nieces and nephews, 21 great-nieces and nephews, and four great-grand nieces and nephews. **R**

This story was prompted by an obituary published in The Catholic Weekly, 23 January 2024 written by Marilyn Rodrigues. Interview with Michael Hill was conducted by Robin Osborne.

We're behind the eight ball in a multitude of milestones

BY SAMANTHA MCGUIRE

Manager, First Nations Engagement,
St Vincent de Paul Society NSW

I'm sitting on beautiful Dharug Country out here in Western Sydney. This is my Country. I'd like to pay respects to our Elders past and present and also acknowledge the continuation of care for Country, Culture, and First Nations rights that our Elders continue to provide for our people.

I would like to extend that respect to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as well.

As a First Nations person it's really important to acknowledge that our Elders are our knowledge holders. They are our storytellers and they help us continue to connect to our culture and our community every single day.

We're here today to yarn about human rights and I think it's only fitting, given that First Nations peoples have occupied this country for over 65,000 years, we acknowledge and discuss the burdens and barriers we as people face in regards to our human rights.

The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples lists a multitude of rights First Nations people should have. Unfortunately to date, the process has been government-led without significant engagement of Indigenous Communities in setting priorities or the delivery of culture-based initiatives.

The ALP and Coalition have rejected a bill to enshrine these rights established by the UN on the rights of Indigenous Peoples in Australian law.

250 years ago, our First Nations people lost their rights in this country, and we are still fighting to be heard. 550 deaths in custody. Over 20,000 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children not living with their families.

We are already behind the eight ball in a multitude of critical milestones. In an attempt to rectify this, the Australian government launched a strategy called "closing the gap" in 2008 to reduce the disparity between First Nations and non-Indigenous peoples on key health, education and



economic opportunity targets. To this day, the strategy is not working. Many of the tracked targets are worsening or have shown only slight improvement.

"At Vinnies, we are trying our best to really progress reconciliation and promote a fair and just society."

I'd like to quote from the Uluru statement from the heart: 'Proportionally, we are the most incarcerated people on the planet. We are not an innately criminal people. Our children are alienated from their families at unprecedented rates. This cannot be because we have no love for them.'

'And our youth languish in detention in obscene numbers. They should be our hope for the future. These dimensions of our crisis tell plainly the structural nature of our problem. This is the torment of our powerlessness.'

I'd like everyone to reflect on what that means and how that resonates with you on a personal level.

As we saw with the Referendum – Australia voted against a Voice to Parliament. Not only does this go against Article 18 in the United Nations Declaration on the Right of Indigenous Peoples, which states that Indigenous peoples have the right to participate in decision-making in matters which would affect their rights, through representatives chosen by themselves in accordance with their own procedures.

But it also shows how much work as a country there still is to do. How is it that in 2023, we are still fighting to have our voices heard? How much more do we have to do to show that what is currently being done to “Close the Gap” isn’t working.

“Our Policy and Advocacy team are doing an absolutely astonishing job...”

As a proud Aboriginal woman, navigating two worlds – my culture and community as well as mainstream Australia - I’m proud to be working for a for-purpose organisation which is committed to social justice and human rights.

It’s heartwarming to see that here at Vinnies, we are trying our best to really progress reconciliation and promote a fair and just society. Our [NSW] CEO has publicly stated that Vinnies is committed to ensuring that the Society works for reconciliation and walks together with our First Nations peoples for a better future.

Our Policy and Advocacy team are doing an absolutely astonishing job in advocating and paving the path for systemic change to assist our First Nations community. In conjunction with our Reconciliation Action Plan, we consult with the community and develop key action areas to ensure we are meeting the needs of each individual community.

We believe in the right to self-determination. To enabling our Indigenous communities the ability to choose and control their goals without external pressure or influence.

Self-determination refers to the scenario where Indigenous Australians have similar rights to those of mainstream Australians. The right to self-determination is based on the simple acknowledgment that Indigenous peoples are Australia’s first peoples, as was recognised by law in the historic Mabo judgement.

Self-determination is a powerful vehicle to allow Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to overcome the legacy of invasion and dispossession.

Our path is not yet complete and there is a long journey ahead but I am honoured to be in a position where I can speak to, support, empower and enable our mob to fight for and stand up for their rights and needs. **R**



The Federal MP for Curtin Kate Chaney with representatives of the Stronger Charities Alliance - the CEO of St Vincent de Paul Society National Council Secretariate, Toby oConnor, Hassan Mirbahar from Australian Democracy Network and Rob Sturrock from ACOSS.

Reforms urged to boost charities’ performance

As a member of the 120-strong Stronger Charities Alliance, St Vincent de Paul Society Australia lent its support to the body’s submission to the Productivity Commission’s Philanthropy Inquiry. The submission is aimed at ‘seeking a clear, unambiguous legal and regulatory environment that minimises administrative burdens and legal uncertainty so that charities can do their important advocacy work and philanthropy can confidently fund it’.

The members of Alliance represent millions of Australians concerned with a wide range of issues, including education, social welfare, human rights, international development, animal welfare, the environment, health, climate change, disability rights and philanthropy.

The Alliance’s submission had three key recommendations:

1. Amend the Charities Act to clarify that advocacy in furtherance of a charitable purpose is itself a charitable purpose and that no weighing of benefit or detriment is therefore required in relation to the outcome of that advocacy.
2. Simplify deductible gift recipient (DGR) status and extend it to all the charities registered with the Australia Charities and Not-for-Profit Commission (ACNC).
3. Repeal ACNC Governance Standard 3 as per the 2018 ACNC Legislative Review recommendations.

Full submission here - [The Stronger Charities Alliance Submission for the Productivity Commission’s Philanthropy Inquiry](#)

“Australia is a generous nation”, said Productivity Commission Deputy Chair Dr Alex Robson.

‘We donated more than \$13 billion to charities in 2021 and over 6 million of us volunteered in 2022. Our draft recommendations would strengthen the foundations for philanthropy so that the benefits of giving can be realised into the future.’

The draft of the Productivity Commission’s *Future Foundations for Giving* report is [here](#). **R**

Rebuilding employment services is long overdue

I am not a shirker, a scrounger, a beggar, nor a thief. I'm not a ... blip on a screen. I paid my dues, never a penny short, and proud to do so. I don't tug the forelock but look my neighbour in the eye and help him if I can. I don't accept or seek charity. My name is Daniel Blake. I am a man, not a dog. As such, I demand my rights. I demand you treat me with respect. I, Daniel Blake, am a citizen, nothing more and nothing less.

This is a quote from the movie *I, Daniel Blake*; an account of one income support recipient's engagement with the welfare system in the United Kingdom. If you haven't seen it, you should.

– From the Foreword of *Rebuilding Employment Services*, final report of [Select Committee on Workforce Australia Employment Services](#) tabled on 30 November 2023.

That a major report to Parliament could be prefaced by a quote from a fictional movie might be interpreted in various ways. One is that life all too often mirrors art, not just the reverse, and not always in a good way. Another is that fact can seem more unreal than fiction, and there is more than a trace of that in this documentation of Australian woe.

The central character of director Ken Loach's disturbing film is a middle-aged man who is denied UK Employment and Support Allowance despite being declared unfit to work by his doctor.

The point of its being singled out by Julian Hill MP, the chair of said Committee, is that its deliberations found that tens of thousands of Daniel Blakes had been battling, even for their lives, against harsh laws and practices guided by the Commonwealth Employment Services System.

The inquiry was informed by over 300 submissions, including [St Vincent de Paul Society's](#), more than 60 hours of witness testimony, over 50 meetings and site visits across all Australian jurisdictions, and direct engagement with OECD experts and representatives of over 10 other countries.

The report contains 75 recommendations supported by almost 600 pages of detailed analysis.

In his damning summary, Mr Hill said, 'It's harsh but true to say that Australia no longer has an effective, coherent, national employment services system; we have an inefficient, outsourced, fragmented, social security compliance management system that sometimes gets someone a job against all odds.

'It should not be controversial to state that full privatisation has failed. Even the previous government implicitly admitted this by bringing a large caseload back to the public sector with Workforce Australia Online.

'The current system is inefficient, tying clients and providers up in red tape, driving away businesses and effectively making too many people less employable by requiring them to do silly courses, pointless activities or apply for jobs they simply cannot do. It has failed to prepare people for today's red-hot labour market and to effectively address long-term unemployment, with 150,000 people stuck in the system for over five years. This must change.'

"The current system... has failed to prepare people for today's red-hot labour market."

– Julian Hill MP, Committee Chair

St Vincent de Paul Society in Australia has since added its voice to the report's widespread support, saying it agreed with the overall finding that, 'The significant and numerous issues identified in this inquiry [demand] wholesale, large-scale reform in the coming months and years to fundamentally rebuild the Australian system'.

The Society's National President, Mark Gaetani, said, 'In recent years, we have seen the operation of a largely privatised job placement system that was ineffective, delivering very negative, often cruel, impacts on Australians seeking work, and that has contributed little, if anything, to the wider economy.

'We endorse the words of the Committee Chair, Mr Julian Hill MP. This is an indictment of a system that was allowed to roll on for a quarter-century, supposedly with government oversight, despite the many flaws identified by job seekers, employers and advocacy groups such as the St Vincent de Paul Society.

Considering inclusion is now a budgetary requirement

'For years we have raised our concerns about this system, including the analysis in our *Let's Build a Fairer Australia!* policy suite. This parliamentary report lifts a veil on the practices of Workforce Australia and its preceding iterations, which even many of its own staff have been deeply concerned about,' Mr Gaetani said.

The many recommendations the Society supports include: -

- An end to automated suspension of payments
- An overhaul of the employment services sector with the establishment of Employment Services Australia and an Employment Service Quality Commission
- Reforming the mutual obligation framework
- A national wage subsidy and work experience scheme for the long-term unemployed
- Increased employment and training of Services Australia staff and increased funding and use of specialist providers, including Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations and Culturally and Linguistically Diverse service partners.

Mr Gaetani added, 'We endorse the report's aim of setting out a comprehensive and ambitious blueprint to rebuild the Commonwealth Employment Services System, underpinned, as it states, "by the guiding vision that all people in Australia be able to enjoy decent employment and participate in economic and social life regardless of who they are or where they live.'

'For the last five years the Society has advocated for employment services to be refocused to support job seekers into work that aligns with their aspirations, abilities, skills, and interests, and which enables personal agency. We call on the Government to implement the Committee's recommendations to help bring this aim to fruition.' **R**

Following the passing of the *Economic Inclusion Advisory Committee Act 2023* by Federal Parliament on 8 December 2023, the interim committee that previously operated has become a permanent part of the nation's political landscape.

Formally expressed, 'The Committee's function is to give a written report to the Joint Ministers, ahead of each Commonwealth Government budget, on matters related to the Commonwealth Government's policies, programs and responsibilities for enhancing economic inclusion and participation.'

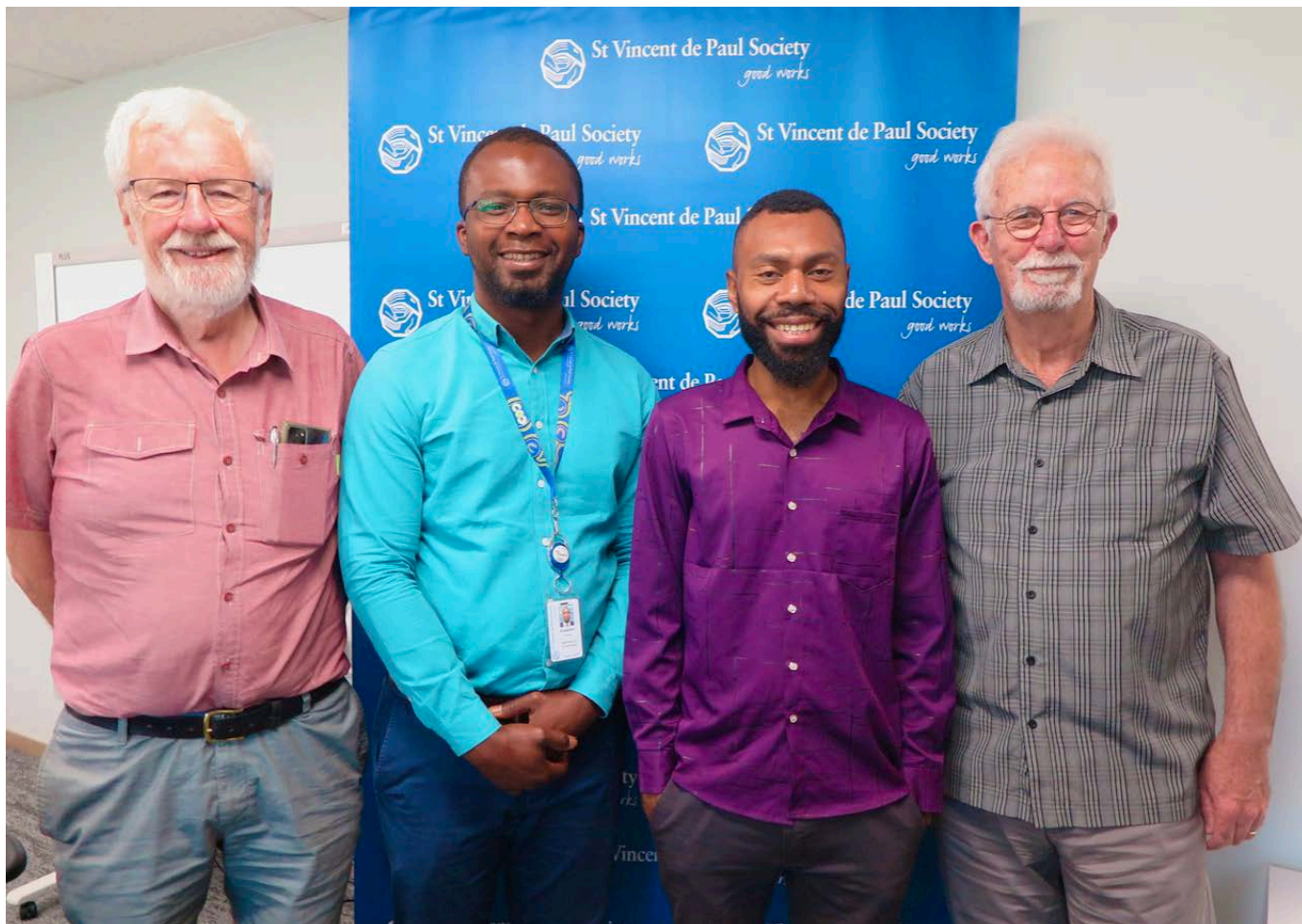
The Society had advocated over several years for an economic advisory panel to assess proposed policies in accordance with fairness criteria. In November 2022 we welcomed the announcement of an interim committee to examine economic policy settings such as income support payments, ways to reduce barriers to work and the adequacy of social security and employment services.

Of particular importance to the Committee - and the Society - are issues related to long term unemployed and disadvantaged people. The Committee's brief includes considering factors such as economic conditions and the sustainability of the social security system.

The 14-member committee, chaired by The Hon Jenny Macklin AC, includes some of Australia's leading economists, academics, philanthropists and advocates. Among the membership is the ANU's Assoc Prof Ben Phillips, co-author of *A Fairer Tax and Welfare System for Australia*, the report commissioned by the Society that modelled policy options that could significantly reduce the number of people living in poverty.

In April 2023, prior to the delivery of the Federal Budget, the interim committee released its first report outlining 37 recommendations. Many of these aligned closely with the core advocacy positions of the Society, including increasing income support payments, increasing Commonwealth Rent Assistance (CRA), and addressing the drivers of long-term unemployment and poverty.

The second report of the *Economic Inclusion Advisory Committee* is due in April, shortly before the May 2024 Budget. **R**



Jason Siwat (purple shirt), Director of the refugee program for the Catholic Bishops Conference of PNG and the Solomon Islands, with (l-r) Frank Brassil, ITVP Oceania St Vincent de Paul Society, Kwadwo Owusu, Social Justice and Policy Coordinator, St Vincent de Paul Society Canberra/Goulburn and Dr Tim McKenna, chair of the Vincentian Refugee Network.

PNG hosts refugees from its neighbours

Jason Siwat, director of the refugee program for the Catholic Bishops Conference of PNG and the Solomon Islands, flew south to Australia recently carrying two important documents. Neither would have been especially welcome to the governments of the two countries bordering his homeland, the Republic of Indonesia and Australia.

The first was a letter from the PNG Catholic Bishops to Home Affairs Minister Clare O’Neil asking her government to bring to Australia a cohort of 61 refugees [now down to 57 following acceptances by New Zealand] who had been brought to the capital of Port Moresby from the Australian-run Manus Island detention facility in late 2021.

The “confidential bilateral agreement” was planned by the Morrison government and has been continued by Anthony Albanese’s. Details of the terms are yet to be disclosed.

The men, who fled from trouble spots such as Iran, Afghanistan and Sri Lanka, are in what the Bishops called

‘a desperate situation... for sure, this festive season for them will be nothing compared to yours... As you take your vacations, please remember those men who will be wandering the streets without food... their children are suffering along with them.’

They urged Australia to ‘Please bring all those who are critically ill and those who cannot be resettled in another country back to Australia... they remain your responsibility until the last man leaves our country.’

The letter reminds the Home Affairs Minister that the men ‘are in PNG because of an Australian policy, and not PNG’s... This is an arrangement that must never be repeated anywhere in the world, let alone in the Pacific and PNG.’

The refugees’ circumstances, including evictions from rented premises, are considered to have declined since the street violence that erupted in the capital in January.

Continued support for Society WA

The second document Mr Siwat carried was a bound survey of the homes and living conditions of several hundred refugees from the Indonesian province of West Papua. They are a tiny proportion of the estimated 15,000 people who have fled to PNG over several decades to escape social exclusion, racism and the frequent brutality of Jakarta's military.

Most live in jungle camps close to the border that divides the island of New Guinea from north to south. During his visit to the Society's National Secretariate office in Canberra, Mr Siwat outlined their desperate circumstances.

'The West Papuans have conflict with local landowners, so cannot farm, they face food insecurity, are unable to pay school fees, they even suffer untreated snake bites when they move about to gather firewood or hunt for food.'

These people live far away and out of sight of the media. Closer to hand but also ignored by officialdom are those living in Port Moresby where Mr Siwat's team went house to house, or more accurately shanty to shanty, documenting conditions and inquiring into their health needs, hygiene and nutrition shortcomings, and lack of educational and work opportunities.

'They 'live in one of the most unhygienic and destitute conditions that you can find anywhere in Oceania and the Pacific that host refugees,' the report said.

The many privations included 21 families sharing one toilet and one tap, with people sleeping on cardboard. There was flooding, health problems were rife, unemployment was gauged to be 80 per cent.

Foraging for recyclable cans and bottles in ditches or rubbish bins was a major earner – for AUD\$2.00 per day. Some refugees sold chopped firewood by the roadside, often on an empty stomach 'in order to get some money for the dinner meal'. Many children did not attend school and most adults have only rudimentary education or skills.

Mr Siwat's two documents described very different cohorts of people linked together by both being refugees, unable to return home for fear of reprisals, even death, and to a large extent ignored by those who could and should help them.

National President Mark Gaetani said, 'The St Vincent de Paul Society in Australia joins with the PNG Catholic Bishops in urging a proper resolution to the terrible plight of all refugees currently in Papua New Guinea, whatever their place of origin or the reasons for their fleeing.

'These folk are part of our human family, deserving of proper care and being resettled in safe places where they can pursue a decent life for themselves and their children.' **R**

The WA State Government under Premier Roger Cook has continued its budgetary support for services managed by St Vincent de Paul Society, confirming that its expanded \$50M Homelessness Support Services package will enable the continuation of critical homelessness services and boost service capacity.

These include funding of \$900,000 for the Passages Youth Centre in the Peel region, which is run by the Society to support at risk youth. Passages is a youth engagement hub providing young people aged 12 to 25 with a safe, friendly and positive place to access support and referrals to essential services.

The Cook Government is also boosting baseline funding for 10 services, including \$900,000 to Tom Fisher House, which is part of Vinnies Homelessness Service and an intensive intervention service for those experiencing long term homelessness.

The service provides support to people facing complex challenges which may prevent them from accessing other programs. It offers free overnight accommodation with few barriers to entry and a place of engagement in which an individual's life impacting issues can be identified and supported.

On any given night we accommodate up to 12 adults (singles and couples) and even have room for friendly fur companions. **R**



Members are making a mark in Maitland

A newly opened hub is enabling St Vincent de Paul Society members to make a greater impact across the Lower Hunter of NSW.

As cost of living and housing pressures extend into a new year, the Society has stepped up to meet the rising demand in an area with some of the highest need in the state.

'We're talking about people who are employed but they just cannot get food on the table or pay their utility bills. The financial stress that they're going through is through the roof,' said Clare Van Doorn, St Vincent de Paul Society North East Regional Director.

'Maybe 12 or 18 months ago, [the family budget] might've been tight, but that amount of money worked. Now, how do you manage when those costs go up?

'In the first half of the financial year, close to 9,500 people sought assistance from our members in the Maitland/Newcastle area with the Lower Hunter accounting for more than 1,100.

'Concerningly, one-in-three in the Lower Hunter sought assistance for the first time and two-in-three reported experiencing housing stress.'

To meet the present need in the community, members of St Vincent de Paul Society Conferences in Maitland, Ruthford, Dungog and East Maitland have united under one roof at the newly opened Maitland Hub, which will serve as a base for the Society's work in the Lower Hunter region.

'The larger space that the new hub provides will enable our members to deliver an improved experience to the people we assist, along with offering additional services,' said Yolanda Saiz, St Vincent de Paul Society NSW CEO.

The new hub, officially opened at the beginning of February, is providing locals facing hardship and disadvantage with a range of services including assistance with food, household bills and other expenses, as well as referrals to local services, counselling and case workers.

Other services offered through the hub include the No Interest Loan Scheme (NILS), providing loans to people facing hardship for essentials and housing expenses, along with Energy Accounts Payment Assistance (EAPA), an initiative run in conjunction with Service NSW to help households pay electricity and gas bills during times of crisis.

The Society was able to establish the hub thanks to a generous donation by the Cootes Family Foundation; John Cootes OAM was born in Maitland and has been a long-time member of the St Vincent de Paul Society.

Clare Van Doorn sees the Maitland Hub acting as a one-stop shop which will complement existing services in the community and give people the support they need without having to jump through hoops during times of crisis.

'We're all striving to do the same thing to support vulnerable people in our community,' she said. **R**

Tasmania appeal helped with back-to-school costs

Launched in the lead-up to the 2024 school year, the Vinnies' School Essentials Appeal was a Tasmania-wide program to help families struggling with the increased costs of living that are now all too evident.

The principal of St Anthony's Catholic Primary School in Launceston's Riverside, Jason Perry, said, 'Initiatives such as are vital for those parents that can't afford fundamental items...there is no other way to support parents unless it is by the school. There is also an element of dignity that is maintained through support by established and reputable charities such as Vinnies.'

He added that as cost of living pressures have increased, he has witnessed a gradual reduction in parents' capacity to spend on anything that "costs extra".

"A child's lunch box is very often filled with pre-packaged food that's cheaper and easier on parents."

'We have seen an increase in requests for hardship discounts or help with fees and costs. Parents are cutting back on so many items, just trying to get by as they struggle to pay for the basics.'

St Joseph's West Tamar Conference President Eric Welsh, the coordinator of the Vinnies Christmas Hamper Project in northern Tasmania, said, 'We are witnessing changes in the amounts of disposable income that families have, the main pressures seem to be trying to cope with rental increases and mortgage stress – all as a result of the rising interest costs and general increases associated with the cost of living in Australia.'

'Compared to as little as three years ago, there has been a significant increase in demand for help during the period when families are preparing for their children to return to school.' **R**



Eric Welsh (left), St Joseph's West Tamar Conference President with Corey McGrath, the Society's Tasmania President, at St Anthony's Catholic Primary School.

Lifesaving defibrillators on the map

All Vinnies shops, Night Patrol vans and other services of the Society across the ACT and the surrounding region now have a lifesaving AED (Automated External Defibrillator).

Made possible by St John Ambulance ACT and the generosity of local communities, the Society's shops and services are now safer for staff, volunteers and visitors. In an emergency, it is vital for defibrillators

to be easy to locate and access. The Society in Canberra/Goulburn has embedded an interactive [map](#) on their website to show the location of all the defibrillators that are accessible during opening hours.

In addition to local community support, Australian Government and ACT Government grants supported the funding of several defibrillators. **R**

Growing together in faith

Meet Juan Manuel Buergo Gómez, President General of the Society of St Vincent de Paul.

Interviewed by Elena Grazini

Q: The Society of St Vincent de Paul is among the oldest known Catholic charitable organizations in the world: what does it mean to be its President? And what does it mean to you personally?

A: The Society of Saint Vincent de Paul is a civil association made up of lay Catholics, founded in 1833 in Paris. It was in 1845, with a Brief of Gregory XVI, that the Holy See granted it recognition.

The General President personifies the unity of the Society in the world.

Leading with a spirit of service an organization of lay people present in 155 countries, each with its own culture and particularities, requires an effort, not only from the General President, but from the entire team, to maintain unity in a community which is a sign of the love of Christ. To do this it is necessary for our confreres to feel part of a single Conference of friends, which extends throughout the world.

Personally, I remember my father, who will see me from Heaven, from whom I learned as a child to experience the Vincentian visit to needy families; to play with children who had nothing. It was shortly after his death that I joined the Conferences.

Q: How did you approach this reality? Was there an episode, a particular meeting, that decisively influenced your choice?

A: I have been a member for 31 years now, but I have always been involved in the Conference's tasks of evangelization and social assistance to marginalized groups, and I have also carried out some service assignments at the national level.

I am currently National President of Spain. Yes, there was a meeting that influenced my decision. It happened shortly after my appointment as president of the International Historical Commission, which forced me to read a lot about Frédéric Ozanam. My interest in Frédéric, for his studies at the Sorbonne, for being the precursor of the Social Doctrine of the



Juan Manuel Buergo Gómez

Church, for everything he wrote on social justice, for being the one who best reinterpreted the teaching of St Vincent for the laity, is what made me fall in love with this reality.

Q: Let's talk about your action program as President: is "Growing together in faith" one of the initiatives you have included in view of the canonization of Blessed Ozanam? What is it about?

A: The principle of the Conferences is friendship and the dual purpose for which they are created is to be useful to our brothers and to ourselves. After the act of faith came the act of charity.

Sometimes we are caught up in the affairs of the Conference and we tend to secularize ourselves, to measure ourselves by the kilos of food or clothes we distribute and not by the spiritual help we give. As our founder in Spain, Santiago de Masarnau, said: "If we measure ourselves with this, the Conferences will disappear, not in the eyes of men, but in the eyes of God."

The future canonization of Ozanam should be a spiritual stimulus and continue his thought for all his brothers.

I commissioned a program in this sense to the religious advisors of the General Council, Father José Francisco Orozco CM and Father Andrés Motto CM.

***“The Society constantly strives for renewal,
adapting to changing world conditions.***

– The Rule

Q: Among your other proposals is the establishment of an International Vincentian Day, celebrated from time to time in different countries. How do you imagine it?

A: Being present in so many countries gives us a great opportunity to make ourselves known and also obtain human and financial resources to support our social works.

An annual international event, faithful to our founding principles, through art and culture as a universal language, is a perfect meeting point to give greater visibility to everything we do.

Q: Young people are important to you. Your program includes various activities dedicated to them and also funds to support initiatives in their favor. What is the face of Vincentian youth today from your point of view? And what could be done to bring more and more young people closer to the Vincentian reality?

A. The 2017 International Youth Day in Salamanca allowed me to personally see the reality of young people; 120 young people from different countries came to Spain. Talking to them, among other concerns, they told me that they needed small resources to carry out their social works. For this reason I would like to strengthen Vincentian Youth Day, July 4th, the feast of Pier Giorgio Frassati, to promote a special collection among all the countries of the Confederation for the benefit of young people. Furthermore, I want to promote international exchanges.

In our national Spanish magazine and also in the Ozanam Network, we have a permanent section for young people, where they talk about their experiences and you are truly amazed by the love, faith and spirit of service with which they act.

I think that young people need concrete projects and certain resources to develop their Vincentian mission. The value of friendship is essential for the Conference to continue and grow.

Q. An interesting chapter of your program refers to the Rule of the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul which says: “The Society constantly strives for renewal, adapting to changing world conditions.” How do you think you can implement this?

A. It is very important to explore new creative forms of financing, to address the changing types of poverty we face. This is a general requirement.

Likewise, I will appoint a person in charge who will deal with the Laudato Si' international twinning projects, to try to contribute to resolving the dramatic consequences of environmental degradation in the lives of the poorest in the world.

There are other themes, such as the objective of excellence in everything we do, the promotion of training, the improvement of communication, the modernization of our processes and the gradual digital transformation of the Superior Council.

All this, to continue to provide a quality service to the Councils and Conferences, so that they can continue to maintain close and personal attention to those who suffer, addressing the shortcomings of both their material and spiritual poverty.

Q. Finally, I would like to ask you to share a passage or a phrase with the readers of our newsletter; something that you identify with in your Vincentian journey.

A. This reflection by Frédéric Ozanam that he made in Pisa in 1853, when he was fatally ill, moved me, because it is the essence, the pillars, of the foundation of the Society of St Vincent de Paul: “Although they speak different languages, their hands always meet with such fraternal warmth that they could easily recognize us by the same sign by which they recognized the first Christians: ‘See how they love each other!’” **R**

This article appeared in the December 2023 issue of FamVin News, the official newsletter of the Vincentian Family.

Society supports good works with our overseas partners

The St Vincent de Paul Society in Australia is working to help those in need in the Asia-Pacific region through the Overseas Partnerships Program (OPP) which encompasses Twinning, Project Support, the Assist-A-Student (AAS) Program and when needed in response to Emergencies.

Since April 2023, the Society across Oceania has been working to establish a collaborative partnership that will be known as the *Society of St Vincent de Paul Oceania Program (SSVP Oceania Program)*.

The aim of the partnership is to help National Councils in Oceania become sustainable and self-sustaining, by increasing their capabilities using current knowledge, expertise and partnerships across multiple areas.

For more information about the OPP, visit our [website](#).

Twinning

Twinning refers to the supportive one-to-one partnership between a St Vincent de Paul Society council or conference in Australia and one in an overseas partner country. The goal is to build solidarity and help others in need.

Twinning promotes spirituality, friendship and shared cultural understanding through prayer, regular communication and financial support.

At the end of the calendar year (FY) 2023, there were 1,869 active twinning relationships (financial and non-financial) between Australian and Overseas Conferences and Councils in Cambodia, Federated States of Micronesia, Fiji, India, Indonesia, Kiribati, Lao PDR, Myanmar, Philippines, Solomon Islands, Sri Lanka and Thailand.

To learn more about Twinning, visit our [website](#).



Kiribati Good Works

Emergency Relief

During times of natural or humanitarian disasters our overseas partners or the Council General International's Commission for International Aid and Development (CIAD) may ask the Society in Australia for assistance.

Australia's National Council Overseas Partnerships Advisory Committee will determine if support is appropriate, and work with the Society to help according to National Council guidelines.

Each year an agreed amount for Emergency Relief is included in the OPP budget to be available for immediate allocation on receipt of an approved application from an overseas partner country. Any funds not allocated will be forwarded to CIAD for use as needed for Emergency Relief globally.

A recent emergency relief request was the Tulay sa Pagbangon (Bridge to Recovery) Typhoon Relief Project in the Philippines. Particularly assisted were the Indigenous



Blessing of the Mangyan Community Center by National Spiritual Adviser, Fr. Francisco Vargas, CM, accompanied by community leaders and SSVP representatives.

PHOTO: SOCIETY OF ST VINCENT DE PAUL PHILIPPINES, INC.

People of Calintaan Mindoro, with the provision of food, water, medicine, clothing and housing materials. Remaining funds were used to build the Mangyan Community/Mission Centre.

To learn more about Emergency Relief, visit our [website](#).

Projects

Conferences and Councils in our partnered countries are supported to undertake good works locally through small and large community development projects and Special Vincentian Support. All proposals are reviewed for approval by Council General International, the National Council of Australia and the National Councils of our overseas partners.

Community Development projects (small and large) improve the circumstances of people and communities in need in a local area and must be sustainable so as to benefit the community over the longer term. They are developed at the Conference and Council level and endorsed by the overseas National Council.

Recent community development projects include the purchase of livestock such as milk cows or buffalo in India to help people obtain income and feed their families and the purchase of sewing machines in Solomon Islands and training for women to make clothes for the community members in need.

Special Vincentian Support projects support the operations of an overseas National Council. They can only be requested by our partner overseas National Councils and have included funding for the Solomon Islands Superior Council to visit its Conferences in outer islands, and the National Council of Indonesia to hold a National Congress to elect a new National President and office bearers.

To learn more about Projects, visit our [website](#).

Assist A Student

Running in Australia since 1996, the Assist A Student (AAS) Program recognises the importance of education as a key plank to help break the cycle of poverty. Education improves a young person's opportunity of getting a job, so increasing their ability to support themselves and their families in the future.

Assist A Student provides the equivalent of \$100 AUD to support the educational requirements of students in need. Supported students may not be able to attend school without it.

In our partner countries, local Vincentians select students in need to receive the educational support and manage the program. Over the last fifteen years, over 60,000 students have been assisted.

In 2024, the AAS program is expanding to the Society in New Zealand, who work with its partner countries in Sri Lanka, Tonga and Samoa to introduce it.



To learn more about Assist A Student, visit our [website](#).

You can donate online at: [St Vincent de Paul Society - Assist a Student](#)

If you'd prefer to donate off-line you can [download a donation slip](#).

For more information about the Overseas Partnerships Program contact: overseasadmin@svdp.org.au



New office helps Lismore's slow flood recovery

Conference returns to downtown Lismore as challenges remain for flood-affected residents.

The floodwaters that swamped the NSW Northern Rivers city of Lismore in February 2022 have long receded but the residual damage continues to affect many residents, as the latest report from the Audit Office of NSW has made clear.

'There is an extensive waitlist for temporary housing and the remaining demand in the Northern Rivers is unlikely to be met,' the report said.

'There are no long-term plans in place for the transition of tenants out of the temporary housing.'

One bright sign of recovery has been the recent opening of the Society's new regional office that houses the St Carthage's Conference supporting many people experiencing hardship in the local community.

Even before the flood, Lismore faced significant socio-economic challenges. The disaster, one of the greatest ever experienced in Australia, made things so much worse.

The Society's premises will also serve as a base of operations for the Vinnies Van which will deliver meals and other assistance to locals in need.

When the flood overtopped the levee built to protect Lismore's CBD, it rose to unprecedented heights, swamping the Society's street level Conference office, the

nearby Vinnies shop – which had been flooded five years earlier – and, to everyone's amazement, the second-level Lismore Central Council office suite.

The flood also laid siege to St Carthage's Cathedral, despite being on higher ground, and destroyed Trinity Catholic College, a highly regarded primary and secondary school.

"There is an extensive waitlist for temporary housing and the remaining demand in the Northern Rivers is unlikely to be met... there are no long-term plans in place for the transition of tenants out of the temporary housing."

The Society is now busier than ever, with members assisting more than 13,000 people in the last financial year, more than four in five seeking food support.

'In the first half of the current financial year, St Vincent de Paul Society members across the Lismore Central Council have already responded to the equivalent of three quarters of the assistance provided during the entirety of the previous year,' according to Paul Burton, NSW State President.

'Our members in the area have distributed \$1.2 million in financial and material assistance over the past six months.'

'Our membership, in addressing the ever-increasing cost of living pressures, will find the re-establishment of the Lismore Central Council office of immense value and support as they continue their mission to those we reach out to,' Mr Burton added. **R**

Striking visual voice from Central Australia

BY ROBIN OSBORNE

National Director, Communications & Media

In June 2023, following media accusations about non-Indigenous workers from an art workshop in Central Australia adding to paintings said to be exclusively done by Aboriginal artists, the National Gallery of Australia (NGA) postponed the Ngura Pulka Epic Country exhibition, pending further investigations.

Fortunately for the gallery's reputation and for art lovers generally, the NGA had an ace up its sleeve in the form of a blockbuster show featuring the life work of Australia's best-known Aboriginal artist, the late Emily Kam Kngwarray. This exhibition opened in December and runs until 28 April 2024.

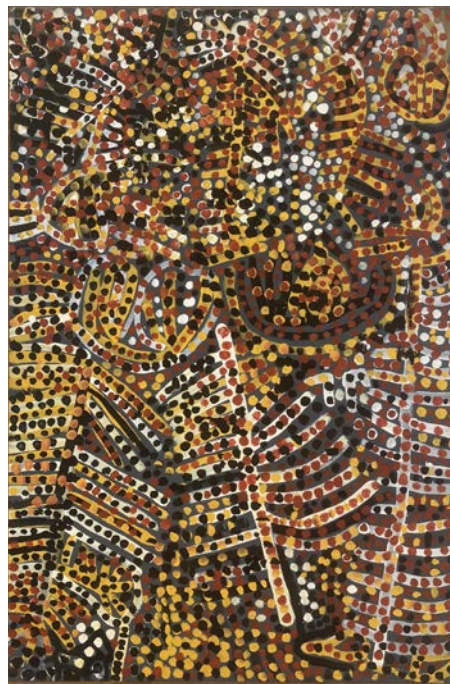
A forerunner [exhibition](#), *Emily Kam Kngwarray: Alhalkere - Paintings from Utopia*, was held at the NGA in 1999 to trace what the catalogue called 'the brief but impressive career of an artist who started painting in the public arena when she was in her eighties'

Emily – the European name she received growing up on the remote desert area known as Utopia, 230 kilometres north-east of Alice Springs - was born at the beginning of the 20th century. Relatively late in life, she began to paint on canvas and paper after working with textile batiks, a choice selection of which is also on display.

She was a founding member of the Utopia Women's Batik Group which commenced operations in 1977. This communal project operated on an egalitarian basis, with no one artist singled out above the rest. All were encouraged equally to produce work. The Holmes à Court Collection sponsored a series of similar projects which launched the Utopia artists into the public domain.

It is estimated that Kam, as she was more properly known as a senior Anmatyerre woman, produced over 3,000 paintings in the course of her eight-year career – an average of one painting per day. By the age of 80 she had become an artist of national and international standing. Back home, she was a lifelong custodian of the women's Dreaming sites in her clan Country, Alhalkere.

Emily Kam Kngwarray is an extensive survey of her work, bringing together the most important works documenting her culture and in time coming to also be classified as 'art'. As has been observed, she knew virtually nothing of the art world beyond Utopia and drew her energy, creativity and inspiration from a small patch of country in the centre of the Australian outback.



Above: Prime Minister Anthony Albanese visited the Emily Kam Kngwarray retrospective at the National Gallery of Australia in early January. He is pictured viewing the artist's batik works.

Left: Emily Kam Kngwarray's first and much-admired canvas, Emu woman (1988–89).

The exhibition draws on international and national collections, offering many previously unshown works from private collections, along with some of the artist's seminal works in the national collection. It also features an audiovisual collaboration with the artist's community, with the songs of the awely that informed her works woven through a series of immersive soundscapes and audio tours.

The exhibition is curated by Kelli Cole, Warumungu and Luritja peoples, Curator, Special Projects, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art, and Hetti Perkins, Arrernte and Kalkadoon peoples, Senior Curator-at-Large, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art. **R**

Emily Kam Kngwarray runs at the National Gallery of Australia until 28 April 2024. Tickets can be booked at [Emily Kam Kngwarray - National Gallery of Australia \(nga.gov.au\)](https://www.nga.gov.au/exhibitions/emily-kam-kngwarray)



St Vincent de Paul Society

NATIONAL COUNCIL of AUSTRALIA Inc.

good works

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