

A CALL TO SERVE

VINCENTIAN STORIES

“Yours must be
a work of kindness,
of love.”



-Frederic Ozanam



St Vincent de Paul Society
VICTORIA
good works

2019 CHAPTER

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OUR MISSION

The St Vincent de Paul 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.

OUR VISION

The St Vincent de Paul Society aspires to be recognised as a caring Catholic charity offering 'a hand up' to people in need. We do this by respecting their dignity, sharing our hope and encouraging them to take control of their own destiny.

OUR VALUES

Commitment

Loyalty in service to our mission, vision and values.

Compassion

Welcoming and serving all with understanding and without judgement.

Respect

Service to all regardless of creed, ethnic or social background, health, gender or political opinions.

Integrity

Promoting, maintaining and adhering to our mission, vision and values.

Empathy

Establishing relationships based on respect, trust, friendship and perception.

Advocacy

Working to transform the causes of poverty and challenging the causes of human injustice.

Courage

Encouraging spiritual growth, welcoming innovation and giving hope for the future.



STATE PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

Dear members, volunteers and employees,

I am delighted to present the seventh issue of *A Call to Serve*, which continues the tradition of honouring and showcasing the magnificent contribution of our volunteer members.

Across Victoria, every day, our conference members and volunteers continue to forge relationships and make a difference to the lives of people struggling with financial difficulties and other challenges including loneliness and marginalisation. We are all called to 'Vincentian Mission' in different ways and in different times. However, in the spirit of Blessed Frederic Ozanam and the very first conference, it is this same mission that unites us all. The *A Call to Serve* project is a fitting way to honour the exceptional contribution of five of our Vincentians and in so doing, celebrate all the efforts across our conferences and voluntary workforce.

Looking back to records of the first days of the St Vincent de Paul Society in Paris in the 1830s, we learn that the stated task of the first conference was to work face to face with the poor, give as much time as possible to assist them and seek to know as much as possible about their plight and how best to help them.

Between these pages, you will read five accounts of contributions that continue to honour this early mission. These stories demonstrate the adherence to Vincentian values and, most importantly, that what we do must always be done as a work of love and as examples of being on the side of the poor and the marginalised.

I congratulate each of the honoured members for their service, while at the same time acknowledging that each one's conference members and store teams are always part of these success stories as well.

I hope you find these stories of servant leadership as inspiring as I do.

Kevin McMahon

State President
St Vincent de Paul Society Victoria



DOUG KNEZ

SERVING ABUNDANTLY

Doug Knez, like many conference members, particularly those in small country towns, is part of the invisible Vincentian family helping to keep the wolf from the door, alleviate loneliness and build stronger communities.

Doug is very passionate about the Society and works tirelessly for the poor and marginalised in his region. Another passion is gardening. This combination makes sense, as gardening is a fitting analogy for how he approaches his Society work. Being a good gardener and true Vincentian requires patience and love, both a short and a long-term perspective; a readiness to do more in tough conditions and a preparedness to alter plans as nature follows her course.

Doug's faith is a key part of his capacity to remain hopeful. Doug is aware that he has been blessed with a good upbringing. He was raised by loving parents, was educated and nurtured. He is aware that others haven't had the same life opportunities. This motivates him to do as much as he can to try to address this imbalance. In a continuation of the gardening metaphor, Doug speaks of lifting people out of where they are, almost like transplanting a tree to a better place, where there is more sun and the chance to be nurtured and supported.

Doug is an interesting Vincentian because he has been a conference member in two entirely different areas of regional Victoria. In 1992, an address by the regional president motivated him to join the Ballarat East Conference, where he remained for 14 years. In a pattern he would repeat later in Gippsland, Doug not only agreed to take on office-bearer roles when required, he also instituted practical and helpful initiatives such as working

bees, gardening, fencing and collecting wood for people in need. He has many friends from those years and regularly returns to Ballarat.

In 2005, in retirement, he made the sea change to the quiet, charmingly quirky town of Fish Creek in South Gippsland. Here, Doug loves his orchard. It provides respite, a place for silent prayer and to ponder the plight of people he visits: How did it happen? What more can we do?

As he had done in East Ballarat, Doug embraced his new community. Fish Creek does not have a conference, so he firstly joined Leongatha Conference, which had 21 members, before transferring to Foster Conference with only five members. Later, Doug joined Korumburra Conference, which had closed for 18 months, with members burnt out from the demands of a very needy, rural town.

Doug sees the home visit as the essence of what the conference does, but he also likes to strike out and break new ground. A local GP who was also the Anglican minister contacted him. She was the driving force behind setting up a community meal once a month from October 2018. This was the trigger that saw the local conference reconvene. Local churches, Rotary and Apex became involved. The numbers grew every month, with around 90 now attending.

Social isolation is a significant problem, particularly in rural and regional areas where industry has shut down and there are limited job opportunities. Doug revels in chances to counter isolation and loneliness and engender a strong sense of community and belonging. Meals are a good way for the conference

and other agencies to join forces to respond on a deeper level to needs.

In 2009, he was president of the South Gippsland Region when the Black Saturday bushfires dealt a heavy blow to many towns in the region. He acknowledges the tireless work and dedication to survivors shown by Sandra Walker, a previous Call to Serve honouree, who died in 2015.

Sandra visited affected areas, like Callignee and Traralgon South, as Doug compellingly describes it, “again, and again and again”, every day for months, with regular contact in later years, just to be there for people and ascertain the best way to continue to help them. It was an incredible initiative and response to dire need.

The Society supported her to the hilt. When she told us what was needed, we were able to organise backup. Groups of parishioners helped re-fence, build sheds, replace spouting and roofing.

It is hard to describe the despair of survivors and the cruel unfairness of fires, which pick off some houses, leaving neighbouring ones unscathed. Conference members like Doug and Sandra felt every part of survivors’ agony, which strengthened their resolve to help them rebuild their lives. They met people deeply traumatised who still wouldn’t leave and were determined to rebuild. Many were uninsured and lost everything. People had different reasons to keep on going. That’s what the volunteers tried to do: give hope and demonstrate this by following up and being there whenever they were needed. The experience has taught Doug a great deal about the human spirit.

History is important to Doug, particularly the history of St Vincent de Paul Society. He has visited Paris and toured the Society’s headquarters, walking the path taken by St Vincent and Frederic Ozanam. He has dedicated time to write local histories, such as the 100-year history of East Ballarat Conference. He sees the value in recording what went before, for posterity. He also wrote about the experience of the bushfires from the perspective of members and

parishioners. This is a significant way of keeping the Society’s light burning brightly. Future generations will marvel at the efforts of those who went before them.

When Doug was regional president (2011–2014) and central council president (2014–2017), he visited all the conferences and asked them to write up what they had done during the year, to record their work so that, when they update their conference history, every highlighted event will be covered.

Doug appreciates being president of a conference can be hard when one is new to the Society. He appreciates the support he has had from many. The highlights for Doug are always at ground level as a conference member. It is the best direction that he taken in his life, joining the Society.

Doug believes Frederic Ozanam would be elated to see the Society moving in new directions. He warms to the emotional pull of Ozanam’s pleas to members that still ring true today. A favourite is ‘No need is foreign to the Society’. There are always new needs. The conference must refocus its efforts as new needs emerge.

His orchard is in hibernation now, but will provide great bounty later in the year. Doug gains satisfaction from observing the changing seasons, tending his trees and sharing the produce with everyone. This is similar to the care and attention he gives to people in need. He finds it easy to help people; it is second nature and a demonstration of his faith. His generosity knows no bounds and he has formed strong relationships with many people he has been visiting regularly.

Doug can’t imagine life without the Society. He knows he and his conference help people and this provides satisfaction. It is rewarding work. Doug has made life-long friends through the Society from Gippsland to Ballarat. He describes the move to Gippsland as a ‘re-blossoming of his life’. This community is lucky that he made the move.



Record of service

2018–2019	South Gippsland Region President.
2018–2019	Korumburra Conference President.
2015	(various times) Fitzroy/Footscray/Moe Soup Van.
2014–2017	President, Gippsland Central Council.
2014	(various times) Wonthaggi Store.
2011–2014	South Gippsland Region President.
2008–2011	South Gippsland Region Vice President.
2007	(various times) Leongatha Store.
2006–2018	Foster Conference member.
2006–2008	Foster Conference President.
2005	Leongatha Conference.
1995–2004	Ballarat East Conference President.
1993–1995	Ballarat East Conference Secretary.
1992	Joined Ballarat East Conference.



MAUREEN LARKINS

ENORMOUS CAPACITY TO SERVE

"Let us go in simplicity where merciful Providence leads us, content to see the stone on which we should step without wanting to discover all at once and completely the windings of the road."
(Frederic Ozanam)

Maureen Larkins likes to understand what is behind a person's current predicament. In this way, she can try and assist in a more sustainable way. She knows to tread gently though, always aware of the need to treat a person with respect and dignity. She understands that conference work is delicate at times. It requires members to respond to what is revealed. If the person being assisted chooses to embark on a longer term association with the members, there may then be a chance for more to be communicated and appropriate next steps taken.

Maureen radiates warmth and welcome. She smiles and laughs readily. At first meeting, one cannot help but be struck by this demonstration of the Society's beautiful tradition of hospitality. Maureen has been a volunteer at Vinnies Camperdown since 1990 and shop manager for seven years. She has also been a conference member since 1993. She is widely respected by all. Her peers, area support managers and others in head office retail all know her for her dedication to get efficient processes in place while also going that extra mile for anyone in need.

Maureen grew up within a strong Irish Catholic tradition and retains a devout faith. Family, Church and the Society are her holy trinity. Her mother died when she was a young girl and Our Lady remains her loving, mother figure. Maureen is by nature a nurturer, a hard worker and empathetic.

Maureen sometimes worries about how well she will do a job; it is a normal part of wanting to do everything well. She recalls that a long-term conference member, Leo Timms, now in his 90s, reminded her that, when she is feeling down or doubting herself, to remember why she decided to join the conference. Go out and honour that commitment to help people, keep it up and you will regain your vigour.

Maureen speaks of the beautiful bond between conference members, with everyone working towards a shared mission in sometimes challenging situations. These days, they see most people in the Assistance Centre, which has been operating for four years. This is a growing trend in country areas as homes can be spread out and in relatively remote areas. At times, there can also be safety issues.

Country towns have a reputation for being cheap places to live, so many people move to places like Camperdown for this reason. This reputation is often inaccurate due to cost of living hikes and very little affordable housing. People don't always stay long, so there is transience and poverty. The Society used to have nomination rights over three houses in Camperdown, but these are now managed by a different charity. Maureen's conference refers people to them but it is like winning the lottery if you are allocated one of these houses.

Country towns are also exposed more than metropolitan areas to the ravages of nature. In 2018, fires erupted in nearby areas such as Cobden. Blazeaid swung into action, doing a magnificent job to organise the response.

There were many victims of the fire, but many offered help. A man donated his shop next to Vinnies so we could set up a relief centre and give away items. Rivers donated clothing and shoes and others brought in much welcome, new items.

Maureen is heartened by the way people pull together in times of need. Certainly, the shop and the conference can always do with more volunteers but everyone always helps to the best of their ability.

"You must not be content with tiding the poor over the poverty crisis; you must study their condition and the injustices which brought about such poverty." (Frederic Ozanam)

Maureen knows it is often a false economy to only help tide people over; they often need more. Being generous, such as helping them overcome a large financial obstacle, will often free them from the constant nagging worry of debt and enable them to get back on their feet. The conference and the shop also keep a store of white goods and furniture. Everything helps when people are re-establishing themselves or have been going without what most of us take for granted as essential.

Maureen has enormous capacity to give and contribute to her community. So much so that her children often suggest she should lighten her load. In her 70s, Maureen finds it hard to imagine which ministry she would let go as she gains much satisfaction and joy from participating actively in the Society and her church. She dedicates on average about three days per week at the shop as well as conference work and parish activities.

She remembers when she first moved to Camperdown, the parish priest asked her to become a Eucharistic minister.

I told him I wasn't worthy of such a role. Father became quite serious with me and said firmly: 'Maureen, Our Lord doesn't ask if you're worthy, rather are you willing?' Well, willing I have been and willing I remain!

Maureen, along with other parishioners, takes communion to people in two aged-care facilities. It is a special ministry that strengthens her faith. She has also been a reader at Mass.

Maureen has in the past been president of her conference as well as treasurer of Corangamite Regional Council. She recognises that she likes most to be a small part of things; she doesn't have to be the main act. The important element for her is that, no matter how little or how much one does, it must be done from the heart, to the best of one's ability and with faith. Her faith allows her to face challenges. One of those is IT, but she is determined to do anything that will enhance the operations and effectiveness of the shop. She likes that shop helpers and members may have different capacities, but everyone does their best for the people they serve and for the Society.

She understands the dual purpose of Vinnies shops: the shops provide decent quality goods to people on low incomes, while profits support the good works of the Society. Maureen is very proud of the shop and very excited at the prospect of the shop receiving a re-make very soon. The retail team came down from Melbourne recently to measure up the new shop fittings. The shop has been going for 50 years and a facelift will do it the world of good.

Given Maureen's elation at these renovations, it is unlikely that she will give up working at the shop. Even if the time comes when she decides to stop being the manager, she is sure to remain in some smaller way, involved in an enterprise that has given her enormous satisfaction and a connection to her faith and Vincentian spirit.

Record of service

2013–2015	Treasurer Regional Council
2007–2012	Conference President
1993	Camperdown Conference
1990	Camperdown Shop





DIANNE SANDFORD

SERVING BY LESSENING THE BURDEN

In 1999, Dianne joined Werribee Conference where her husband, Bernard, had been a member since 1979. Dianne had learned the Gospel stories at Methodist Sunday school and their four children had been raised Catholic, so there was much about the faith tradition of the Society that was familiar. It seemed natural to be actively involved in the life of St Andrew's parish and the conference. Given her commitment and her natural belonging to both, people were always very surprised to learn she was not a Catholic.

Dianne is clearly one of those people happy to be involved in many ventures. She is practical, no nonsense and has a big heart. When she takes something on, she excels at it and extends herself to the limit. A demonstration of this is that she received a Wyndham City Council Above and Beyond Local Community Award.

Dianne considers the values of courage, compassion and commitment, as particularly important for her as a Vincentian. She remembers being very nervous conducting her first home visit. She worried about who she would encounter and whether she would respond appropriately. It took courage that first time. She sees courage in the people she encounters too, as they bravely face extreme challenges in their lives. There is an exchange of courage that occurs between conference members and the person seeking support.

After many years and many visits, Dianne is very comfortable visiting people. Dianne speaks highly of her conference and particularly Marise, who has been her partner on visits and other activities throughout the years. They understand, as all 19 conference members do, that it is important to be

there for people for as long as they need support. This takes commitment.

Dianne describes a Libyan family with three young children that she and Marise first visited over six years ago. The call notes said: 'No income'.

The father was on a student visa, undertaking his doctorate here. Libya was supporting this study by paying a living allowance. Then the Libyan Government fell and the money stopped. The family were penniless. The conference paid the family's rent and all other living costs for six months until they formally achieved asylum seeker status. Red Cross started to support them and they were then eligible for 85 per cent Centrelink payment. A fourth child was born and then, out of the blue, the Centrelink payments stopped. The conference resumed supporting the family as it had before.

Dianne has continued to visit the mother every week, recognising the isolation of being home alone with small children, particularly as there are no other Libyan people in the area. They have become good friends with Dianne recognising she has become this woman's mainstay.

You have to be there for the long haul, particularly when people are struggling with social isolation and loneliness. We cannot but feel for people like this family. Understanding what it must be like for them and relating to their difficulties in the most helpful way requires compassion.

When Dianne visits someone in the midst of their anguish, her first thought is always: what can we do to lessen their burden? Compassion is her instinctive response, although

she concedes there are people she would prefer not to visit. People can be challenging but, still, she always remains positive and tries to give her best. Her conference believe Dianne lives out other Vincentian values such as empathy and integrity. She has a deep respect for each person, gives them hope and always encourages them to take control of their destiny.

Twenty years ago, Wyndham Vale parish mainly comprised residents from Anglo-Saxon backgrounds. Today, it is much more diverse, with many Filipinos, Indians, New Zealanders and Sudanese. Many of the people Dianne visits are originally from other countries and are struggling to re-build their lives in a new country, with visa issues and the living-in-limbo-like existence this entails.

Dianne trained as a mothercraft nurse and nurturing children remains a passion. She is always willing to help mind children whose parents struggle, for example, to combine work and being home. She sees this as the neighbourly thing to do. The children love coming, feeling very welcome, and enjoy a room full of toys. She helps identify children for the kids camps and Big Days Out.

They have a ball and some children continue to go every year until they are too old.

Dianne could be described as an unofficial ambassador for the Society and 'particularly' the Werribee Conference as she does an excellent job promoting its good works. She enjoys speaking at school assemblies and RE classes, working hard to engage the children in the stories of Founder, Blessed Frederic Ozanam. The firewood story always captures their interest as they grasp the fundamental importance of fire for cooking, warmth and washing. She is well known at Vinnies Hoppers Crossing, where she often collects goods on behalf of families. She proudly describes it as one of the best shops.

Dianne and Bernard's garage is often used as storeroom for events such as the Winter Appeal. Dianne organises volunteers to bag food and

distribute it in a timely manner. Dianne has a reliable, 15-year-old station wagon that is her trusty steed. It gets her and Marise where they need to be and carries all sorts of things: furniture, white goods; Christmas hampers, piles of clothing and food.

Dianne likes to suggest to people she visits that they come out to the car and select what food they would like. This is giving people some choice and control over their lives.

The other central role the station wagon plays has been carrying the piety stall to church on many Sundays throughout the year. The church does not have room inside for the stall so, if the weather is fine, Dianne and Marise set up trestles and unpack all the piety goods. Her knowledge of the medals, holy pictures and statues is remarkable, particularly given she did not grow up with the stories of Catholic saints.

Conference members see Dianne as the face of Werribee Conference. She is a dedicated servant of her community and parish, particularly doing this in the name of the Society. The people she supports see her genuine desire to help them and love her for it.

Dianne is at a stage in her life now where she recognises she must pull back on the level of commitment. It is up to others to take over and she feels comfortable to ask for people's help in this.

In 2018, Dianne took the final step in her faith journey and was confirmed a Catholic. As Bernard comments:

While I was the practising Catholic, Dianne really taught me what it is to be Christian.

Record of service

2009–2018 Vice President

2009–2018 President

2009–2018 Treasurer

1999– Werribee Conference member





LOUISA SELVADURAI

A PASSION FOR SERVING CHILDREN

At different stages in our lives, all of us, and especially children, need an angel by our side. While Louisa Selvadurai, this year's nominated Rising Vincentian, is too modest to describe herself as an angel, she understands that the children she encounters through her Young Vinnies work are often needing such a presence in their lives.

We don't always need to know why children are selected for the kids' camps. We just need to provide a positive experience and positive role models. Whatever we can do, even if it's stressful or difficult, we will be available to the child, stay with them, talk to them, try to understand what is happening for them and how we can make their time enjoyable and fun.

In 2013, Louisa became involved in the Greater Dandenong Young Vinnies through her parish, seeing it as a natural extension of her strong Catholic faith.

It made sense that to live out Christ's message, we must be there for those who need our help and see the face of Jesus in these people. In this way we truly serve God. This is at the centre of what Vincentians do.

Since then, she has immersed herself in supporting children in many ways, while also participating in her local soup van and remaining active in her parish with programs like the Winter Appeal. She believes the alignment with faith and the diverse range of opportunities to help that the Society offers are key attractions to members and volunteers. Her endorsement, however, goes further. She believes being a Vincentian has taught her how to live her life responsibly and fully by contributing to the greater

common good. It has taught her that we are all, in her words, 'co-members of our communities'. We can and must contribute to the whole, not just to our own little patch.

Louisa is a very capable person with a quiet confidence who is willing to be active on the ground as well as taking on leadership roles. Since 2015, she has been treasurer of her conference, the youth representative on the Southern Central Council, and a representative of her region on the State Youth team.

Louisa's telling convinces one of the joyous and creative nature of the children's camps and Regional Roadshows. Children between six and twelve years of age participate in fun, engaging activities like The Amazing Race around the City.

The children are energetic and the days are hectic. The children have a great time, unaware of the skills they are learning: how to be leaders, problem-solve, gain independence, make new friends; understand the dynamics of teams and respect each other, while having fun.

The youth leaders and volunteers start each day with a prayer, pausing to focus on the purpose of what they are doing. Louisa welcomes these opportunities for prayer and reflection; this is an integral part of being a Vincentian.

Like for the many friends she has made through this involvement, the initial impetus to join the Young Vinnies was wanting a new experience, but she remains because of the strong sense of purpose and community. Both reasons have drawn her

closer to the Society. She cannot imagine her life without it now.

Louisa sees that working as part of a group is key to the special essence of Vincentian work.

Blessed Frederic Ozanam achieved so much because he gathered a group of peers around him and a mentor. You can't change the world on your own, but coming together and sharing ideas in a supportive environment, anything is possible. We have a very skilled, creative Youth Team that supports each other. We are blessed to have a Baillie, an older, wiser and very experienced Vincentian, who is our mentor, and Fr Andy Hamilton as our spiritual adviser.

Louisa explains how the children's activities link with a much bigger story:

Imagine, Blessed Frederic Ozanam, a 20-year-old student, sparking the idea for the organisation which now has such a wide, international reach! This volunteering has allowed me to become part of a bigger mission, involved in an amazing organisation and its history. Look what he achieved. A success story with so much impact. It teaches us our imagination is the only limit.

In another echo of Ozanam, Louisa describes the nature of the work she and her fellow Young Vincentians do on the kids camps and outings as a work of love. The Kids' Camp volunteers' T-shirts are emblazoned with the Ozanam quote: "Yours must be a work of kindness, of love". It is a welcome and constant reminder of the nature of what is unfolding: the Young Vinnies are serving the children and focused on making it a positive experience, especially when the children may be confronting challenging circumstances in their lives.

Love has many forms and, for Louisa, it is never giving up on a child. Judgement is suspended, even if the child's behaviour is challenging. She focuses on being available to the child in whatever way is helpful. This may mean letting go of her own expectations and not being beholden to

a rigid timeline. A work of love requires time, selflessness and flexibility. Louisa hopes the kids camp experience provides the children with great memories and a pool of experiences they can draw on throughout their lives.

Louisa was touched to read in *The Record* about a girl she remembered from a children's activity day later volunteering in the Dandenong Tutoring Program. Perhaps this is the ripple effect that comes about, even unconsciously from the early experiences of feeling cared for, acknowledged, cherished even. There is a saying that we all remember how we are made to feel, and this is something that endures through a lifetime.

Louisa acknowledges the support given to members and volunteers. She has participated in numerous training sessions and programs that have put her in contact with Vincentians across Australia. She sees this as a strong indication that the Society values its members and volunteers.

The Society also offers members and other volunteers flexibility: people can be involved as little or much as they choose. There is something for everyone and every contribution makes a difference.

There is another echo of the Society's early days in Paris in this story. Louisa is a highly intelligent young woman undertaking a doctorate in neuropsychology. The sky is the limit in terms of life opportunities for her, but like a young Frederic, similarly blessed with significant academic ability, living out her deep faith in practical and effective ways is essential to her.

Louisa's career requires her to better understand the change in brain behaviour through illness or accidents. The parallel with her Young Vinnies work is striking. Both roles require assessment of a person's current situation, how this affects them, how to help them overcome challenges, working one on one. The important skills of listening, understanding, empathising: both roles serve the person and aim to help them thrive and live life as

fully as possible.

This approach is further evidence of a desire to truly understand a person's predicament, reminding us of Blessed Frederic Ozanam's message for members to understand the individual nature of a person's poverty: an authentic connection is only possible through understanding.

"You must not be content with tiding the poor over the poverty crisis; you must study their condition and the injustices which brought about such poverty, with the aim of a long-term improvement." (Frederic Ozanam)

The combination of Louisa's personal traits and her academic training enhance her capacity to build a person's sense of themselves and for them to thrive.

It calls to mind the following bible verse:

"I have come that they might have life and have it more abundantly," John 10:10

Louisa is humbled by the longevity of dedication she sees in older conference members.

Last year I received my five-year badge. Someone else was receiving their 55-year badge. I'm constantly inspired by other Vincentians I meet, the variety of works on offer. It shows that the values and mission of a Vincentian can carry on throughout one's life. I'd love to stay involved.

The Society knows its membership is ageing. When you meet Louisa Selvadurai, a rising Vincentian, these worries subside. The organisation is in very good hands.

Record of service

2017–State Youth Team

2017–Kids Camps Special Work Conference

2017–Roadshow Special Work Conference

2013–Treasurer, Greater Dandenong Young Vinnies

WAL STEVENS

LOVING SERVICE AT THE HEART OF CONFERENCE WORK



Every morning during his prayers, Wal Stevens dedicates himself to the Sacred Heart of Jesus, asking for help to be the best he can be that day in whatever good works he is able to do. Over 30 years with Blackburn Conference, there has rarely been a day that Wal has not done something relating to conference work. Its members say he is always the first to put his hand up.

There are many hallmarks to what makes a true Vincentian. Non judgement is one of these which conference members strive to uphold when assisting people. Most of us concede that it is harder than we think. Meeting Wal is to encounter a Vincentian who lives this out. He, quite simply, does not judge. His detail of every home visit and how people are doing it tough is devoid of even a shadow of judgement. He sees the face of Jesus in every person he serves.

Conference president Grace Mizzi describes Wal's special way with people.

His softly spoken voice and caring nature help people to relax. He treats everyone the same, regardless of challenges such as addictions and demands they make. He was the person who drew me into the conference 15 years ago. What you see is what you get. A genuine Vincentian.

Wal is quick to acknowledge the contribution of others. He speaks of his deep affection for fellow conference members, the team work, mutual support and beauty of pausing together for prayerful reflection. Vincentians like Wal are comfortable expressing the love they feel for their conference brothers and sisters. Love is at the centre of all they do and what motivates them to action.

Grace explains further what Wal contributes:

His gentle manner diffuses heated situations. The members always look to him for guidance. One of his truly extraordinary gifts is that he combines deep compassion with high-level organisation. Both are essential. As we know too well, best laid plans never reach fruition if someone doesn't make them happen. Wal makes things happen.

Wal was an engineer before he retired and brings his talent for project planning and attention to detail to the conference.

A favourite project for Wal is the children's activities; camps and kids' days out. For the past 15 years, Wal has visited families and helped identify the children who would benefit from a camp. He ensures all necessary paperwork is done and organises transport. It is a joy for him to see the enjoyment the children gain from these events.

When he speaks of those he meets through the bread run and home visitation, his authentic modelling of the Vincentian way is evident. Wal is humility personified and his delivery is understated. In many ways, his affection for the bread run is a demonstration of this.

In talking about the conference, I always go back to the bread. It seems very humble, but people look forward to it, even though there mightn't appear to be much value in it. The kids are excited, calling out, 'Here's the bread man!' And the bread allows us to have a conversation with someone who may not have talked to another soul all day. If we're late, they notice. It's only bread, but it's also company.

It is not surprising that Wal relates to the poignant simplicity of Matthew 25:35–40:

"For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me."

According to his conference, Wal greets every person with respect, compassion, commitment and generosity. When he speaks of those he meets through the bread run and home visitation, his adherence to the Vincentian way is evident.

It is essential to get to know people and feel what they're facing and living every day. It might be unpaid bills or something coming up. Almost nothing is beyond our ability to help.

Wal appreciates the unique quality of the home visit.

It is a place of trust when you are invited into someone's home and the best place to assess how we can help a person. We must let them tell their story their way and guard against being too quick to come in on it and never criticise.

Integrity is important, too. His conference reflects honestly on what they could have done better. It is in the midst of these discussions that the best conference work develops. While some people visited only need one-off or occasional assistance, others have ongoing relationships with Blackburn Conference. As Wal explains with a smile:

In some homes, we even witness the furniture getting tired, such is the longevity of some of our relationships.

Grace Mizzi affirms Wal's humility and true demonstration of the Vincentian way. She also speaks highly of his flair for collaboration and networking. This has enabled him to marshal significant resources for the benefit of people supported by the conference.

Wal's conference has forged great relationships with

organisations such as Eastern Emergency Relief, which provides furniture for people going without. The conference visits their warehouse, selects whatever is needed and only pays a delivery fee to the carrier. This service is always well received by people.

Wal recognises that the people they see often lack basic requirements and that what little they have succumbs to wear and tear. The conference assists people in trauma, such as women and children escaping family violence. The conference also teamed up with sister conference, Blackburn South, to respond to the 2009 Black Saturday bushfires, focusing its efforts on Alexandra.

While it was heartbreaking to see the devastation people lived through, the Society's Bushfire Appeal raised nearly \$4 million which greatly helped in rebuilding, offering accommodation and providing furniture, and white goods.

Wal places great importance on affordable and secure housing. His conference visits Ozanam House, helping serve meals and chatting to the people there who have no permanent home to call their own. It is always easier to assist people post-trauma who have mercifully landed a house through the government or community.

As Grace recalls:

If somebody needs something, Wal goes out of his way to get it. I remember a first visit to a woman with four children who had escaped family violence. She had a brand new government unit but there was not a stick of furniture in it. Wal got going and within 24 hours, the family had beds and bedding. Within the week, they had all their white goods, furniture, desks for the children – Wal thinks of everything.

He believes the conference generally gives the right amount of assistance and that erring on the side of generosity is always better than its alternative.

Wal cannot imagine a life without conference work.

It is bound up in who he is.

Wal's conference remains in awe of him; the time he makes for people, his generosity of spirit, his gentleness which is strength in disguise. Wal's

authentic faith in action is exemplary – modelling Frederic Ozanam's love of Jesus is at the heart of all he does.

Record of service

2007–2014	Vice President, Ringwood Regional Council
2003–2013	President
1989–	Blackburn Conference member

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Web: www.vinnies.org.au

General enquiries: (03) 9895 5800

