

A CALL TO SERVE

VINCENTIAN
STORIES

2015
CHAPTER



St Vincent de Paul Society
VICTORIA

good works

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

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Michael Liddy

State President's Message

Dear members, volunteers and staff,

On 5th March 1854, under the servant leadership of Father Gerald Ward, the St Vincent de Paul Society opened its heart and doors to the people of Melbourne and Australia by establishing its first Australian Conference at St Francis Church, Lonsdale Street, Melbourne.

Our first Conference was established six months after the passing of the Society's founder, Blessed Frederic Ozanam in France. Guided and inspired by Frederic Ozanam's vision, Fr Gerald and his companions established the first Conference in response to the sufferings and cries of the poor and disadvantaged and in doing so, provided practical assistance to alleviate immediate needs, offered friendship during difficult times and sought to redress the inequalities suffered by people in need by advocating publicly for a more just and fair society.

Since 1854 the Society and the people we serve have been blessed by the countless number of Vincentian men and women who have given compassionate service and a dedication to make the world a better place for all, including the marginalised.

This is the third year in which the Society's Victorian State Council has sought to honour members for their dedication to service, and for their compassion, courage and selflessness. We also recognise them for being modern day examples of servant leadership within their respective communities and in our Society more broadly. The richness of each of these lives cannot be overstated.

I congratulate each of the honoured members for their service, as well as their families for their part in supporting the work of the Society to help those in need.

I wish to express the Society's sincere appreciation to Anne Tuohey for her thorough researching of each story, and for telling each story in a way that enlightens us when we read them.

In sharing these stories with fellow member, volunteers and staff, I believe that each story will add a further thread to the very colourful tapestry that is the story of the St Vincent de Paul Society in Victoria.

Michael Liddy
State President
St Vincent de Paul Society Victoria



Mario Croatto

A faith-based spirit of generosity

Mario Croatto is proof that Vincentians come in all shapes and sizes. Described by many as a gentle giant, he has combined a lifelong commitment as a doctor with his conference work in the country town of Leongatha. His story echoes that of many migrant families who come to Australia, work hard and make considerable contributions to their adopted country. A deep faith and a good listening ear have enabled Mario to respond practically, yet mostly from a Spiritual motivation, in any way he can to alleviate the plight of the poor and disadvantaged.

Early life

In 1927 Mario's father came from the Friuli region of north-eastern Italy to Australia, in pursuit of a better life. His wife and first child Rina joined him in 1929, with further additions to the family – Mario, Bruno, Amelia and Rina – arriving over the next five years. Mario grew up with the Friulano language, quite different from mainstream Italian.

His parents, Giovanni (Jack) and Albina, found work on a farm at Balliang near Bacchus Marsh. Through hard work, they were soon in a position to buy a dairy farm from their boss, at Thorpdale near Trafalgar. These were the Depression years and, as the butter price fell from 1 shilling and sixpence to sixpence, there was no alternative but to give the farm back to the previous owner and return to working for him.

His father would soon suffer a terrible farming accident, breaking his neck and enduring a host of other injuries. Against all odds, he managed to survive. He was unable to work for a year, with the family receiving two pounds a week from insurance. At this time, the family moved into a boarding house in Melbourne.

Mario's grandfather and uncle had leased a farm at Koonwarra. Neighbours needed help with some hand milking and in return would provide a house, chooks and

mutton. The family moved in and, shortly afterwards, Mario's grandfather was unable to keep working his place. Mario's parents took over the lease, started working the farm and made a success of it. The family eventually moved there.

Mario remembers that his family never asked for help. Over many years of experience, he believes migrants are the ones least likely to seek assistance unless there has been a significant tragedy. Overall, they are very resilient and manage to live on very little. Their ability to cope is significant, though he notes that the second generation Aussie migrants, picking up on the locals' easy-going ways, are sometimes less able to stand on their own two feet.

Education

Mario attended St Laurence O'Toole Catholic primary school in Leongatha, riding the eight kilometres there every day on a horse. The school was run by the Josephite nuns whom he remembers with affection.

"I seemed like the biggest kid in the world but my mother thought I was too young to go to school so I didn't get there until I was almost 7. I towered over the others!"

Mario reflects that he was a late maturer but he loved school. As his fifteenth birthday approached, his parents suggested he attend boarding school in Sale.

“I didn’t want to go. I wanted to be a farmer but Mum said no and nagged me not to waste the chance to study by staying on the farm. So in June 1945, I went reluctantly to St Pat’s College Sale. I was taller, heavier than everyone but still remember bawling like a baby.”

The homesickness only lasted a day, with Mario loving his six years there. Boarding school was like one big family.

He remembers several of the Marist brothers with affection, especially his favourite, Br Roger, who was a great bloke. He was stern and strict but had a great way with the boys. Mario summarises Br Roger’s greatest achievement as growing boys into men. Mario made lasting friendships and still attends regular reunions twice a year.

Because of his size, Mario was introduced to weights, the discus, hammer and shot put. He held the school record for shot put for thirty years.

He credits St Pat’s with providing a foundational understanding of social justice. His generation was thoroughly immersed in *Rerum Novarum*, cementing Catholic Social Teaching principles that have guided him throughout his life.

While the school did not have a Society of St Vincent de Paul Conference, Mario was a member of the Sodality of Our lady.

By intermediate – year 10 in today’s language – and being strong in the Sciences, Mario had made up his mind to become a doctor. On gaining entry into Medicine, Mario moved into Newman College and enjoyed campus life very much. Too much in fact, failing first year.

His generation was thoroughly immersed in *Rerum Novarum*, cementing Catholic Social Teaching principles that have guided him throughout his life.

“I wanted to come home but Mum was always the force encouraging education as the best path. I repeated and passed well but that year the faculty brought in a reduced quota for Medicine which I didn’t meet so I transferred to Dentistry. Then the following year, I re-applied and re-entered medicine”.

In the meantime, he had joined the Melbourne University Athletics Club and had come to the attention of the renowned Olympics athletics coach, Franz Stampfl, who was possibly most acclaimed for coaching English Olympian Roger Bannister to break the four-minute mile. Franz was a Dunera boy and took Mario under his wing, convinced he was an Olympics possibility in hammer throwing.

Mario did have potential and held the Victorian record for some time. At the Australian Championships, Mario achieved the best throw on the day, then nerves set in and he came fourth.

Franz was an inspirational coach but Mario had to decide which career he would pursue in earnest, realising he couldn’t do justice to both.

“I think I broke Franz’s heart as he got me from nothing to the point of being a national champion and then I pulled the plug. He was very upset but my family were poor and I needed to establish a proper career.”



Mario and Leonie’s wedding day.

Meeting Leonie

Mario undertook studentship training at St Vincent’s hospital. In 1955, he was celebrating completion of fourth year. He went with a friend to St Vincent’s Hospital to attend a dance and met Leonie, a resident nurse. She recognised Mario, who had attended school with her brothers. Three days later, Mario invited her to the Med Medleys, a significant dance on the social calendar, and the rest, as they say, is history. A smiling Mario declares he hasn’t let her out of his sight ever since. He likes telling the family that he met their mother in a dingy Fitzroy back street, opposite a brothel.

On completing his degree, Mario went to Mooroopna Base Hospital to complete initial training. This hospital wasn’t his choice by any measure but Mario reflects that the Holy Spirit must have had a hand in sending him there.

“It was the best training I could have received. Over fourteen months there, the doctors taught me everything they could, watched me until they felt I could handle a procedure on my own. It was the perfect way to build confidence.”

In 1960, during this time at Mooroopna, he and Leonie married. A doctor friend at Shepparton invited Mario to join him in practice in Shepparton when he had finished his residency.

“However old Doc Donoghue, my family’s doctor, kept writing to

me, telling me he was getting older, was not well and needed a younger pair of hands. Eventually I weakened and said I'd give him six months."

Mario and Leonie returned to Leongatha. Under Dr Donoghue's tutelage, Mario received further valuable training to equip him for general practice and to meet the broad range of medical needs of a country town.



Mario and family

As a country G.P. Mario learned to do almost any medical procedure within reason: paediatrics, emergency surgery, appendices, tonsils, caesarians and dealing with fractures.

He combined his general practice work with thirty-four years of service at Leongatha hospital.

Mario was surprised how quickly the practice

grew. He still thought of himself as the local immigrant son who was a bit rough around the edges, and yet the patients came. Women he had known when growing up in the town started coming to him when they were expecting babies and to look after their sick families. Old Doc D. still worked a little but Mario picked up the lion's share of the work, putting in long hours.

After a few months, Mario realised he needed a break and arranged to have Wednesday afternoons off. Michael Bourke, a nephew by marriage of Dr D., had come up and done a locum and liked it there. He bought Dr D's share. Dr Bourke and Mario became great mates.

Mario and Leonie stayed in Leongatha, raising their six children there: Louise, Julia, Gemma, Mary Anne, John and Paul. They are now grandparents to four grandchildren. They believe it is still a good place to raise a family and is a very pleasant town to live in. It has never suffered the natural disasters such as drought and fires to the extent of other country areas and is a relatively comfortably well-off place with the dairy industry still operating.

"This mountain of clothing turned up. Miss Nora Hogan lived on her own and offered a room in her home. We quickly filled it up."

Joining the Society

In 1965, at Sunday mass, the parish priest announced that a Vincentian from a neighbouring parish was going to give a talk in the hall about the Society of St Vincent de Paul. Mario thought this was a worthy cause to take on. He and about ten men attended. The visitor called for the election of office bearers with those in attendance reticent about taking on the presidency. Mario agreed to nominate, becoming the inaugural president. His friend Michael Bourke became the secretary. St Laurence O'Toole Conference had begun.

The conference met in the parish hall and started finding people in need with the guidance of the parish priest. One of the first things it did was to organise a collection of clothing from parents of the school.

"This mountain of clothing turned up. Miss Nora Hogan lived on her own and offered a room in her home. We quickly filled it up."

At the beginning, clothing was all the conference had to offer. After a while, they started collecting food. They relied on donations, as there was no money allocated to their efforts. In the early days, it was mainly word of mouth bringing people in need to the conference.

The conference started to respond to broader needs, partly revealed through instituting home visitation and also by word of mouth that the conference was there to help. There were events such as house fires, with those affected needing furniture. The conference was taking bigger steps to meet these needs, evolving slowly into a bigger operation.

Opening a Centre

In 1972, Mary and Graham Farrell came to live in Leongatha and became very active in the conference. They had a bungalow behind their home and stored all the clothes there after Miss Hogan's could no longer accommodate the supply. The bungalow was in effect the first unofficial Centre for Leongatha.

The conference also started collecting tinned foods and distributed small hampers. Again, after about twelve months, they needed more space to store everything.

The former Leongatha Centre





Leongatha Centre

The Centre initially averaged weekly takings of \$5,000 and now the Centre takes \$30,000 per month on average, which exceeds the current target.

Mario was President of the Centre at this time and, in the spirit of Martin Luther King, he often spoke of “having a dream”. He knew the conference needed a proper centre, one with capacity and one which offered some comforts for the volunteers. It would be a while though before his pleas would be answered.

A conference member offered a mobile office as big as an average bedroom. The parish priest gave permission to put it behind the church.

“It was choc-a-bloc with clothes and food. We asked Father if we could use the space under the Church hall stage and he agreed. We stored the furniture and clothes there. We served people from there for a year or so until we were able to buy the site in Michael Place. This had been owned by a petroleum company and was quite handy, with a flat area, and a loading ramp, which helped with furniture collections. It was in essence, a big, tin shed.”

It was here that the Centre first operated from a real shopfront where furniture and clothing could be displayed properly. But, before long, they were running out of room again. The conference bought the block of land in Peart Street, which is where the Centre is today.

“John Smith from the Bendigo Conference, who was in charge of Centres, was a great help. After often complaining to him about our need for a purpose-built place, on behalf of State Council, he gave us the go ahead.”

While permits and plans were organised, the conference rented a couple of adjacent shops on the other side of the railway line.

The new building was paid for in three-and-a-half years and was a very good investment.

The Centre initially averaged weekly takings of \$5,000 and now the Centre takes \$30,000 per month on average, which exceeds the current target.

As a comparison, Leongatha makes more money per head of population than Bendigo, a town ten times bigger than Leongatha and one of the Society’s biggest earners. Leongatha continues to be one of the most profitable Centres in the State.

Mario is insistent that credit for any of the Centre’s success must go to Mary Farrell, who became the Centre’s long-standing volunteer manager. She has only recently retired. She was the one who best understood the space and layout requirements.

“It was always Mary who made most things happen. She was a great worker.”

It is also admired by people involved in retail, who appreciate quality visual merchandising. The team work very hard at presenting items in a visually pleasing way and customers often comment that the store does not have the tell-tale smell usually associated with Op Shops. This is due to the effort of Centre volunteers who make sure everything is in very good condition and washed and ironed before being displayed. They think nothing of coming back after hours if required. The store has been open Saturdays, as well, for several years.

The Centre has an office and a meeting room and is a good base for seeing people and arranging home visits. Mario would like the meeting room available on evenings and perhaps on weekends as well. He has noticed over the years that the emphasis on retail has caused the Centre to operate a little more separately than it used to do in relation to the other work of the conference. He thinks this is a pity. Retail should not be seen as the main game of the Society.

Mario sees home visitations as one of the pillars of conference work and the way to really understand what is going on in a person’s life. Mario remembers accompanying Leonie on a visit one day when her regular partner couldn’t make it.

They visited a single mother with three children. She was worried about finances and raising her children alone. She seemed at her wit’s end and very agitated. She was trying to manage the mortgage on her own.

“I was very suspicious when I saw her this time because I remembered her from the past and she had deteriorated greatly in the space of a relatively short period. I realised her emaciated form and agitation were probably due to thyrotoxicosis, a condition that is easy for a doctor to diagnose and treat. I took her pulse and told her to see a doctor, which she did. She is much

better now, a changed woman really. I think the Holy Spirit sent me along that day.”

Mario enjoyed his active conference involvement as a chance to do something completely different from his day job. On his days off, he was happy to be delivery boy for the conference. He was strong and fit and would deliver big furniture.

“One time, I delivered a large wardrobe to a woman newly arrived in town. Next day, she brought her sick child for an appointment at my surgery. She did a double take when she entered my room. She couldn’t believe a doctor had delivered her wardrobe!”

The Conference lives on

Mario continues to attend conference meetings, although his health prevents him from undertaking other activities such as home visits. He still feels part of the show and retains a great interest in what is going on. He never stood for office at the Regional Council level due to work commitments and has been very happy to immerse himself in conference life in Leongatha.

In the beginning – and this continued for many years – the conference had a consistent staple of six or seven members. About fifteen years ago, a meeting was organised in the parish where conference members spoke, aimed at attracting more members. This boosted numbers with about a dozen new recruits joining. This has strengthened capacity considerably.

Mario values the Spiritual aspect of the conference meetings. Spending time discussing the Gospel and saying prayers together helps remind members of why they become involved. The conference used to allocate more time to this part of the meeting, which he liked, but he realises it wasn’t for everyone. In fact, one woman stopped attending the meetings as she said it was too much religion for her. The conference tends now to follow a standard format.

Mario believes that there is something wonderful about coming together as a body in prayer.

“This helps us to hopefully see Jesus in the face of the people the conference supports. The conference gets on with things – it isn’t sitting around praying all day but it has to be recognised that the practicality is Spirit-driven.”

Mario concedes that people in small towns can’t get away with much; someone always knows what someone else is doing. The conference discusses clients at the meetings and isn’t afraid to broach sensitive issues.

One such issue is the pokies, which have hit the town hard. The conference knows that many people get into trouble – including people who have never been in trouble before

– because they play the pokies. It is such a highly addictive gambling product.

“People don’t readily admit to a gambling problem but we will bring the topic up if we think it’s relevant and have perhaps seen this person at a pokies venue. There are many specialised services now available where we can refer the person for help.”

The same sensitivity surrounds family violence, which Mario believes has increased and is more visible.

“It is one of the main causes of poverty. When a woman has to run away out of fear, leave the home, there is little to sustain her and her kids.”

Mario believes his training as a doctor has enabled him to know when to suggest professional help and when just to listen. This has been developed over years listening to patients. He has always been known as the doctor who didn’t keep a tight schedule for appointments; they always ran over time. It has helped him develop a keen ear for what is needed in different cases.

“My skill was the fact I could listen. People need to be heard. People used to say I was the nerve centre of the town.”

Sometimes a person needs comfort and reassurance, help with food and bills; sometimes this is not enough. That’s when the conference can refer them for professional help and there are many good, local services, run by agencies such as Anglicare and the Salvation Army.

Mario’s own family background provides a point of reference as he reflects on what he sees as current pressing issues the conference is trying to address.

“People on Newstart are greatly disadvantaged trying to run a home. I can’t see how governments put these restrictions on the people who are worst hit.”

Nonetheless, he still feels that some poor people believe they should live like the wealthy and want all the trappings. A breakdown in societal values, which has become too consumer-driven, has contributed to people forgetting some basic lessons such as living within one’s means.

The conference juggles the balancing act of providing a handout while trying to provide a hand up, as Frederic Ozanam would have wanted.

“We have to accept some people struggle to help themselves. They keep coming for help in what becomes a chronic pattern. Addictions don’t help; they are very hard to break. Take smoking, which is very expensive. But sometimes we see people who are flat broke, losing their accommodation, and mismanagement plays a big part, not poverty per se. When the State Trustee becomes involved in managing the person’s affairs, we often see a turnaround.”

Mario believes that there is something wonderful about coming together as a body in prayer.

Mario knows that the efforts of the conference have changed people's lives even though it is often not easy. Members have been able to steer people in the right direction.

"You try to love them as Jesus would have done. You don't always succeed but you try."

And this again is where, for Mario, the power of prayer and reflection comes in. It sometimes takes prayer to allow members to do their job properly and in a manner that respects the foundational example set by Ozanam.

"Give people what they ask for, even more. Don't stint because you privately think their actions have contributed to their problems."

He tells the story about Leonie's involvement with one man who was very frustrating to deal with. This man was constantly at the Centre seeking assistance. He believed his life could only take a turn for the better if he could go to Adelaide, although he could not demonstrate why this was.

Leonie was constantly frustrated believing he would not change. But his pleas to go interstate continued and eventually the conference paid his ticket.

He was back at the Centre not long after, wanting some further help. Leonie was very angry and told him to wait. She asked another volunteer to see him. She felt ashamed afterwards but he had pressed all her buttons.

Recently, Leonie and Mario were participating in their weekly Biblical group, held every Monday at the parish.

"The man who was to have gone to Adelaide turned up looking for the priest on his day off. Leonie invited him to join the gathering, have a coffee and chat which he thoroughly enjoyed. You can't help but be judgmental at times but you must hide this from the person and work on being less judgmental. There is a spiritual imperative in all we do in the name of the Society but also hopefully in how we live generally."

Mario sees this spiritual calling manifesting itself in many ways of acting, particularly the importance of being generous.

"Give people what they ask for, even more. Don't stint because you privately think their actions have contributed to their problems. The feeling that comes upon you is often judgmental but you mustn't give into this. It can be hard at times."

Mario is pleased to have the women involved as members. Many were always behind the scenes contributing.

"Women have a way with families and are so good at connecting; there is no one better than a woman for reaching out to a family in a difficult time."

Mario's broader contributions

He has received many awards and acknowledgement in recognition of his service to the area, but none were mentioned by Mario himself. His conference brothers and sisters however were keen to emphasise the array of his involvement. Besides awards in recognition of his 40 years service to rural medicine from the Rural Doctors Association; Honorary membership of the Australian Medical Association for service in excess of 50 years and meritorious service to the Italian Community, Mario is also a member of the Knights of the Southern Cross.

As a now retired doctor and respected member of the Leongatha community, Mario continues to take an active interest in current affairs and local issues. As the son of parents who came to Australia in search of a better life, he has great empathy for the plight of refugees. He has taken the opportunity in public forums, to plead a case for greater acceptance of refugees and more compassion towards asylum seekers.

It was perhaps less well known until the local paper published an account of an Italian scientist tracking down her grandfather who spent time in Leongatha as a prisoner of war, of the Croatto family's support of this man through hard times. Mario's mother kept in contact with the man after he returned to Italy and his granddaughter was determined to find this family that had meant so much to her grandfather. There is something in this story that points to the early, strong influence of family values that recurs in many stories of Vincentians.

Lengatha community involvement in the Society

Mario sees the good at the core of many people who want to make a contribution to society in some way. For several years, potatoes were grown for the Society by a few local parishioners. On some occasions, conference members bagged them and had them delivered to Ozanam House. There have also been tons of potatoes donated to the Society by local potato farmers who in some cases have no connection to the parish.

Conclusion

Looking back, Mario sees the part played by the Society in Leongatha and district as part of the Church's Mission to spread the Gospel. He feels grateful to have had the chance to share in this Mission. As his story reveals, he has brought some additional qualities along with the shared qualities all Vincentians try to emulate in honouring Blessed Frederic Ozanam; compassion, love, acceptance of the other and a deep faith-based generosity of spirit.

Foundation Member and Chairman, Leongatha Conference
Conference President.



Elsie Johnson

Problems are made to be solved

After more than forty years' service to the Society of St Vincent de Paul, Elsie Johnson still pauses regularly to reflect on the teachings of St Vincent de Paul and Blessed Frederic Ozanam. In particular, there are two quotes, St Vincent de Paul's plea to his followers "To assist the poor in every way both by ourselves and with the help of others...to preach the Gospel by word and by work." The second, Ozanam's "Yours must be the work of love, kindness. You must give of your time, your talents, yourselves", both speak to Elsie in many ways.

Elsie grew up in a family that believed you 'catch' rather than being taught a calling and you respond according to your own personal experiences. Elsie remains intrigued by the question of why some individuals respond favourably to the call and others do not. Other than speculate, the best we may do is to allow the individual to tell his or her own story. This is Elsie's story.

Early family history

Elsie's father's ancestors came from Danish Lutheran stock. In the mid 1800s, his grandfather migrated to Australia and married a Catholic Irish servant girl in St Francis Church Melbourne. They settled in Footscray. They dealt with the contentious mixed marriage problem by raising some of the children as Catholics and the rest as non-denominational Protestants.

Elsie's mother, Annie Winifred (Win) Dean was the ninth of eleven children of a Protestant family. The most noteworthy relative was her Uncle John, renowned as "Hellfire Jack" the Bush preacher who while still in his twenties became head of the Salvation Army in Australia before moving back to the United Kingdom to lead the Army there and later to New York to lead the army worldwide. His story is told in Manning Clark's A History of Australia.

When Win and Fred met, they both had their struggles. Win was orphaned before her 10th birthday. Fred's father had joined the newly formed Australian Air Army leaving Fred to support his mother as best he could. This necessitated setting aside his gift as a violinist.

The call to Catholicism

In the 1920s, over 95% of Australians professed allegiance to some form of Christianity and for the most part, respected parental and Church authority. It was unthinkable that Fred and Win should marry in a civil ceremony.

Fred's attachment to Catholicism was at best lukewarm. Although not as fervently as in the previous generation, Win was nevertheless a committed Protestant and as such, not entirely immune from the widespread suspicion that Roman Catholicism and its clergy were not to be trusted.

Win and Fred elected to marry without either their parents' consent five days after Win's 21st birthday – the then age of consent.

Afterwards, Win had a change of heart and persuaded Fred to take her to an interview with his parish priest, Fr James O'Collins. The upshot was surprising.

Fr O'Collins instructed both parties in the Catholic faith, regularizing their marriage in the eyes of the Church and baptising and confirming Win. From this time, as Bishop of Ballarat, he became Win's first port of call when she encountered some problem of a spiritual nature in her life as a wife and mother.

Initially Fred and Win's life as a married couple was joyous. They bought a home in Footscray close to both their parents. Fred obtained an apparently secure job in the Victorian railways and they both dreamed of Fred becoming a professional classical violinist. They welcomed two healthy sons into the world and looked forward to a bright future. It was the late 1920s and on the economic front, the situation was soon to turn bleak.

Depression years

During the Depression years, Fred was among the one third of Australian workers to lose their jobs and with it the family home.

By 1937, six children had arrived over a 10 year period. The family lived in a tiny cottage with a stable behind which housed an old nag Dolly and a dray. Fred and Dolly went six days per week to load up with fresh fruit and vegetables at Victoria Market, selling the produce door to door to households on his way home. Sunday was reserved for Mass and visiting relatives. They were happy days with the children largely unconcerned about the worries of the adult world.

Elsie has no recollection of any SVDP visitation but the family was almost certainly beneficiaries of SVDP support. Many years later when she drove her parents around Victoria on holiday trips, her father insisted that they call into every Catholic Church along the way to drop a few silver coins into the SVDP poor box and say three Hail Marys for the Society's intentions.

In 1939, disaster struck again with Germany precipitating the outbreak of World War 2 in Europe and the Middle East. Win was unhappy that Fred volunteered to serve in the second AIF, she could not forget the harm done to her family during World War One. His regiment was about to sail when he contracted an eye disease which destroyed much of his sight and ended forever his dream of a musical career.

A section of the Australian community feared war in the Middle East would open the door for Japan to destroy the British Naval Base at Singapore and convert Australia into a supply base for use by its troops on an advance through the Pacific and Asia. It then needed only for the U.S Naval Base at Pearl Harbour to fall for Japan to be well placed to become the most powerful nation in the Southern Hemisphere.

Elsie's parents decided to move their family further out of Melbourne where they would be out of the path of any advance into Australia by the Japanese. They relocated the family to Ferntree Gully.

Moving to Ferntree Gully

Elsie and her youngest brother Philip spent the winter of 1940 battling painfully exhausting whooping cough. They were in bed when a careless workman set their home on fire when stripping old paint from its weather boards. The children were farmed out to relatives while the parents sought accommodation elsewhere. Elsie was barely eight years old and trusted her parents implicitly. She found the experience more exhilarating than frightening.

Ferntree Gully was then a small town at the foothills of the Dandenongs. Its clean, fresh air soon cleared Elsie's lungs of infection. St John the Baptist parish and school was vastly different from St Augustine's Yarraville where Elsie had made her First Communion at the age of six and learnt the primary school catechism (and most other lessons) by rote in classes of up to 100 students. The classes were supervised by grossly overworked nuns. Elsie was escorted home from school by her elder brothers.



Her father insisted that they call into every Catholic Church along the way to drop a few silver coins into the SVDP poor box and say three Hail Marys for the Society's intentions.

*Elsie's First Communion,
St Augustine's Yarraville*

The family, other than her father, soon became actively involved in the life of a parish vastly different from anything they had known before. It stretched from Gembrook down through Mt Dandenong, Monbulk, Olinda and Belgrave to Ferntree Gully and from Ferntree Gully down through Boronia, Bayswater and Wantirna. It was without a SVDP conference but family history mitigated in favour of lives of service.

The older boys happily served as altar boys for Fr Flynn and the visiting priests who provided Sunday Mass and confession to persons in all parts of the vast parish. Elsie marvelled at her brothers' tales of hair raising experiences in Fr. Flynn's old T Model Ford as it bounced up and down over the rough bush tracks that then served as roads. She and her younger brothers helped their mother and other older parishioners in preparing and serving home-made morning teas in a big tent on festive occasions.

Meanwhile, Elsie's father was seldom home. The AIF required him to assist at P.O.W camps set up in North East Victoria to house Italian P.O.Ws captured in the Middle East campaign. He remained with the AIF until the early 1950s, assisting to convert Bonegilla Camp into a temporary home for displaced persons made stateless by the Holocaust and other political and religious strife. The stories Elsie heard from her father at that time has coloured her attitude to the refugee issue ever since.

Illness strikes

The war was over, the whole family would be home for Christmas and Elsie had won a Diocesan scholarship to cover the coming cost of her secondary education. 1945 promised to end well but it was not to be the good finish to the year the family had predicted.

Elsie collapsed on Christmas Eve and was admitted to the Royal Children's Hospital suffering from a severe attack of poliomyelitis, then commonly called infantile paralysis. The shock was worsened by the fact that she had supposedly been diagnosed with a milder attack in the 1938 epidemic which people thought would provide protection.

When after several months her condition remained much the same, the hospital informed her mother that she would most likely be bedridden for life, a prognosis the family rejected. A second opinion was sought. The upshot was that Elsie was discharged into the care of Dr Jean MacNamara, a world renowned expert in the disease and its treatment. This would prove to be a fortunate turn of events for Elsie.

Two and a half years after diagnosis, Elsie had regained the capacity to dress and otherwise attend to her personal needs with minimal help. With the aid of back and leg supports, she was able to be up and about for several hours every day. In mid-1948, Dr MacNamara agreed she would be well enough to return to school at the beginning of the year, insisting that it must be a boarding school to reduce time and effort wasted in commuting.

In July, Elsie and her mother set out on their quest, confident of soon finding a convent boarding school that would meet Elsie's requirements. By December they had visited countless schools in all parts of Victoria with no success. While the school administrators always appeared sympathetic and anxious to please, they always shied away from bending their rules and conventions in order to accommodate Elsie's needs.

Schools were closing for the Christmas holidays when they were directed to Mt Lilydale College, then a small boarding school run by the Sisters of Mercy. The approach to the main convent was up a steep, winding drive and footpaths with steps, stairs and no hand rails. When they finally reached the main convent building, Elsie's mother thought this was to be another school that would knock them back. Elsie remembers clearly their first encounter with Mother Superior.

"Mother Ursula met us and Mum apologised for wasting her

time as she felt there were insurmountable issues such as the steepness of the site, the stairs. Every difficulty my mother raised, Sr answered with a 'You leave that to me Mrs. Johnson.' She was the most independent nun you could ever meet. She was quite a wonder."

Elsie returned at the beginning of the school year and Sr Ursula had attended to every issue. A parishioner had made a special desk for Elsie and Sr had obtained an exemption for Elsie who had not completed earlier study prerequisites due to her confinement at home.

Elsie had a wonderful time at boarding school, completing years 11 and 12. She remembers in particular studying Mathew's and Mark's Gospels in detail. Many of the stories left an impression and for many years she could recite Mark's Gospel word for word.

Elsie today reflects on this call for generosity of heart and the ever present call to us to grow more aware of Jesus in our deeds and actions.

She reflects on Mathew's King of the Universe (25-31-46). It is partly a story of judgement, how we will all be judged by the way in which we live out our faith. Jesus is in effect telling us that our actions or lack of actions toward the hungry, the homeless, the sick, the imprisoned are felt by Him. Elsie today reflects on this call for generosity of heart and the ever present call to us to grow more aware of Jesus in our deeds and actions. It has guided her in all facets of her life and work.

She credits Sr Ursula and the wonderful Mercy ethos of being propelled to action on behalf of others, which made for such a life-enhancing experience for her.

"When you have a real battle on your hands, you need people who encourage you. I have always remembered the example of Sr Ursula and some of the nuns."

"I think we all get called to serve but some of us don't answer the call because it's made to seem too hard. Sr Ursula taught by example that anything is possible."

Higher education and career choices

Elsie's parents believed she was as deserving of a higher education as her brothers. She was also academically talented and with the encouragement and support of the nuns and school fellows, she was able to get the most out of her last two years of schooling. She won the Commonwealth Government Scholarship which covered the significant tertiary education costs she would face.

Mt Lilydale College had lacked the facilities needed for her to learn the school based mathematics and science that were

prerequisites to courses to which she had been drawn. Elsie opted to enrol in the faculty of Arts, concentrating on the study of history, literature and philosophy. This pursuit opened up the prospect of a career in the civil service and similar administrative services, teaching, librarianship or retail management.

Initially her preference was to pursue a librarianship. Elsie thought this would be most interesting, less energetic and therefore less exhausting. Mostly, the training was done early on Thursday evenings in the State Library. Elsie's brother Mick, closest to her in age, was also at the library at that time studying to complete a course relating to his aspiration to be involved in dairy farming. He and Elsie made a habit of meeting there and having a meal together where they would discuss all the problems of the world and plan their futures.

Tragically, on Mick's 20th birthday, he was critically injured in a car accident, in no way of his making. He never regained consciousness and died several days later.

This tragedy tested the faith of the family enormously. Elsie abandoned her librarian course and three months later, commenced temporary work as an English and Social Studies teacher at the Ferntree Gully Technical School.

A teaching career

Initially Elsie saw her job at the Ferntree Gully Tech as a "fill in" - something to keep her gainfully employed while she decided what she might do in the way of a permanent career choice. The experience however opened her eyes to the prospect of being a teacher and she discovered she had a talent engaging with teenage boys and their peers.

A challenge with the later effects of poliomyelitis was the need to rest more frequently and for longer periods. Elsie also knew she had to respect her limitations through related physical weaknesses but she knew the Education Department and civil service in general discriminated against people with disabilities. As a temporary teacher, she was paid at a lower rate and could not obtain promotion. To become permanent meant paying into the government run superannuation scheme but as a disabled person, she would lose up to 50% of her contributions should she retire or die before age sixty.

Nevertheless, Elsie chose a career in secondary education. She was employed first by the State Education Department for seventeen years and for a similar period, by the Catholic Education Office.

Becoming involved with the St Vincent de Paul Society

The official record indicates that after several abortive attempts, the Ferntree Gully Conference was founded in 1961. While Elsie was not then a member, she was very much aware of its existence and actively involved in its work.

The Conference began with assistance from her brother Frank who was to serve as a member and president for several years and also as regional president.

A similar scenario ensued in Boronia where her younger brother Philip was instrumental in forming the Boronia Conference when the Boronia parish was cut off from the Ferntree Gully parish in 1964. Philip served as president and regional president. Her older brother Jim also served the Society in Queensland in the 1960s. It is therefore no surprise, given the family's Society pedigree, that Elsie would

join the Society when it offered full membership to women.

Over the years, the Parish has been blessed with priests who have all been supportive of SVDP. This is partly why Elsie believes that the local conference has always been St John the Baptist's most influential lay organisation.

Surprisingly, given her spirit of independence and determination, Elsie has never held office. She never wanted this. She prefers to have the freedom of choice an office bearer cannot always enjoy. Elsie likes to be able to say exactly what she is thinking and believes if it's worthwhile, there is a better chance people will listen.

"I'm certain I've been more influential than if I'd been an office bearer. By necessity, they are political animals and are constrained."

Elsie believes home visits are the most important aspect of conference work. She ceased visiting a few years ago, only because the conference was concerned she may be challenged by access issues that put her at risk. Elsie is sure she is capable of continuing but has graciously deferred to her conference brothers and sisters, appreciating that they have her best interests at heart.

She was also previously involved in assisting at the Ferntree Gully Centre until it became difficult due to mobility and fatigue.

As with many conferences, Ferntree Gully Conference is twinned with St Joseph's Conference in Kerala State, South India.

With close to half a century's involvement, Elsie enjoys offering support and mentoring in any way that is helpful. She tries always to be a positive influence on the work of the conference.



Elsie's graduation

With close to half a century's involvement, Elsie enjoys offering support and mentoring in any way that is helpful.

Elsie with local parish students, 2015



There are two baskets permanently placed at the back of the church. One is for St Vincent de Paul and the other is for asylum seekers. There are always activities happening, in support of a cause such as trivia nights for local asylum seekers and refugees. Occasionally, the conference runs joint events and is always prepared to get involved in special appeals.

The Social Justice group is also active and members like to keep abreast of policies and issues that impact on their local community.

Elsie believes the toll from domestic violence has increased and the conference is able to refer people on to the many excellent local services that offer appropriate support.

Given her own family's experience, she reflects that nowadays, people expect help more readily. There is a different kind of social contract in operation today.

Although there are only a small number of active members of the conference, it always seems much bigger because of the many links with other groups. The spirit of collaboration is heartening and so much more is achieved by these forces for good pulling together. Elsie continues to assist in helping the Society to work closely with other lay groups in the parish to the mutual benefit of all.

Elsie is amazed at the level of activity going on, both projects which are solely of the Society's making and others in which the Society plays a less prominent role.

The Annual Christmas Dinner

Since the late 1960s the St John the Baptist Conference has invited up to 200 of its senior citizens to a sumptuous 'sit down' traditional Christmas dinner. Elsie has never seen the primary intention of this event as strictly speaking, being about providing a service to the poor and needy but rather, acknowledging the debt of gratitude which the younger generations owe to their predecessors.

Whatever the motivation, on the weekend of the first or second Saturday of December, the younger (and not so much younger) generations turn up on the preceding Friday evening and Saturday morning to ensure that the church hall looks its festive best, the meal is cooked and ready to be served and those needing a lift are picked up.

The event starts with grace and soon after, the parish musicians arrive. The day proceeds with laughter filling the hall and the mayor, M.Ps and other local dignitaries join in the fun and help to serve the guests. Father Christmas always attends and distributes gifts. Those attending always break out spontaneously into song until a Knox community transport bus arrives to take the exhausted but still reminiscing guests home.

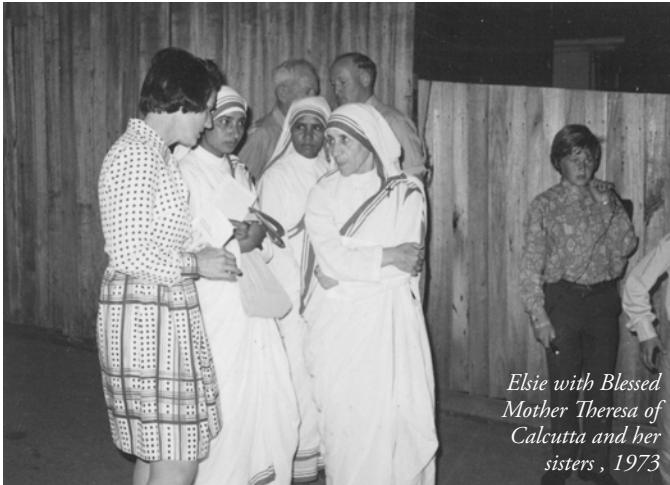
Now attending as a guest, as Elsie looks around the hall, she hopes the recent years' bands of workers feel similarly satisfied with their efforts as Elsie, her brother Frank and his children did on similar occasions, over forty years ago.

The Melbourne Eucharistic Congress

In 1973, Melbourne was the proud host city for the Eucharistic Congress. Catholics from all over the world gathered here to encourage and increase devotion to the Blessed Sacrament. It was an especially significant gathering as it was the first one since Vatican II. The Archbishop encouraged every parish in the Archdiocese to invite at least one of the distinguished guests to address an eucumenical gathering on a relevant topic of the guests' choosing.

Ferntree Gully did not have a parish council. Instead it had a committee led by Noel Clark (President), Noel Carroll (Treasurer) and Elsie. Noel Clark, who was also the Parish Secretary, rang the Cathedral seeking to know whom was best to invite. The answer:

"Cardinal Wojtyla of Poland is certainly going places but his English is shocking. Otherwise, Mother Teresa of Calcutta. But you won't get either of them, best to aim a little lower down the list."



Elsie with Blessed Mother Teresa of Calcutta and her sisters, 1973

Elsie remembers the committee's jubilation at the news and more particularly remembers the night Ferntree Gully was transformed from a quiet outer suburb into a superstar venue.

Being optimistic by nature, the committee disregarded this last bit of advice. They decided against Cardinal Wojtyla because of the language barrier, little knowing they were knocking back the next Pope, John Paul II.

Elsie rang the Missionary Sisters of Charity headquarters in Fitzroy. After initial discussions revealed that Mother Teresa was already booked for another event, Sr Monica agreed that if the time of the event could be altered, Mother Teresa would come.

Elsie remembers the committee's jubilation at the news and more particularly remembers the night Ferntree Gully was transformed from a quiet outer suburb into a superstar venue.

Elsie would write a poignant account years later in the parish newsletter, entitled "*Something beautiful for God.*" The following excerpt captures something of the spirit of the evening.

"I stood, nervously waiting in the muggy heat for Jim Winters to arrive in a meticulously clean car with Mother Teresa and two of her sisters... She was over 60 years old but still youthful in spirit and charged with a non-threatening sense of purpose. I expected her to talk about the material needs of the poorest in Calcutta and how we might help relieve them. Instead she spoke of their spiritual richness – their love for family life, children and readiness to share whatever they owned with others, regardless of their personal beliefs.

"I expected her to be critical of wealthy Western nations such as Australia. Instead she spoke of the spiritual poverty and unhappiness of people in Western world nations who, in being blessed with an excess of material wealth, are yet unwilling to share and have lost the capacity to value family life and children for their own sakes.

"I still have awesome memories of that night. One is of the

many eager donors who came forward with vast amounts of money, and of Mother Teresa and her sisters stowing this away (without looking at it) in the seemingly unfillable inner pockets of their habits while all the time listening to those wanting to speak with them."

Forty years later, Elsie still counts this as one of the most wonderful experiences of her life, even beating an audience in 1961 with Pope John XXIII.

Food store

Along with her great admiration for Mother Teresa of Calcutta, Elsie has found many people inspirational, both from within and outside of Catholic circles.

In the Jubilee year of the Victorian Society, she attended an inspiring talk given by Robert Fitzgerald, a New South Wales Social Welfare Commissioner and active Society member. This talk motivated her to think about what else the conference could do to practically assist the poor and the disadvantaged.

The conference, with Elsie's encouragement decided that a good step would be to establish a food store. The store would be open a couple of days per week. Elsie reflects that it never developed quite to the extent that she had hoped but sees this as a valuable lesson for future undertakings. The conference was able to establish a modest food store which was stocked mainly from regular mass and school non-perishables collections and special collections such as the Feast of the Sacred Heart in June.

There still is a store in the church grounds, located in the old convent which is now the parish administrative centre. Conference members roster themselves to pack the food parcels and hampers at Christmas. Elsie's unfulfilled dream is that people be assisted with their food choices. This aim is in keeping with Elsie's belief that the Society should be helping people to help themselves.

The food store also boosts their supply from regular trips to Foodbank Victoria started by Council for Homeless Persons. Elsie considers this facility heaven sent and has watched it grow from its infancy into a great service. Foodbank also supplements what the Conference includes in Christmas hampers every year.

The Vincentian Scholarship Scheme

In his address, Fitzgerald also canvassed the importance of education as an equaliser. In doing so, he touched on a matter close to Elsie's heart. She had always wanted to establish something of an educational nature but the conference was dubious. How could it set up such a scheme? And where would the money come from?

Elsie's mind drifted back to her own school days. How would she have fared if Mother Ursula had not insisted that "With God's help you can do anything"?

She took the matter up with parish priest, Fr. Des Moloney, presently Director of Corpus Christi College who promptly committed the parish to contributing \$2,000 to the as yet unplanned and unnamed project.

At the next meeting and with some trepidation, the conference agreed to proceed. Elsie was directed to establish a committee of five comprising two conference members and three parishioners in order to plan the project for commencement at the beginning of the following school year.

Elsie runs a tight ship and the steering committee was extremely diligent and timely in its deliberations. As the committee reached agreement on all elements of the scheme, the hope was always that the idea conformed with the spirit of the Society's patron St Vincent de Paul and founder Blessed Fredric Ozanam.

By the end of 2001, the steering committee had drawn up a constitution which was to guide the work and all the necessary documents such as eligibility criteria and application forms.

Elsie believes the most important features of the Scheme were that it was made available to Catholic and non-Catholic students alike; and to both primary and secondary students; that the principal and staff were to nominate beneficiaries without regard for the conduct of either the student, his/her parents/guardians. The student's need was to be the sole criterion. The award remained confidential.

Elsie continued leading the committee for three years until ill health made this impossible. She retains a keen interest in its progress. Her nominee, Chris Markwick took over from her. He has developed the Scheme considerably, encouraging other parishes in the Knox Deanery to set up their own schemes.

A few years ago, Chris gave a talk about the Scheme at a Knox Emergency Relief meeting convened by Knox Council. The Council advised Chris that it assisted students in a similar manner and soon after, offered to incorporate and amalgamate the two schemes. The Knox Vincentian Scheme was born with additional funding of \$20,000. The funding has since grown to a minimum of \$50,000 annually, comprising \$30,000 from Knox Council and \$20,000 from the SVDP Knox-Sherbrooke Regional Council.

Elsie acknowledges that Chris has taken the Scheme to a higher level, particularly because he has focused on building strong links with the schools as well as with the Society's Knox Sherbrooke Region, Knox Council, St John's Parish Ferntree Gully and individual parishioners who provide financial support.

Since 2002, the Scheme has allocated \$390,000 to students living in the Knox Council region. More than 1,900 students have benefitted. The original steering committee never envisaged that the Scheme would go on to allocate this level of assistance, not in its wildest dreams. Elsie is proud of the achievements and hopes those steering it today are vigilant in

ensuring it remains true to the vision of St Vincent de Paul and Blessed Frederic Ozanam.

The Ferntree Gully Electorate Victoria Day Award

Elsie received a Victoria Day Award in 2010 for her contribution as a member of the Ferntree Gully Conference but also in recognition of her other community work associated with supporting and advocating on behalf of post-polio sufferers.

Her nomination prepared by her conference brothers and sisters describes Elsie as a person of:

“Great vision, enormous energy and steadfast commitment in the pursuit of many causes of social justice for the individual.”

Elsie reflects on her forty years

While Elsie views service as second nature, she sees a challenge as helping young people 'catch' the Society calling.

“Numbers are dwindling and the conference will need someone who has drive and probably youth on their side. We sometimes make a false assumption that the young aren't interested in becoming involved. They have to feel wanted and be involved in what they'd like to do. We need to let them stir things up- the world needs more stirrers.

“They will listen to their elders. Grandparents can get kids to do things Mum and Dad can't but we have to go out of our way to help them become involved. I always let the young ones tell me what they think should be done. Then I say, why haven't you done it? They respond quite well to that.”

Elsie ponders whether conferences amalgamating might be one way of addressing the drop in the number of active members.

She knows the importance played by champions in her life and they don't have to belong to the Catholic Church. Some of the people she admires most in her personal experience claim to be atheists but she is convinced they're not atheists.

“They are possibly agnostically inclined. But you couldn't be an atheist and serve people the way they do. I don't think you can truly serve other people if you cut God out of your life.”

She reflects that sadly, the sense of serving is not as strong as it once was across society. Especially those who aspire to leadership positions such as politicians of all complexions and the wealthy who hunger for power for its own sake. She concludes that it would be preferable if people were drawn instead to the message of a U.S President who won many supporters with the simple words:

“Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country.”

(President John F. Kennedy, Inauguration speech, 1962)



Isabel and John McLean

On the refugees' team

People become involved in the St Vincent de Paul Society at different stages in their lives. For the McLeans, John was introduced to conference life as a school boy. For Isabel, it would be in her fifties.

Both their fathers had been members of the Society, albeit on opposite sides of the world.

For both of them, their involvement in the Society provided a shared commitment and a deepening of their already devout faiths. Their conference and committee involvement in service to others is a true expression of living out the Gospel teachings and modelling the example of Blessed Frederic Ozanam.

Their lives intersected through the Society after each of them had been widowed. They have enjoyed a very happy marriage and devoted partnership for 25 years until John's death in 2014. They are proof of the adage that a happy life is a busy life.

Their most important Society achievement is in the area of service to refugees and asylum seekers. Their courage in taking a journey into a world they knew little about would reap enormous benefits for people who came to Australia seeking asylum. Their example illustrates what can be achieved when people are prepared to leave their comfort zone. Knowing nothing about asylum seekers and refugees, they both took a leap of faith into unknown territory.

Together, they have made an impressive contribution in their quiet, modest yet focused way. Their story is yet another in a long line of examples of people who have made the Society and indeed their community a better place by their selfless adherence to the gospel messages.

Like many Vincentians, their own lives were not always easy but both were blessed by deep and abiding faiths. John

had taken the time to write his memoirs, which have been a valuable aid to the writing of his story. They highlight a life steeped in Catholic ways and influences. Their lives outside of the Society also provide interesting points of reflection; both growing up during the war, facing many challenges and experiencing very different times to today.

As the one remaining to recount their stories, Isabel has remarkable recall of details pertaining to both her life and John's. An ability to appreciate the ridiculous and find light amusement in dark moments has stood Isabel in good stead. There is an abundance of common sense as well. Her little dog, Misty, who was John's loyal mate, remains by her side throughout the interview.

Isabel's early life

Isabel's gentle, lilting accent is a giveaway to her origins. Born in 1936 and raised in Scotland, she laughs that her full maiden name, Isabella Mary Teresa Smith was a ridiculously long name to give a baby. She has always been known as Isabel. She has a younger brother, Hugh, born just before the outbreak of the war.

Knowing nothing about asylum seekers and refugees, they both took a leap of faith into unknown territory.

Isabel has retained extraordinarily vivid memories of her early life. While not poor, the family were not well off. It was a hard time for everyone, with rationing, blackouts and a shortage of petrol. Her mother heard that toilet paper was going to be unavailable so, along with a neighbour, stockpiled a supply. In 1941, Dalmuir, the city they lived in, was badly bombed and the family lost their home and all their possessions. They were left with only what they were wearing. When they emerged from the shelter, the tram lines had been blown out of the ground and all the toilet paper was wrapped around them like streamers. Isabel still stockpiles toilet rolls.

The family were taken on the back of a truck to a little farm outside Kinross. Isabel remembers how good many people were to her and her brother, who were then known as “the little evacuees”. She stayed on the farm for two years and has fond memories of tending the animals and trying her hand at churning butter and cooking. She and Hugh ran wild. Her father remained working in Dalmuir, making the complicated journey to be with the family on weekends. In 1943, the family was able to be reunited in Dalmuir.

Her father managed to obtain another house and the family started from scratch, gathering whatever they could in the way of furniture and bare essentials. Everything was scarce due to the war effort. Isabel remembers the blackout blinds and taking turns to drink out of a cup, as the family had to share the most basic of necessities.

Isabel enjoyed her school years, attending secondary school run by the Belgian order of Notre Dame nuns. The school was in Dumbarton in the Shire of Dunbarton. Isabel still finds amusement at the silliness of those responsible for naming places.

Coming to Australia

In February 1959, Isabel came as a young bride with her Scottish husband, Jim Henderson, to Melbourne. They were ten pound Poms, arriving by boat.

She remembers Jim’s sister, Jean, who was married to Bill Macdonald, and Hughie McLaughlin, who played for South Melbourne, were there to meet them at Port Melbourne. She and Jim stayed initially with Jean and Bill in North Sunshine.

As Isabel was expecting her first child, she and Jim moved out to where they could afford, which happened to be a garage. She gave birth to a boy, Chris, shortly after they moved. They remained living in the garage for a year.

She and Jim had had some false starts with real estate, first putting a deposit on a house to be built at Sunbury, promoted as an important future satellite town, but this never eventuated.

They then built a house in North Sunshine where Julie and Ann were born. Sadly, Julie died at four years from an asthma attack, which was a condition about which not much was then known. Isabel gave birth to Katrina five months later.

Jim worked with Dickens, the predecessor of Coles. There were moves to country towns to manage stores in Benalla and Ballarat. In 1971, they returned to their home in North Sunshine. The older children were still at primary school.

Jim suffered ill health and after moving to work at SSW in Footscray, he decided he’d like to run his own business.

“We bought a milk bar on the corner of Middleborough and Highbury Rds, East Burwood. We ran that for two years and three months, and believe me, I was counting! It was not a very successful experience, one I’ll never forget and I was glad to get over it!”

On St Joseph’s Day, 19 March 1974, Isabel went to work at Vulcan, in the service and spare parts division organising orders and deliveries as well as doing the wages for contract servicemen. The job was to be for six months over the winter months when the company was busy. Isabel remained working there for 16 years.

In 1987, Jim died suddenly.

Isabel had not been involved in much outside the home because of Jim’s illness.

“When he died, I used to pray that I’d find something that I could be involved in, within the church. I had no idea what, but I was praying something would turn up. One day, Katrina and I bumped into a woman with whom we’d lost contact. She suggested I join SVDP.”

After Mass during Lent, this woman took Isabel straight to a conference meeting. This was St Christopher’s Syndal. John McLean was the president.

John’s early life

In 1929, John was the first born of Catherine and John McLean’s three children. His parents moved from Geelong to Terang when John was young as his father took up postings as a newspaper reporter with the Geelong Advertiser and the Terang Express.

Next was a move to Melbourne, where his father became an influential journalist within Catholic press circles – the Advocate, the Tribune, and ultimately becoming Chief of Staff at the Advocate.

In 1939, John attended the Sisters of Mercy at St Brendan’s in Flemington. In that year, he became an altar boy and in 1940 was confirmed by Archbishop Mannix. His memoirs recall some years later, as a senior altar boy, he was selected to be a ‘mitre bearer’ at a confirmation of local children. He escorted Dr Mannix to the pulpit and sat in the front pew with the mitre while Dr Mannix delivered a homily lasting one and a half hours.

After Mass during Lent, this woman took Isabel straight to a conference meeting. This was St Christopher’s Syndal. John McLean was the president.

Academically strong, John received a Diocesan Scholarship and completed Grades 7 and 8 in the one year. In 1943, he attended St Kieran's Moonee Ponds in the Scholarship class, excelling under a marvellous Christian Brother, Br Bell, who had a special talent for getting the best out of his pupils. All but one in his class of 38 gained Victorian Junior Government Scholarships.

In 1944, moving to St Bernard's C.B.C. was a mixed experience. John at times bore the brunt of one brother's severe discipline, which shattered his confidence, affecting his grades. This brother had a brother who was the Australian Welterweight boxing champion and the entire school learned boxing as a result. Overall, though, John retained some fond memories of the school and it was where he first joined the Society of St Vincent de Paul through their college conference. His memoirs recall the Christian Brothers' practice of arranging May altars in honour of Our Lady in each classroom. Students were expected to deck the altars with flowers or face additional homework.

Although nowhere near the level of suffering experienced by Isabel growing up during the war, John's memoirs paint a vivid picture of what they went without, due to rationing of food, clothing and footwear and, in particular, petrol.

"Petrol was unavailable for domestic users and motorists had to use an untidy mechanism called a 'gas producer'. My Uncle Jim Jessen was a fruiterer and needed a motor vehicle to make deliveries. One day the gas producer blew up and burnt him. The story of the accident was featured in the newspaper."

John's family took in boarders to bring in extra income. Living in Flemington, close to Flemington and Moonee Valley racecourses, with many relatives who were keen on the horses, introduced John to racing. From 1946, he attended eight successive Melbourne Cups. In the end, though, he came to the conclusion that racing was a mugs game and gradually lost interest.

John left school in Year 11, joining the Myer Emporium ladies shoe department as a stock boy. This involved returning to the shelves the hundreds of boxes that had not been sold to customers. He was later transferred to men's shoes and was promoted to salesman.

At the time, Myer's was the biggest retailer in the Southern Hemisphere and John enjoyed eleven happy years' employment with the company. Answering what he thought was a calling to become a priest, John entered the seminary of the Blessed Sacrament Fathers at Bowral in New South Wales but this was a short-lived exercise. Within a few months, John had resumed his career with Myer.

In the early 1950s, John's family were forced to leave their rented home in Flemington, which had been sold, and moved to Black Rock. It was at St Joseph's Black Rock that John's

adult participation with the Society commenced. In 1958, John left Myer and went to work as manager of a shoe shop in Mentone, owned by a parishioner.

Soon he was introduced through his father to Patricia Connolly, who was deeply involved with the Legion of Mary. Pat had been a nun, associated with both the Franciscan Missionaries and the Little Company of Mary. Health problems had forced her to leave both. John and Pat became engaged and were married in November 1959. In 1960, they moved into their newly built home in Glen Waverley.

John saw many opportunities to be involved in parish life in his 31 years as a parishioner. In August 1971, he was a foundational member of the St Christopher's Conference.



Sudanese choir, St Mary's East St Kilda, 2006

Imagine how different suburban life was in the 1960s. John and Pat were like courageous pioneers forging a path out of the wilderness. People waited until they had sufficient cash to make home purchases. John and Pat made do with a card table and a fruit box in their kitchen. All the houses had septic sewerage systems. Very few roads had been built; having a driveway was a luxury and it was a common occurrence to become bogged. Most people wore gumboots or galoshes to the railway station, left them there during the day and retrieved them on their return in the evening. Honesty was taken for granted then.

In 1961, a new parish, St Christopher's Syndal was established. The parish priest, Fr John Hennessy, was an astute operator who had boundless energy. He arranged the purchase of the land for the parish church and, until there was a presbytery, lived with John and Pat.

Fr Hennessy established among other initiatives, an 'Adoration Vigil' for the men of the parish, which was conducted in association with the first Saturday of the month.

John saw many opportunities to be involved in parish life in his 31 years as a parishioner. In August 1971, he was a foundational member of the St Christopher's Conference. He also became involved as an Extraordinary Minister for the Eucharist and as a member of Charismatic Renewal.

Pat continued to be in poor health and was advised that bearing children was highly unlikely. Pat and John decided to adopt and made application through the then Catholic Family Welfare Bureau. In the same week that Fr Hennessy came to stay, they brought home their first baby daughter,

Mary Jo. Every year for four years, they would take delivery of another baby: Martin (1962), Anne (1963), and Danny (1964).

John soon realised the shoe business was not going to adequately support this expanding family. He applied to the Shell Company and was interviewed by its then employment officer, Kevan Gosper. Gosper would go on not only to become chairman of Shell but also to rise to Olympic athletics fame and become a significant force in the Olympics movement.



John commenced in the Accounts Payable department, moving through the ranks, and would continue with Shell for 27 years. His work exposed him to all types of people including battlers and shady characters. It was at times a challenging way to learn about human nature but it was a lesson that he gained a great deal from.

Early in 1975, Pat's health deteriorated and sadly she died in December of that year. John was now a widower with four children between the ages of 11 and 14. It was not an easy cross to bear and his faith was sorely challenged at times. He acknowledges that Shell was an outstanding supporter in a time before parenting considerations were systematically factored into workforce issues. Shell allowed him to work flexible hours to accommodate his children's needs. There is no question that John's personal qualities of honesty and integrity, matched with his financial and auditing skills, made him an employee they were loath to lose.

His faith kept him going, as did the support he drew from his Society friends who did what they could to help with his family. He recalls in his memoirs families inviting him on holidays away and including them in picnics and gatherings.

Meeting Isabel

John took on presidency of St Christopher's Conference in 1988 and, in March 1990, the conference welcomed a new member, Isabel Henderson. Isabel remembers vividly her early introduction to conference work at St Christopher's. The Waverley Regional Council had initiated a Special Work, Loreto House, which operated as a refuge for women and children escaping family violence.

"Thursday nights we visited Loreto House. It was quite an experience for me being in a place that was so unlike anything I'd ever encountered. I found it hard not to be judgemental at times. The rubbish bins were piled high with beer cans, with all the children running around. One mother has always stuck in my mind. Before coming to Loreto House, this woman walked the streets of Dandenong all day pushing a baby in a pram. She would change her baby in shopping centre toilets. At night they slept in squats."

It was quite an awakening for Isabel coming to understand the complexities relating to family violence. She saw how women often went back to the situation from which they had escaped. She visited women, not so much to take them food or material goods, just to be with them.

She recalls other challenging occasions, such as visiting a family who had lost a son. Another time, she and John went to a home where the partner had returned the night before and was causing trouble. She and John sat with them, doing little more than being with them and talking through a hard time. These early experiences have stayed with her, the importance of offering friendship and being a presence for people in challenging times. She came to realise many people are friendless and need help to overcome this.

Within weeks, John had become friendly with this Scottish widow. By June, they were engaged, and were married in February 1991. If every cloud has a silver lining, this was theirs. A new and fulfilling chapter in their lives was about to commence. A tree change to Gippsland, overseas travel – the first for John – and a more intensive involvement with the Society.

A new life in Drouin

Isabel and her daughter had a weekender at Corinella and Isabel had always intended to move somewhere near there in retirement.

In 1990 she and John put their homes on the market and started looking around Wonthaggi. A parishioner highly recommended Drouin where his sister lived but John, who had travelled extensively with Shell, was not keen on Drouin, seeing it as somewhat of a one-horse town. Eventually, though, they had a look and found their future home, which happened to be located in McLean Street. John and Isabel settled happily into the town despite John's misgivings, finding it lived up to its reputation for being a tidy and, most importantly, a friendly town.

John had thought that he might retire from the Society after many years of devoted service. Isabel smiles, recalling how they had only just unpacked their boxes when John was invited to join the local conference.

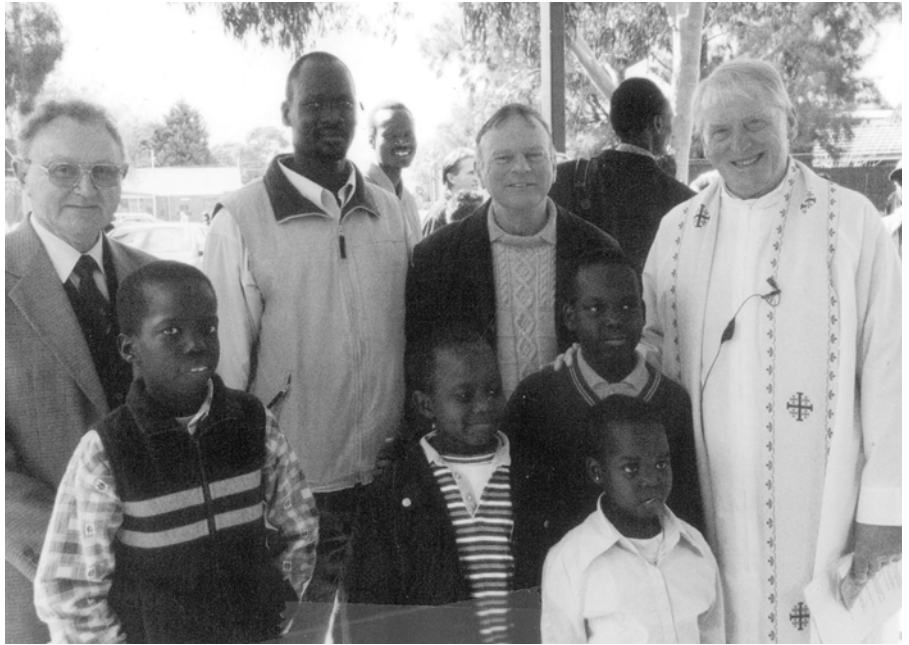
"Word had gone around we were coming to Drouin. We were met at Mass. John was drawn to join; he couldn't stay away. Once a Vincentian, always a Vincentian. I joined the Catholic Women's League to get to know some people. After a couple of weeks, I decided to come with John, so we both became involved in St Ita's Conference."

In 1992, Isabel and John were preparing to go overseas so John could meet Isabel's family. John was contacted and advised that the Sale Diocesan Council was being started up again. Would he consider joining as an office bearer?

John and Isabel had a wonderful holiday. For John it was a dream come true, visiting the Vatican, seeing Michelangelo's Pieta and the Sistine Chapel, as well as visiting Ireland and the United Kingdom. Returning refreshed, John was convinced to join the Council.

John was also persuaded by Peter Joseph to become Latrobe Regional President, with Isabel becoming the Secretary.

John became Secretary and later Treasurer of the Sale Diocesan Council. Isabel acted as secretary to the Diocesan Council President and to John for 14 years. The Council came to be known as Gippsland Central Council. In 1997, John became President of the Diocesan Council, which gave him a seat on State Council.



St Albans parish with Br. Chris Meehl and Fr. Peter Carucan

They had to learn a great deal from scratch, such as what an asylum seeker was, what a refugee was. It was slow but momentum started to build.

Re-establishing the Migrant and Refugee Committee

At that time, Gerard Dowling was State President. He along with members Pam Smith and Maureen Duke continued to raise that no-one was doing anything particularly in the area of migrants. The Migrant and Refugee Committee had been in abeyance for some time.

John asked Isabel what she thought he should do. They prayed about it for a while. He decided he'd propose to Gerard Dowling that, if he could relinquish his role on the State Finance Committee, he'd re-establish the Migrant and Refugee Committee. He was also on the Centres' Board of Management and knew there was only so much he could undertake simultaneously.

"I remember we went to the mass for deceased members. John spoke to Gerard outside St Francis. Gerard was very enthusiastic about John taking on the refugee area but insisted he remain on the finance committee as well. So there we found ourselves with this job we knew nothing about."

John wrote to every Regional President and asked them to come to a meeting at 585 Lt Collins St. (SVDP's previous headquarters.)

He received very few responses but, with Isabel's support, they kept on going. They had to learn a great deal from scratch, such as what an asylum seeker was, what a refugee was. It was slow but momentum started to build around the Victorian Society's jubilee celebrations, 2002-2004.

"We were having familiarisation workshops at ACU. Damien Coleridge in Membership and Development had invited Marie Tehan. John felt very nervous that a politician was attending but, when she came, she was down to earth. She offered to facilitate the workshop. She later rang and asked if she could join the committee. She brought Sue Galbally of the legal family and Margaret Healy, who had been a deputy head of CentreLink. All knew how to influence government."

Out of the blue, the Society was asked to run the Federal Government's integrated humanitarian program, which involved supplying newly arrived refugees with household goods. The Salvation Army had pulled out of the contract. Isabel remembers that some members advised the Society not to get involved. John and Isabel engaged in prayerful reflection and John took the issue to State Council. Isabel remained in St Francis, praying for the duration of the Council meeting. Council endorsed John's proposal that the Society accept the government's offer.

Apart from two young women the Society employed to do the hands-on work, John and Isabel did the financial administration themselves. There were very regular meetings at the department in Lonsdale St with Brian Dalton, then CEO often attending. Isabel remembers the large number of bureaucrats who attended, greatly outnumbering the SVDP representatives. They were hard taskmasters, expecting the Society to carry out the contract to the letter. This was hard. They couldn't always procure a bed and other supplies when a new band of refugees were to be released from detention at short notice.

Isabel credits the former Brooklyn warehouse for doing a fantastic job providing furniture, always ensuring the refugees received new items. A bedding company provided beds at a very competitive price and would work weekends if required to fill an order. SVDP managed the contract for four years.

The unit funding model was ill conceived as it did not cater for the range of household sizes the Society was coming across. The contract stipulated an amount of \$3,666 per family, obviously generous when it was a single person or small family but not when it was a family with many children. Isabel and John became very adept at balancing it out to cater to everyone, so adept that at the end of the contract there was a generous financial gain for the Society. This was partly because the contract allowed for paid administration positions and Isabel and John performed the majority of these functions as volunteers.

As well as the contract, they were also involved in other ways for the Society to assist refugees and asylum seekers. There were many valuable partnerships formed with parishes and organisations keen to support this cause. There was a tutoring program in Dandenong helping refugees to learn English and keep them engaged in school. The Christian Brothers at Sacred Heart St Albans were wonderful, also Fr Carucan, the parish priest at the time, who Isabel describes as a saint and was making links with all manner of people and agencies to help these people learn skills and make valuable connections. It was tremendous work and help came from all quarters.

Isabel remembers, in particular, Fr Carucan's efforts to connect lost family members. Families were separated in their home countries when militants entered a village and started shooting. They might never see family members again. One family member was able to find a father alive in Afghanistan and Fr Carucan set up the phone for a teleconference call between the parties.

Isabel remembers that Fr Carucan had very little himself. He held a special refugee Mass on the feast of the Assumption and invited the McLeans for lunch afterwards. Although he had hardly any food in his home, it was a lovely lunch. Each person had a slice of bread and a slice of tomato.

"Fr Carucan retired in his customary quiet way. Many refugee families remain eternally grateful for all he did for them. He thought the Society could do anything. We gave him financial assistance and for a few years helped fund a Sudanese case worker in the Parish. We gave \$20,000 to St Anthony's Noble Park (Fr Tony Feeney) to establish a micro-credit program."

Isabel and John came to understand the challenges of refugee resettlement, particularly in relation to the clash of two cultures and the sense that people were stuck between the ways of their homeland and the expectations of their new country. Conferences and parishes became involved in different ways, for example, running footy for the youth. The youth wanted to be Australians as did their mothers but the fathers were the traditional heads of the families and didn't like that the mothers received the Social Security family payment. They felt their authority was being eroded by these

customs. A great deal of family violence occurred as fathers were threatened by losing their status and control.

There was a government-sponsored program in Flemington which helped men learn how to make furniture such as futons. Christian Brother, Br Ray McNerney, facilitated this program.

Members went regularly to the detention centres. Being in the country, it was difficult for Isabel and John but they managed to go a couple of times to Maribyrnong. These were experiences they would never forget.



Baxter Detention Centre

"...You were watched the whole time you were speaking to the person. Guards stood over you. It was a harrowing experience."

"It was confronting times, every visit we undertook. You had the name of the person you were going to visit. You had to hold up a piece of cardboard with their name written on it. You had to make sure you spelled it correctly. And the names seemed foreign to us then. Anything you were taking in for the person was taken from you and you were watched the whole time you were speaking to the person. Guards stood over you. It was a harrowing experience."

These insights took them onto a national refugee committee. They visited South Australia's Baxter detention centre with National President John Meehan.

"We were taken there and it was like something out of a film set. We had to leave everything in a locker. We were then taken in to a little cage, a guard in front of you and a guard behind you, with five taken in at a time. Then they locked the back gate, the front guard opened the front gate and we walked through, into another cage, same procedure, then through scanners. It was a long and arduous process before you were able to visit the refugees. We'd been briefed the night before by a nun who visited regularly. We smuggled phone cards in, hidden in our bras. We sat and talked to the refugees and still there were guards walking around, watching us."

Isabel recalls the trauma for the visitors, many in tears, at leaving the refugees behind in this terrible place. The injustice

of being able to walk out to freedom while the refugees who had done nothing wrong remained locked up.

“The conditions were awful, prison-like; there were cameras in the women’s toilets. The treatment was inhumane. It was no wonder many ended up in a psychiatric hospital in Adelaide.”

As Australia’s inhumanity towards people seeking asylum continues today, Isabel wonders at the nation’s collective incomprehension of people’s suffering.

“I don’t think even Frederic Ozanam would have comprehended it. How people could be so cruel to other people who had done nothing wrong. They’re only trying to escape extreme cruelty. One doctor who used to go to Woomera, she befriended a young man, got him out and got him into a local school. She took him into her family. He managed to make a good life here, getting well-paid work in the mines.

His story was one of escaping. His father hid him on a cart and he managed to get out over the border to Afghanistan. Most of his family were killed. A lovely young fellow. Well mannered, helpful. Most of them are like this. They are just escaping terrible, terrible circumstances.”

Isabel and John considered their refugee committee involvement their greatest Society achievement and the one they gained the most from. They have proven themselves to be a complementary team whose mutual support has benefited the Society and those it serves beyond measure. Isabel’s characteristic humility plays down their contributions: she and John saw it more as an opportunity they benefitted from, because they learned so much about refugees.

“SVDP became our life, it did. We were wearing out a path up to Melbourne three times a week. I was still the secretary of Diocesan Council. The Society became our life. We didn’t get to do much conference work.”

Refugee Transitional Housing Project in Hallam

The committee bought a house in Hallam for refugees to give them 6 months stable accommodation with conference support, helping them become familiar with Australian customs.

The house was purchased to provide affordable housing to refugee families facing imminent homelessness. There were related aims: to work with the families to achieve financial security by giving them the opportunity to save the bond and/or the first month’s rent for their next rental property. The conference would refer the family living in the house to any services they may require and generally help them adjust



Isabel with John in beloved team Guernsey

from being newly arrived to being able to manage their finances and secure accommodation for themselves. The overall experience should help them learn to manage their finances, pay rent on a regular basis and, in doing so, build up a rental history that gives them a reference. As well, the family would be assisted to understand Australian customs.

The house was officially opened in July 2010 as an initiative of SVDP’s Refugee Asylum Seeker Migrant Committee. Isabel and John attended the opening and discovered that it was to be known as McLean House in John’s honour.

Isabel and John stayed on the committee for 11 years, with Isabel continuing as secretary. John kept attending even as he became sicker. Isabel finally retired when she needed to be home looking after John.

Life after John

Isabel and John had always been ever present at Society functions, never baulking at travelling to Melbourne for events. They were a couple who exemplified a perfect partnership and what can be achieved when two work as one, complementing each other’s skills. It is hard to imagine one without the other. The loss of John in September 2014 is still very raw for Isabel. She was shocked and honoured at the turn out of people at his funeral, evidence of how much he was loved and respected by Society members. John wrote his own eulogy.

She remains actively involved in St Ita’s Conference and continues to give thanks to the Society for deepening her faith.

“I enjoy the spiritual readings at the weekly meetings and really living out my faith - not just getting up in the morning, saying my prayers and going to Mass. I don’t know if it’s made me a better person but I think it’s helped me. It has guided me in how to treat the people we visit, not judge them, although that can be hard at times. When on home visits, I go into places so messy and dishevelled I still wonder why people can’t make more effort but I know this is sometimes all they know. It’s how they’ve been raised. And they can feel like the world has given up on them. I always treat them with respect and try to love them.”

Isabel’s reflection calls to mind Bishop Hurley’s 2014 Ozanam Address in which he talked about learning not to judge and recognising this can be hard. We all judge but have to learn to put this aside so that we can truly meet people with respect and understanding and love. Isabel and John are two more examples of Vincentians who have learned to do this through their work practice and prayer.

Issues facing the Society today

Since becoming President in 2012, Isabel encourages conference members to look for more effective ways to help people out of a spot that can have longer-lasting impacts.

Helping people to help themselves

“We see some terrible messes, bad situations becoming worse. Financial crises, owing money all over the place. It all becomes too hard for people to confront. I sometimes think if they could be more organised, it might help. But we can’t impose our standards too much. And we have to concede that we can only give people so much and help them to help themselves. It is hard to change people’s way of thinking when it comes to money management but we have to keep trying. We often refer people to Anglicare for financial counselling.”

Taking a long-term view helps. Isabel believes that, in the past, conference members were not always able to get past the door when visiting people. Slowly this has improved, with members now having a better chance of engaging with people who invite them in. The conference often sees people over a very long period. Members try to lift people up out of dark and hard places. It doesn’t always work but sometimes it can.

“We had one lady, we visited often, who battled with alcoholism. Her entire life had been a mess but she somehow overcame it. She learned how to use a computer and re-connected with her family using technology. She presented us with a homemade certificate, claiming our continuing to visit her and never giving up on her was what helped her finally beat her addiction. Now she speaks to aboriginal groups and often sends us cards. It’s an uplifting story to hold on to while recognising some people perhaps have more resilience than others.”

Isabel also mentions a recent conference visit she heard about, to a lady who seemed to have a hoarding problem. The members were going to suggest gently that a couple of the men could bring a trailer around if she wanted anything removed or taken to the tip. Isabel smiles wryly wondering how that conversation was received.

Affordable housing a critical foundation

The increasing costs of living have hit the poor very hard. Utilities are a big challenge. A lot of people around Drouin are on disability benefits and many single mothers are transferred to Newstart when their kids reach eight. Rents are also high. While there’s lots of new housing being built, very little of it is affordable. Rents are over \$300 on average, prohibitively high for someone on benefits. If paying too much rent, they miss out on Commonwealth Rent Assistance and so can be trapped between lack of affordable rental stock and missing out on CRA. It becomes a vicious cycle entrenching hardship.

Housing is the most critical need. Without the foundation of housing, every other problem is hard to overcome. It needs to be adequate, affordable and secure housing. There

is a particular shortage of housing for the local Indigenous community.

Isabel appreciates that, with society’s rampant consumerism, people crave a nice house but the people the conference sees can’t really afford it. Then they fall behind with gas, electricity and other bills. Then they fall behind with the rent.

Housing is the most critical need. Without the foundation of housing, every other problem is hard to overcome.

“We had a request last week from a lady needing \$1,000 for her rental arrears. We couldn’t help her with the full amount as we would have to help others in the same predicament and not enough to go around. The news can become like a Chinese whisper, spreading like wildfire through the town: the Vinnies will pay your rent. We have to manage people’s expectations.”

There are many caravan parks in the area and the conference is a regular visitor. Isabel believes it is substandard accommodation and the worst examples should be closed down, but this would place people in a difficult predicament. The conference talks to the Shire of Baw Baw to try to achieve some improvements. It is a hard slog achieving change but they will keep trying.

Isabel also delivers meals-on-wheels- which has highlighted the need to visit house-bound people. The conference has a few more new members, and she wants to start this; there is capacity to spread themselves around a bit and do more than distribute material aid.

The next chapter

Isabel and John enjoyed three trips overseas together and many trips around Australia on Society business. Isabel is visiting Scotland in 2015 with her elder stepdaughter.

John spent a great deal of time carefully recording his memoirs. He kept many documents and records, particularly relating to his family’s early history and his Society involvement. Perhaps there was a touch of his father the reporter in him. Isabel wonders how she will ever sort through these papers should she ever decide to move house.

Isabel’s faith inspires her to go on. St Therese of Lisieux is one of her favourite Saints and she recites her well-known, short prayer when she needs help:

“Little flower, in this hour show me your power.”

Isabel finds the Little Flower has rarely let her down.

“When St Therese’s relics were on display at St Patrick’s Cathedral,



we queued to see the reliquary. We had a friend who had been sick for many years and was in St Vincent's hospital. I prayed for her. That day, she received good news from her visiting specialist. Like St Vincent de Paul, the Little Flower doesn't give up on her believers."

Isabel often describes the plight of people the Society supports in terms of messy lives. If one thing is clear from her encounters and those recorded in the to date three volumes of Vincentian Stories, conference members are a breed of people comfortable and adept at working with human mess, whatever form it takes. They are for some in the community, a special 'cleaning' and invisible mending service rolled into one. The contribution they make is often immeasurable. That is why recording these stories is an important way of recognising all conference members who quietly and diligently support the struggling, the lonely and the poor.

Isabel

1990	Joined St Christopher's Conference, Syndal.
1991	Joined St. Ita's Conference
1994-2008	Sale Diocesan Council Secretary
1993-1997	Secretary Latrobe Regional council
1998-2013	Secretary RASM
2010-2012	Secretary St. Ita's Conference
2012-	President St. Ita's Conference
2014-	Twinning Co-ordinator Latrobe Baw Baw Regional Council

John

1946	Joined St Bernard's College Conference, Moonee Ponds
1956-59	Joined St Joseph's Conference, Black Rock
1971-1990	Foundation member, St Christopher's Conference, Syndal
1972-75	Conference president
1985	Foundation committee member, Loreto House for Families at risk
1988-90	Conference President, Syndal
	Member Drouin Conference 24 years
1992-2012	Treasurer, St Ita's Conference, Drouin
1992	Secretary Sale Diocesan Council
1997	Initiated the establishment of new conference, Philip Island
1993-97	President Latrobe Valley Regional Council
1994	Treasurer Sale Diocesan Council
1997-2000	President Sale Diocesan Council
1997-2000	Member Victorian State Council and appointed to State Finance Committee and Centres Board of Management
1998	Initiated the reformation of the Migrant and Refugee Committee
1998-2010	President, Migrant and refugee Committee
2001	Appointed advisor to State Council on Migrant Refugee affairs
2001-2004	Negotiated the award of contract to SVDP, of the Household Formation support segment of DIMIA's IHSS program
2002	Invited to represent SVDP in a delegation to Minister Ruddock on the plight of women and children held in detention
2002 & 2005	Chaired three day National Migrant & Refugee Committee meeting in Melbourne
2013-2014	Twinning Co-ordinator Latrobe Baw Baw Regional Council



Syd Tutton

(1937-2010)

Determined to make a difference

In celebrating the contribution of great Vincentians, there is always a sadness in writing about those that are no longer with us. In Syd Tutton's case, the regret is particularly poignant because he was someone who was never short of a word and he loved to recount stories from his past. Syd would have thoroughly enjoyed looking back over a fifty year association with the Society. This story would have been punctuated with accurate historical accounts – his photographic memory was extraordinary, an occasional convincing rendition of an Irish accent, a sprinkling of Latin mottos (and some expletives) and many funny, even ribald stories. Political correctness was not something Syd practiced rigorously.

He had a wicked sense of humour and a wonderful spirit in which he told a story. His face would crack into a wide grin, with his eyes crinkling at the sides. He'd sometimes laugh so much, he'd be wheezing. He liked to have the final say too.

He was a local conference member for over forty years, more than ably backed by his wife Jo whose outstanding contribution to the Ormond Centre which Syd was involved in establishing, is acknowledged here.

Most significantly though, Syd was an ideas man, facilitator of ideas and enabler of others. Skills like these need a big stage and he is probably most remembered for putting them to use in his State and National Society work. It was here his fighting spirit took advocacy into both the parliamentary and general community spheres.

Syd was a deeply committed Catholic; his faith both a public and private celebration. He loved history, classical music, was well read and would often spontaneously recite his favourite poetry. He also liked a good glass of red and a whisky. He was romantic and nostalgic but could also be pugnacious and unforgiving. He could also be suspicious of people's motives,

smelling a rat at ten paces. Yet, he was also warm, sociable and a generous host. He gave a lot and he could hurt a lot. He was very human. He graced the tables of important people while remaining true and in solidarity with those on the margins of society.

These are some of the paradoxes of Syd Tutton, a man very much formed by his association with the Society which in turn has been significantly shaped by his considerable contribution. Most significantly, he fought injustices when he saw them. We trust that this story does him justice.

Early years

You can take the boy out of Richmond but you can't take Richmond out of Syd Tutton. Most paths lead back there for Syd. Born in 1937, he grew up in Richmond, in the shadow of St Ignatius, where his deep and abiding faith was activated. His father had many jobs – whatever would bring some money in – and mainly worked as a barman at different Richmond pubs. He and his mother Catherine known as Kit, had a second son, Des, who to this day, lives in Richmond.



Syd with his family

Jo was a wonderful support and mother, managing all the day to day aspects of raising six children, while Syd focused on providing for the family and operating on the bigger social justice stage

Commencing at the parish school, Syd met other “bubs” such as Danny Murphy. He and others in the Richmond crew would remain friends for life.

Richmond was aptly known as Struggletown, in those early post Depression years. It was also very Catholic, known colloquially as Irish Town from the wave of Irish immigrants that settled there in the nineteenth century.

Growing up, Syd spent a great deal of time with his mother’s family at Greta near Wangaratta. It is a place he often spoke of with fond memories. This involvement was another layer in Syd’s happy childhood even though money was scarce.

Syd’s Richmond crew would become involved alongside him in St Ignatius’ local Young Christian Workers group, playing in its footy and cricket teams. Syd was instrumental in establishing its Loyola Musical Society. Syd retained a love of music throughout his life and was known to burst into song particularly a few bars of Gilbert and Sullivan, even though he was not gifted as a singer.

After St Ignatius parish school, Syd attended De La Salle. He was smart, wrote well and was a voracious reader but had to leave school at fifteen, something he wished he hadn’t had to do, but the family was struggling to make ends meet.

Early career

He found a job with the State Electricity Commission of Victoria (SECV) as a clerk. This was the beginning of a connection with the energy industry that would continue for most of his life.

At some stage in his life, he also did overseas service as a national serviceman and reservist with the Royal Australian Navy.

Keen to make his way in the world, Syd put himself through a night school business course.

Marriage and Family life

In his early adult years, Richmond remained the centre of Syd’s life. Through the Loyola Musical Society, he met and fell in love with Josephine. Many in this circle became romantically involved and these couples remained friends for life.

Syd and Jo were married on July 16, 1966 at St Anthony’s Glenhuntly. There would be six children with four arriving in quick succession; Carmel, Bernadette, Claire and Denise. Four years later, Geraldine and Stewart followed.

Family life was understandably busy and at times hectic but the parents dealt with stresses as a team and without exposing the children to worries.

Jo was a wonderful support and mother, managing all the day to day aspects of raising six children, while Syd focused on providing for the family and operating on the bigger social justice stage. Daughter Bernadette recalls:

“It seemed to us that dad had several paid jobs or positions on the go as well as his volunteer work. However, I was never in doubt that we were always very important to him.

“Mum was a wonderful mother and provided strength and stability to Dad and to us all. She was a very strong, capable woman, willing to tackle just about anything. Mum made many of our clothes, was a very good cook and would fix things around the house. When the children were older she took a job with The Advocate in the classifieds until it closed its doors; and, in later life, as well as managing the Ormond Vinnies Centre, learned to fly, took up tap dancing, studied yoga and followed other creative pursuits.”

Syd and Jo worked as a team but, given Syd was very headstrong, things tended to be done on his terms.

It was a strict upbringing; Bernadette can’t imagine how

the family would have managed with so many children without clear boundaries being set, or without the children pulling their weight with household chores. There was a zero tolerance approach to bad behaviour. Respect for one's parents was an important value modelled in the home, a value which Syd's children have since instilled in their own children.

From an early age, the children were aware of the central role of the Church and the associated organisations in their father's life. There was the Piety stall, the poor box and many evenings spent attending meetings.

There was also involvement in the Right to Life and the Hibernian Australian Catholic Benefit Society of which Syd was Vice president. Bernadette remembers the collar made of green velvet with a gold fringe that Hibernian office bearers wore on formal occasions; there were events in parks, home masses and meetings. St Patrick's Day was always a big celebration. Syd's children would play guitar and sing at the masses and then were excused when the formal meetings began.

The formative influences of Catholicism in Syd's life flowed onto his children. Syd took the family to benediction during Lent and they were actively involved in Church life from an early age, acting as altar servers.

Theirs was a household that valued hard work and perseverance. Like many of his generation, Syd bore the legacy of an upbringing which carried the sense of knowing Irish Catholics were the underdog. This possibly fostered his determination to prove himself in the world and protect the beloved culture that was under attack.

Later working life

Syd went on to become the manager and company secretary of the Electricity Supply Association of Australia, secretary of the Australian National Committee of the World Energy Council and member of the Executive Assembly representing Australia. It was a busy schedule and involved quite a bit of travel, taking him often to France. This would dovetail nicely with his international Society involvement which took him to Paris to the Society's headquarters.

SVDP involvement Ormond Conference

When Syd and Jo started their life together, they moved to Ormond, near to Jo's parents' home in Glenhuntly. It was a natural step for Syd to join the local conference, as an active extension of his commitment to his faith.

At the local level, Syd is probably most remembered for starting the Ormond Centre which remains today a successful one, even though it is also regarded as probably the smallest venue the Society has in Victoria. It was officially opened in 1995. Once established however, Jo Tutton was the driving force behind its success. She remained the volunteer manager for many years and would be there every morning to open up

and then lock up, at day's close. Though no longer involved, she is remembered with great affection by long standing volunteers.

A changing of the guard at Ormond Parish brought a new priest who did not share Syd's vision for the Society. Syd shifted allegiances to Glenhuntly parish whose conference was very small, with only a few elderly members. He started an active recruitment drive, speaking at every mass. Within a short time, he had built Glenhuntly into a successful conference. It was yet another example of Syd's driving force when it came to carrying out an idea. He was unstoppable.

State Presidency

Ask anyone for recollections of Syd's Society work and most think of his involvement on State Council and nationally. Syd was made for a bigger stage and he embraced the opportunity to initiate a great deal. He was motivated by both desire and fear. Desire to build the reputation and standing of the Society, and fear that with its ageing population, it could very easily become irrelevant.

Syd voiced his concerns regularly that the Society was under attack and that the State was stepping into the Society's areas of responsibility. He took any opportunity to promote and elevate its standing in the community. As a great believer in the power of stories, he often emphasised the importance of telling the Society's story. As he often said, "If we don't tell it, who will?"

There was an urgency in how he set about initiating and implementing ideas and new approaches. There were programs, there were recruitment drives and there was a commitment to building the Society's capacity to speak out through advocacy and policy. His networking, reaching out to conferences and acknowledging their contribution was a mighty morale booster, the benefit of which might be difficult to quantify. However all good leaders know a happy team is a productive team. Syd's approach was multi-pronged.

Syd was always looking for ways to expand the reach and vision of the Society. He also recognised that the membership was predominantly of retirement age or older. What other initiatives could the Victorian Society take on which could widen its offerings and its volunteer base?

He also added an important layer of expertise with his business acumen. He achieved efficiencies such as bringing all ninety centres at the time, all with separate bank accounts, under one umbrella account.

Another significant capacity Syd brought to the job was his extraordinary, photographic memory and capacity to absorb and retain facts. In the writing of this story, a number of people recounted examples where this ability of Syd's was remarkable.

Ideas people need a big stage and the Society provided this to Syd. Syd served as State president from 2001-2006. While given the word limits, it is impossible to include an exhaustive list, the following are a sample of some of his significant achievements in this period.



Events such as the 150th celebrations of the Society's presence in Melbourne from 1854 were an example of his pride in and desire to put the Society front and centre of life in Victoria.

150th celebrations

This was a big occasion, with official involvement of Archbishop Denis Hart, the Governor-General, Premier Steve Bracks, and the Lord Mayor as well as many overseas dignitaries. When Syd ordered a shindig, he made sure it was a big affair. When it came to the Society, there was to be no hiding its light under a bushel.

For the celebrations, the Society commissioned a tram bearing the full Society logo. It trundled along Melbourne's CBD route, another example that the Society was well and truly open for business and proud to celebrate its place in civil and religious life.

A new head office, Box Hill and a new company

2004 was also the year of the opening of the new Society headquarters at Box Hill. Extensive organisational detail went into this purchase and the relocation of staff from the previous, antiquated site in Little Collins Street.

As well, St Vincent de Paul Aged Care and Community Services was established as a new company within the St Vincent de Paul Society in Victoria. This involved bringing together three distinctive business areas; aged care, homeless/housing services and employment services for people with a disability. Syd was instrumental in making this happen.

The new company limited by guarantee with a single member, the Society of St Vincent de Paul, was devised to meet the Society's desire to remove the major government funded 'Special Works' – as they had started out – from the

immediate control of State Council and place them under the control of a specifically designed corporation that could provide specialist, professional services.

Syd wanted to strengthen and promote what he saw as a unique advantage – the collaboration between the professional and volunteer arms of the organisation. This separate company lives on today as VincentCare Victoria.

This was an indication of Syd's shrewd and pragmatic approach to facing realities. He knew that to be well placed and viable in the future, the Society needed to implement a more professional structure but this must be done while safeguarding the three pillars of the Society: that it is spiritually based, it is a volunteer organisation and it is democratic. He always emphasised the Society's volunteer roots and the need to safeguard this. He travelled widely, visiting as many conferences and centres as he could across Victoria, honouring the wonderful work of the conferences. He took every opportunity to shine a light on the mainly invisible work of the volunteers. Syd always wanted the Society to come out of the shadows while remaining true to its humble, volunteer foundations.

This desire to remain true to the Society's foundational story was always foremost in Syd's thinking as Syd chose new areas and ways to address unmet need. At the same time, there was no false modesty in how good ideas were developed into viable programs. Once Syd had the whiff of a good idea, he set his mind to turning it into a reality, recognising that this could take an investment of time and money. He knew the risk of mickey mouse schemes and would always ensure sufficient due diligence was undertaken.

Compeer

Compeer is one such example with Syd giving the green light for the foundational work to occur in 2003. The St Vincent de Paul Society has always involved people wishing to volunteer their time and talents to help others. Assistance that is face-to-face and personal is particularly valued as it aligns with the founding principles. The Compeer program is based on this same person-to-person principle and provides a system of volunteer support and professional oversight that is essential when people's mental health leaves them vulnerable. So many people suffering from mental health issues have challenging, diminishing or no relationships with family and friends. They rely heavily on professional support but what is almost universally missing is the bond normally provided by family and friends. This is what Compeer sets out to provide.

Compeer was something Syd had seen in Sydney. He talked to many in Melbourne about establishing it in Melbourne. Geoff Brown was one of these people. Geoff's experience of Syd was that once he backed you, you had the running on a new idea. Geoff visited the various places in New South Wales where Compeer was operating. He started the work to establish it in Victoria. Syd gave the green light for Geoff to travel around the State identifying bases for the program. Geoff looks back in gratitude for Syd's willingness to give him



A considerable part of Syd was defined and formed through his work with the Society of St Vincent de Paul.



the time and resources to think it through and incorporate adequate checks and balances which were lacking in the early days in New South Wales.

Syd also agreed that for State Council to back and indeed have a sense of ownership of Compeer, they would need to be educated about mental illness. Geoff was able to engage specialist mental health consultants to run sessions on the weekends with State Council. He remembers the strong sense of backing from Syd.

Keeping the Society story alive

Syd operated on different levels to keep the light of the Society burning bright. He knew the troops needed to be kept engaged in the wider story, the big picture of the Society. They also needed to feel their good works and in the enterprise cases, the money raised was well spent. There was little point if all they did was continue to put a bandaid on a gaping wound. He was a strong advocate for the ‘hand up’ part of the Society’s motto.

In his time as State President, Syd commissioned many reports and books that kept the foundational story of the Society current and present in people’s minds but also, regular reporting on Victorian conference work.

He invited Dr John Honner, a respected Church historian, theologian and former Jesuit to write two concise publications on Blessed Frederic Ozanam and Louise de Marillac. At a local level, he commissioned 40 Conferences 40 Stories, which showcased the diverse range of works across Victorian conferences. It gave a clear picture of the triumphs and the challenges, including conferences that had not continued. Syd

was not one for papering over difficulties. It named challenges and threats to ongoing sustainability of some conferences. These included “fiefdoms”, too much hierarchy, the business vs charity nexus. Syd understood that any rumblings and discontent had to be brought out into the open and sorted if the Society was to forge ahead. In these ways, Syd was sending a very strong message that said – be proud to be part of this legendary international society, have pride in your contribution, and that you are part of this organisation and movement at a local level.

It was also Syd’s love for and the value he placed on story telling that motivated another of his initiatives which has been and will continue to have an enduring benefit.

The Elizabeth Bond Archives

The importance of collecting and preserving records had been supported strongly by a roll call of State Councils but it was Syd’s concern that the substantial collection of material such as conference minutes and various memorabilia be properly housed as an intact collection.

In 2006, the archives moved from inferior lodgings in Brooklyn to a new home at 335 Flinders Lane where it remains today. These premises were identified and secured at a very modest rental negotiated by Syd. The more spacious area has enabled the archives to grow and expand to quite a considerable collection. The “Elizabeth Bond Archives” were named in honour of another wonderful Vincentian whose unstinting dedication to the Society included writing a history of the Victorian Society to 1980. (See *A Call to Serve 2014*: Betty Bond).

Advocacy and poverty development

Syd also recognised that what was missing in Victoria’s organisational capacity was a research capacity. He created a social policy and research position and appointed Gavin Dufty who has remained in this role since 2002. Gavin reflects that Syd’s approach was to enable others and this is what he allowed Gavin the space to do; initiate a range of ground-breaking research work into living costs of low income people, particularly after the impact of privatisation on utilities costs. Syd recognised a role such as this needed



support and guidance. He was instrumental in establishing the Social Justice Committee which steered Gavin’s work.

Syd actively embraced and participated in research that would further his desire to get the Society’s name out and better understood across the wider society while advocating strongly for those missing out. He cleared obstacles to enable a social history of poverty through the eyes of the Victorian Society, to be written. This involved the research team having access to conference minutes going back decades in order to identify how the Society defined and responded to poverty and social exclusion. (2007-2011 “The face of the poor: a history of poverty through the eyes of the St Vincent de Paul Society Victoria over the 20th century).

In his term as State President, Syd invited expansive thinkers as speakers for the annual Ozanam Lecture. A couple of examples were Professor John Molony, author and professor of history, Australian National University; Jesuit priest and respected social commentator, Fr Frank Brennan and Helen Johnston, Director of the Combat Poverty Agency, Ireland.

Syd also encouraged joint advocacy work not only with other Catholic agencies but also ecumenically. In 2003, as debate raged about the direction social security policy was taking in relation to the so called “mutual obligation” welfare to work reforms, the Victorian Society undertook research in association with the Brotherhood of St Laurence and Melbourne University. The research reinforced that this approach was not working for people with the most severe barriers to employment and that significant changes were required.

Serving the Society nationally and internationally

Syd served as National Secretary from June 2006 prior to being elected as National President in March 2008. He was also a member of the Board of St Vincent de Paul Society’s International Council General based in Paris. He was highly respected by Vincentians across the world. There have been many tributes written about him, many of which were included in a Eureka Street article written by Dr John Falzon,

CEO St Vincent de Paul Society National Council, who worked closely with Syd. Here are a couple.

“I cannot forget his smiling face.” (Prakasham, National Project officer for the Society in India;

“Those who have met and known Brother Syd have been privileged to experience his warmth and big heartedness especially in helping the poor and the marginalized,” (Thomas Tan, Coordinator, South-East Asian Region, St

Vincent de Paul Society, Eureka Street 17/12/10)

His contribution on the international stage earned him the extraordinary honour of a papal Knighthood in 2009.

As with his involvement at the State level, Syd nationally, threw himself into all manner of tasks from advocacy, promotion, to hands on administration. He oversaw the move of the national office from Sydney to Canberra. Always on the look out for the need for renewal within the Society, he even took on the challenge of reforming the Society’s New South Wales Council. This was to be a significant battle with much vitriol and recriminations. Doing this late in his life, many have reflected that this was yet another example of Syd’s determination to tackle whatever needed to be done, however unpalatable, even if it would be done at considerable personal cost to himself.

In the first decade of 2000, there were many injustices and discriminatory practices Syd felt strongly about and he never shied away from speaking the truth about these.

He was outspoken in his criticism of the imposition of compulsory income management of people on social security benefits

Another example is where he called for fairness and compassion in Australia’s handling of asylum seekers.

“Our members feel strongly that Australia must always be ready to contribute to the care and support of recently arrived asylum seekers. In doing so we are simply putting into practice the proud Australian tradition of welcoming people



Syd with grandchildren Connor and Ryan, at his investiture, Papal Knighthood, 2009



in need, especially those who have come from situations of great suffering. We stand ready to work with the Government to make this a reality.”

(SVDP National Council media release 2/11/09).

His contributions on the national stage are too numerous to list but again, as with the State Presidency, he utilised a range of ways to lead by example, be a strong advocate and make a difference. He understood that to lead the Society, he must inspire and set an example. He took a strong stand on contentious issues, never shrinking from controversies.

He had a personal interest in editing the Society’s national magazine, *The Record*, which was one vehicle for disseminating his views and he always welcomed thought-provoking articles and personal reflections from others.

Conclusion

Many people remember Syd with great respect and affection. He drew people to him through an infectious enthusiasm for the Society. He was often a step ahead in his thinking.

He could be akin to a bull at a gate, stubborn and impatient. When he wanted something, he wanted it to happen now or very soon after and the world of the Society isn’t always able to respond that quickly.

Like many people of strong character and conviction, he had supporters and critics. He admired many people and many in turn, admired him back. One such person, also an Ozanam Lecture speaker, Social Anthropologist, Fr Gerald Arbuckle described Syd’s commitment to the poor in the following glowing terms.

“His total focus on the needs of the marginalised, his willingness to battle for them – at great cost to himself and his health – is something I will always treasure. Of all the prophetic people I have ever met, he is from the very top shelf drawer.” (Society News Update undated, Vale Syd Tutton)

Syd was the sum of many parts but a considerable part of Syd was defined and formed through his work with the Society of St

Vincent de Paul. As he remained a faithful servant to the Society, he too remained at heart, a Richmond boy, throughout his life. Even in his last days, he continued to speak of the importance of the Society advocating for the poor and of never being afraid to be revolutionary in this defence.

He had a deep faith and was dedicated to the Church. His faith certainly helped Syd face his illness and death with grace. Asked if was afraid of death, he famously stated words to the effect of;

“No, I’m not worried about dying and I’m looking forward to meeting my Maker. If he doesn’t like me, too bad.”

In a fitting tribute to a full and productive life, Syd was farewelled at St Ignatius, Richmond in December 2010. The church was packed with people who knew him and knew of his contributions. One of his heroes was Inigo de Loyola, the soldier-saint who founded the Jesuits, whose motto is ‘Ad maiorem Dei gloriam’ (All things for the greater glory of God). As John Falzon has written, Syd in effect made this motto his own.

1968	Joined St Kevin’s Ormond Conference
2003	Joined St Francis Melbourne Conference
2007	St Anthony’s Glenhuntly Conference,
24/07/07-31/10/07	Interim Conference President
2007	Regional President
2001-2006	Victorian State president
2006-2008	National Secretary
2008-2010	National President
	Board member, International Council General, Paris
2009	Received Papal Knighthood



Br Doug Walsh

Going where he is called

Doug Walsh does not see himself as a natural born leader, rather a facilitator. His life has developed as a result of following others' leads. But along the way, he has become a leader, operating on both a local level through his earlier teaching roles and development of the soup vans and on the international stage, through supporting the poorest of the poor in developing countries.

His devotion to service as a Marist Brother has been a perfect complement to his involvement as a long standing Vincentian. There have been significant influences of family, Church, the Marists, Cardijn and many overlaps, milestones, significant people; all have set him on a path towards working with the poor and the marginalised.

The experience of a country boyhood, moving regularly from an early age established an ease with new surroundings and new people that has been an asset. He is able and willing to adapt to new places and circumstances. Now at seventy eight, he credits young people as a key source of inspiration and motivation.

Like many Vincentians, his path has drawn from overlapping influences and the many committed and vibrant people who have accompanied him on his journey.

Early life

At the risk of confusing the reader, one point needs to be clarified at this stage of the story. Doug was named 'Peter' at birth. The name 'Doug' comes later in the story.

Peter and his twin sister Maureen were born in 1937, the youngest of four, coming five years after Pat, the middle son. There was also eldest son Jack. His early years were spent at Werribee where his father was a teacher at Werribee South primary. The area had a very strong Italian market gardener

community and Peter's father learned Italian in order to communicate with them.

As new postings became available, the family moved, firstly to Melton which in the 1940s, was a little village. Then a couple of years later, to the little Mallee town of Beulah. Peter attended the state school where his dad was headmaster. The two older brothers went off to board at St Pat's Ballarat.

Spending time with farming families, Peter's first ambition was to be a wheat farmer. It was a happy, carefree time, roaming free and going ferreting with his mates.

Then in 1950, the family moved to Bendigo, with Peter starting in Year 8 with the Marist Brothers.

"I was a lonely boy from Beulah. Bendigo by comparison was this huge city."

Peter remembers the Brothers at the school with admiration. Br Gordon was the first he met. He was a 21 year old, 21 stone, gentle giant, filling a doorway at more than 6 and a half feet tall. He was a major influence on Peter and many school mates.

Joining the Marists

Peter formed a strong friendship with three slightly older boys who would on leaving school, embark on becoming Brothers. Peter followed in their path but all three left a few years later.

“As I tell them now, you all left but you were obviously called by God to guide me in this direction and I was the one with the vocation.”

The Marist Order are followers of Mary. The founder of the Marist Brothers, St Marcellin Champagnat and his fellow Marists noted the Jesuit model and fervent following of Jesus but realigned the Order to one which is devoted to Mary.

The Order comprises priests, brothers, nuns and lay people and consequently, has more of a community and family spirit than a traditional order. The Order expanded outside of Europe, going to Oceania region in 1837.

Education was recognised as pivotal to giving people the best chance in life. The teaching doctrine was modelled on De La Salle Brothers

The family unit is very important and also opens up the feminine side of the order. The gentleness of the mother is the spirit the Marists try to emulate. The founder had a great belief in the table as a gathering place. There is a table that has been preserved since the early days when the order was founded. Time around the table remains very important.



Education was recognised as pivotal to giving people the best chance in life.

Name change

Sixty years ago, on July 16, 1955 Peter Walsh knelt down in the chapel, on a cold, frosty morning and received the habit as a postulant. It was announced that Peter Walsh would be known in religious life as Brother Douglas Ian.

“I was 17 when I changed my name. In a sense – I’m 78 now – this is how I’ve been known. All these years I’ve been known as Dougie. I’ve got cousins who are Peters. You ring up the family and they say, which one? Oh, it’s Br. Doug.”

In 1957, after novitiate training at Mt Macedon, Doug headed to Drummoyne, Sydney to undertake teacher training with other novices under Br. Fogarty who was highly regarded by the Education Department. These were the days when government departments such as Education were split according to Catholic/Masonic allegiances. Each looked after their own. As well, the Education Department Inspectors ruled the roost. Then, they were key to a person gaining a teaching position and were far more influential than having a university degree.

While in Sydney, Doug received his Primary B, his first teaching certificate which enabled him to teach in Victoria. He maintained this registration until last year (2014).

Moving to Western Australia

Many young men joined the Marists because they wanted to teach. This wasn’t what Doug had set out to do and really ‘fell’ into teaching because this was the path which the Order set him upon.

The year he qualified to teach, he was sent to Northam in Western Australia, to a little Catholic school of 150 boys, grade 4 to year 10. Doug and two other Marists, ran the school. He remained there until 1960.

In 1957, Northam had many Ukrainian and Polish refugees who had been placed in a holding camp. Doug remembers the impact of the hostilities between Hungary and Russia spilling over at the 1956 Melbourne Olympics, that eventuated in a blood bath in the water polo event.

These refugee families were struggling, with the fathers having little or no income. There was free milk from the school and the locals pulled together in a spirit of generosity. The butcher and the baker provided food and the mothers cooked for the school community. Even though they were challenging times, Doug looks back with great affection on his time there with the other brothers. They were great days.

Western Australia was truly like the end of the world in those days. Doug acknowledges it was very hard on his parents and Maureen that he was sent that far away. His family made the long and arduous trip over for Doug and Maureen’s 21st. In those days, religious life was strict and Doug was not granted leave to attend Maureen’s wedding.

Doug was then sent to Perth for two years and taught at Subiaco Marist school. He taught R.E, maths and sport. It was here that he started his youth work through the Legion of Mary for boys in Year 10. They would say the rosary every week and deliver the Catholic paper, The Record, to Catholic households.

In 1963, he returned to Northam as headmaster staying for 6 years.

Even though separation from family was hard for Doug also, he remembers his years in Western Australia as an adventure and a formative experience.

A brief return to Victoria

In 1969, Doug was sent back to Victoria to Champagnat College in Wangaratta. Then from 1971 to 1973, Doug was at St John's Hawthorn, (now St Joseph's primary school.).

In Hawthorn, Doug became involved in the Young Christian Students (YCS). St John's boys would meet with the girls from Kilmaire. Doug had developed a strong affinity with young people through the Legion of Mary in the Western Australian schools. The Young Christian Workers (YCW) and YCS movement, based on founder Cardijn's philosophy of 'See, judge and act' was very strong in Victoria.

Lessons along the way

Next stop on Doug's travelogue was Forbes in New South Wales, where his main responsibilities were in coaching sport and looking after boarders. Along with swimming and athletics, he was introduced to rugby. Doug was involved in a YCS group there. Doug recalls meeting a young boarder, Tony Clarke, who was a natural leader.

"It was here that I learned I needed to be a facilitator. It wasn't my movement; it was theirs and whereas the other groups folded when I left, I learned to leave the running to others and to concentrate more on being the spiritual advisor. This YCS became a very good group within Wilcannia and Wagga diocese through Clarke's leadership. He is now a Marist brother in Timor Leste."

In the late 1960s, brothers had to undertake a university degree before becoming a Brother. This new breed of Marists came equipped with different skills.

"This was a new motivation for me. I was able to learn from these Brothers that things had changed. They had a better understanding of where the Church was going and had good ideas. I followed them. I've always gained a great deal from being around young people including young brothers, even still today."

The Peter/Doug confusion continues

Doug's Marist brothers tended to call him Dougie and the students called him either Douglas or Doug.

When he went to Wangaratta, he became Br Peter. He was offered the option of changing his name and took it. This continued at Hawthorn and then at Forbes, he was still Br Peter, with Dougie his religious nickname. All the brothers knew him as Dougie.

"We'd have meetings and the head brother would say 'I'll get Dougie to do this and Dougie to do that.' I'd be taking note of all the things I had to do. One day someone came up to me and said, 'I don't know who this Dougie is that's meant to be doing all the work, but you seem to be doing his work for him.'"

Then a young man joined the order and became Doug's assistant in the dormitory at Forbes.



Coaching football at Northam W.A. in the late 1950's

I've always gained a great deal from being around young people including young brothers, even still today.

"His name was Br Peter Walsh so I became known as Br Peter Douglas. In 1976 I was sent back to Bunbury. Everyone there knew me as Br Douglas. I decided I'd give the Peter away."

Doug reports that the two Peters have been in the same community for some time and continue to cope with this quite well.

While in Bunbury, Doug was advised the brothers would be having a sabbatical. The Order ensured their Brothers undertook a refresher course, a second novitiate. The Church changes, Vatican II occurred; there was a need to take stock. A renewal course was proposed.

A benefit as Doug sees it, of belonging to an international order is that the sabbatical was held in Frieberg, Switzerland.

On the way there, Br Charles Howard who became the Order's international Superior General, explained that the sabbatical would be a great opportunity meeting other brothers of similar ages. It was a wonderful experience for a young man like Doug, coming from the other side of the world.

"We were told we must also visit an undeveloped country. I went to Calcutta. I was drawn there partly because of Mother Teresa and also because it was young Australians who were spending time there. People like Moira Kelly and Anne O'Brien who would go on later to work on our soup van."

John travelled with Br. John. On arrival, they went to the House of Dying where the nuns worked and then they went on to the Mother house to visit Mother Teresa.

They spent half an hour with her. She directed Doug to accompany Br. Andrew, an Australian Jesuit, who was working with Mother Teresa. He was training young Indian Brothers to teach. He invited Doug to visit the slums.

“The next day I was taken at 6am to this area I can still remember. It was muddy, with one small, dry patch with a blackboard. The Jesuits were teaching the kids the alphabet. I got involved, using the pointer. Families started to come over and join in the class, looking at this stranger. They all clapped at the end. Then they brought a small cup and saucer and one small biscuit for the guest.”

Br. Andrew told Doug he must accept this. On the way back, he explained that the people would have bought that with whatever money they had for food that day. Doug was upset by this gesture and wondered how he ever could leave these people with so little but such generosity of spirit. It was a big lesson.

When he was heading home to Australia, Doug asked Mother Teresa what advice she could give him.

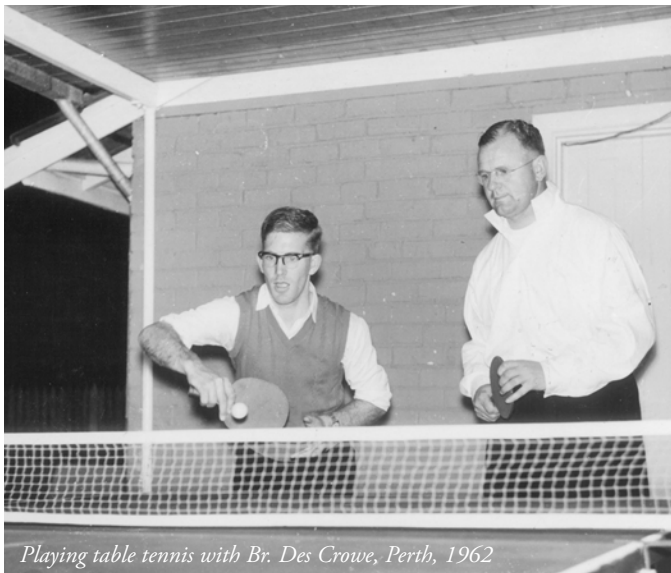
She said “Your heart is here, isn’t it?”

I said, “It sure is.”

“I want you to go back and look for the poor in your own country, your own area.”

Doug had been hoping the Marists would offer him an overseas posting. That’s what he had always wanted. But Mother Teresa was right. He would find his mission with the poor closer to home than Calcutta.

On his way to Switzerland, Doug visited Rome. It was nearing the end of John XXIII’s papacy and afforded Doug the opportunity to think about this pope who had been his hero. Doug reflected that he had been very influential in his life as a young brother. He brought to the papacy simplicity and humility and really valued the ordinary person which has been a hallmark of Doug’s life.



Playing table tennis with Br. Des Crowe, Perth, 1962

St Paul’s Traralgon

In 1978, back in Australia, Doug was put in charge of St Paul’s Traralgon, a school of year 7-10 students, where he became headmaster.

“I enrolled a boy in the school whom no other school would take.

I learnt in 3 weeks why no one else would take him. If he was in a class, he completely monopolised attention. Johnny became my concern, known as my young lad, my young charge. He followed me everywhere. He’d be in my office and we’d do one on one work. I was

determined to keep this kid but after about a month, I had to let him go. It became a justice issue as no one else could learn because of him. I also couldn’t continue to run a school and try to provide the intensive support Johnny needed.”

Doug spent seven years at St Paul’s. In this time, he took immersions to Bourke in New South Wales where Mother Theresa’s sisters were operating in an aboriginal community. Doug believes this period marks the significant beginning of his outreach work with young people.

Overseas missionary work and the beginning of Society involvement

“I wanted to go to an undeveloped country again and to the real poor, the material, destitute poor. I had always been putting my name up when an assignment overseas presented itself. The answer always seemed to be:

“Not now Dougie. We need you here.”

It was said so much, Doug started feeling he could set this phrase to music.

In 1986, an opportunity finally came and Doug went to the Philippines for a year to study at the Jesuit’s East Asian Pastoral Institute. It was an exciting time being the first year of Corazin Aquino’s presidency. The revolution had taken place, the Marcos regime was over and democracy was being restored.

Doug met Fr Tom O’Gorman there who was leading the work of the lay and religious pastoral workers.

On the first day, Fr Tom explained to the group that in going out to the poor in Manila, he hoped this would help inspire their embrace of the poor. He took the group to slums which even today Doug finds hard to describe.

“He took us to one under a bridge and he said mass there. I’d never seen anything like it.”

Doug’s parents had been involved in the Society since he was a child. He could remember them helping families. There was always an unspoken understanding they were helping the poor. At Christmas, there was always some kind of assistance

going on. The boys had been junior members of The Holy Name Society, an avenue for involving younger ones in doing good works.

It was in this period in Manila, that Doug would have his first direct contact with the Society of St Vincent de Paul.

Assist a Student Program

In the mid 1990s, a scheme originally known as Adopt a Student, which would later be changed to Assist a Student, was formed from an idea of John O'Brien and Jim O'Shea's which they developed when supporting a technical school and scheme in India. Doug would be a cofounder of this program. From humble beginnings in Victoria with around sixty students, it has grown to support almost 5,000 students and has expanded across many other Asian countries. Many of the original students entered University and have now embarked on successful career paths. This saw the formation of the PANASCO Conference which meets every four years to establish how it can best support efforts in these countries.

The Society supports this program through twinning.

Danusia Kaska who was running a Young Vinnies in the west of Melbourne and was on State Council also became involved in Assist a Student, through meeting Doug. He recommended that she visit the Philippines. She went there on her own and it was an eye opener, confronting poverty on this scale. She and Doug would become quite a team, promoting the program to schools, parishes and raising funds. Like many who have worked alongside Doug, their connection would be ongoing and cross over into other areas of service.

As the program expanded, it became Australia-wide with Br Doug appointed National Project Officer and Coordinator for the Assist a Student program, a position he held for many years. He has also made significant inroads in promoting this program to Catholic schools. Danusia and Doug had done most of the footwork until this point but now as a national program, it was able to acquire administrative support.

Bagong Barrio

In Manila, back at the Institute, some local pastoral workers spoke about their work, explaining what they did. Doug remembers a woman, Placid, talking about the lack of education in the slums, most notably in Bagong Barrio.

The group went out each weekend and stayed with families. Doug slept alongside a family of seven. The father was dying of tuberculosis. Only one child was going to school, a girl named Nida. She was the brightest child in the family and



Doug with his mother and sister. Bendigo, 1972.

This was the start of an education program for Bagong Barrio with which the Victorian Society of St Vincent de Paul would go on to have a long association.

she understood her responsibility to come home and teach the other children. Doug returned to Australia, determined to support the continuation of her education. This was the start of an education program for Bagong Barrio with which the Victorian Society of St Vincent de Paul would go on to have a long association.

The Bagong Barrio Education Fund continued to grow and to ensure the success of the program, Br. Doug enlisted the support of James Lee, named as Young Australian of the Year (Vic) 2003 and founder of Wednesday Night Tutoring, a youth-based voluntary tutoring program for refugee and migrant children living in housing commission flats in Melbourne.

On Br. Doug's retirement in 2005, James was appointed the new director and sought to expand the program with more students and greater connections between the Philippines and Australia. He enlisted the support of Liz Stearne, Michelle Miller and Michelle de Guzman, who together make up the BBEF Leadership Team in Australia today.

Thanks to the ongoing support of sponsors and leadership team members from Australia and the Philippines, the program is flourishing with the hope of continued expansion in the future. Over the years, there have been as many as 80 students being sponsored.

Doug met many young people including a 17 year old young woman, Lolita. The Society helped in bringing her out to Australia. She is now a religious, belonging to a Philippino order and is working in Brazil.

While Doug was there, he also made good connections with members of the Philippines Society National Council, who have remained great friends.

Assumption College, Kilmore

In 1987, he returned to Australia, to yet another posting, this time, Assumption College Kilmore, initially as R.E Coordinator and later becoming boarding master. He would stay for nine years. It was another special time for Doug and a place where he learned a great deal.

During this posting, Doug took many young people into the boarding school who really needed extra help. He learned that this strategy didn't always work. If boys weren't coping at home, they wouldn't cope as boarders. This later led to him working with Marist Education Welfare Service and founding the Doxa School.

He was very conscious he was representing the parents of these fulltime boarders and was in effect, a father figure to the boys. He had a great relationship with all their parents and worked alongside some talented people.

"Val Daley was a wonderful woman, a mother figure to the boys. Another wonderful woman, Barbara Radford, looked after the kids with special needs. Barbara worked tirelessly with me and while it helped some to a degree, it probably wasn't enough of what was truly needed."

"I learned a lot about family. The boys referred to themselves as 'Dougie's boys' and I referred to them as 'Dougie's boys'. If staff ever had an issue with one of my boys, I'd be over at the office in a flash to represent their best interests."

Doug joined the local conference in Kilmore, the first he'd formally joined. He started doing home visits. The Society in this time flew out three of the Philippino pastoral workers and they came to Kilmore. They were freezing in Victoria's winter weather and the Society provided them with warm clothes. Doug brought them to Melbourne and they met the overseas group. John O'Brien and Jim O'Shea were instrumental in helping this to occur.

They went home and told their national council they wanted to form a conference. They became the first slum conference. It's had its ups and downs but is still going. Importantly, the education program is still going.

The best religion lesson ever

It was while at Kilmore that Doug realized the importance of the Marist approach: Learning on the job, through life experience rather than in the classroom, was the best way.

When he started at Kilmore, he had Wednesday nights off

and would catch the bus to Melbourne spending the evening on the North Melbourne soup van. In those days, the Mathew Talbot van, the first one established, was based out of Ozanam House.

Doug was teaching the Gospel to the Year 11 boys and they were not that interested in the stories.

He decided to take a group of boys with him on the van, the following week. The boys were excited about getting out of the classroom.

They arrived back in Kilmore quite late. These were the days before mobile phones and the school had a dormitory phone. Boarders were expected to go to bed at a certain time but would have the radio on.

"I could hear Julian, one of the boys speaking. I said "Julian, we've had a late night, there are people trying to go to sleep. Would you stop talking?"

The kids called out to me:

"Julian's on the radio."

It was coming through the speakers. They were all listening."

It was talkback radio and Doug heard Julian recount the trip to Melbourne to go out on the soup van. The gist of what Julian was saying was it had been a marvellous night, Br Doug took us down, he works there regularly. Before we went, we heard the Good Samaritan story. It was wonderful and the people on the street were terrific."

"I'm thinking to myself, this is the best religion lesson I've ever given."

Doug met up with Julian years later and recalled the soup van visit. He told Doug he was taking his kids on it too.

Moving to Melbourne and increasing involvement in the Society

In 1996, Doug moved to Melbourne to be a part of the Marist Education Welfare Service, (MEWS). He continued doing the soup van run Wednesday nights. In the early days, it went to places that have since shut down such as the old Salvation Army Gill near the market. Doug remembers calling in there one night.

"I heard my name called out. I turned around to see a bearded man I didn't know, walking towards me. You don't remember me Br Doug? I'm Johnny from Traralgon. I looked into that bearded face and something of that year 7 face I remembered emerged, even though it's 20 years later. It's the kid no other school would have. He said I want to thank you. I said, but I kicked you out. No, you looked after me in Year 7."

"I'm thinking to myself, this is the best religion lesson I've ever given."

How've you been Johnny?

I've been in and out of jail a few times but I'm doing okay. I've got a nice girlfriend now."

The first week Doug was in Melbourne, he went to Fitzroy mobile conference and told Gavin O'Connor he wanted to join a conference.

He told Doug to visit Margaret Oats in Johnston Street Collingwood. She worked out of the local parish where she had a cupboard to store goods.

Doug asked when the conference met and she invited him to come to her home one morning at 11am. A group were there and Margaret was looking after everyone, making them cups of tea. Doug asked when the meeting would start and she said it had started.

There were no prayers or the usual formalities associated with a conference meeting. She told Doug if he wants a meeting, come to the region. He attended the next meeting at the presbytery and ended up as regional president.

As regional president, he was thrown in at the deep end. The Johnston Street store was losing money and the Society wanted to close it but Margaret was vehement it would remain open. She dragged Doug to the store one Saturday morning to meet with Society representatives.

"The store was trying to break even and we ended up achieving this. Marg organised the troops. I was a regional president with no experience. I remember reading up about what a regional president was meant to do."

Organising the soup vans

Initially, there was only one van. It was, by all accounts, a fairly amateur arrangement. Most of the vannies were not Vincentians and there was no signage on the van to indicate the Society's involvement.

The vannies had never asked the Society for money, just the van. Doug also came to realise as regional president, the soup van came under his responsibility. Doug suggested as regional president, he'd talk about any money issues at regional and State level meetings.

By this time, there had been a second van started up at Footscray. The Collingwood Soup Van, commencing in 1998, would become the fourth operating. (Moe established one in 1997). Doug had established an enduring friendship with Margaret Oats who a few days before she died, had requested that he look after her people in Collingwood. Leo Holt, long standing president of the Collingwood van and involved from the beginning, sees this operation as a significant way in which Oats' contribution has been honoured and continued.

The Collingwood soup van along with the Fitzroy one, became part of the Melbourne region with the Footscray van always remaining separate. The soup vans operation has expanded to now also include Berwick, Endeavour Hills as well as Moe.

Doug visibly winces recalling the days of portable gas cylinders and gas burners in the vans and vannies never completely sure if everything was turned off.

The vans have come a long way from the days when there was little attention given to risk issues. Doug visibly winces recalling the days of portable gas cylinders and gas burners in the vans and vannies never completely sure if everything was turned off. The intentions were always good; the solution and implementation could be less than perfect.

As the soup van program expanded and as it became obvious there were many regulatory issues to be complied with, the Society realised it needed to formally review the operations.

At this time Doug was working with the Young Vincentians and met James Lee who was involved in Assist A Student Program. Danusia Kaska was on that committee as well. It was another example of Doug enjoying the energy and ideas these young Vincentians generated.

Through James, Doug was able to invite his father John who had business expertise, to examine some of the practices. John checked the vans and realised everyone was doing their best with substandard equipment. John came to State Council and told them they were exposed to all kinds of risks with no policies or procedures. There were many compliance issues requiring attention from registering volunteers through to ensuring proper food handling procedures were being followed. The Society suddenly realised what a big undertaking the soup vans was and understood it had significant responsibilities.

There have been many changes in practices over the years, many relating to safety. In the early days, the vans did not have fixed street stops; they tended to go wherever they knew people requiring support were such as squats, rough sleeping areas. These people who the vannies describe as friends would tip off the vannies that there were others living – perhaps illegally somewhere – who needed a visit. This could be counterproductive as the appearance of the soup van tipped off locals and police as to the location of squatters.

These visits also could place the vannies at risk. They could never be quite sure how they would be received. The current system of fixed stops seems to work well. When there is trouble at a particular stop such as a rooming house, Doug, Danusia and the team leader assess risks and identify alternative or temporary precautionary action.

Doug sees the team leaders as vital to the success of each soup van roster. There are seven teams every night of the week and while all are doing the same kind of work, they each leave their individual mark on how they do it.



The Society suddenly realised what a big undertaking the soup vans was and understood it had significant responsibilities.



In 2008, a Soup Van Coordinator, Caroline Stubbs was appointed to start the process of instituting policies and practices. This important role has continued and is currently held by Danusia Kaska.

Partnerships

Over the years, there have been many loyal supporters and donors who have contributed to the expansion and better service offered by the soup vans around Melbourne and Moe. Doug and many of the vannies have been veteran networkers, striking up many significant relationships to the advantage of the soup vans. Tasty Trucks, whose main business is providing pre-packaged lunches to building sites, factory workers and offices, has been supporting the vans for many years. Managing Director Colin Lear from Tasty Trucks has been pleased to donate leftover food to the vans on weekdays, that would otherwise be wasted. He has also assisted with the design of the van fitout to best meet their unique purpose and provide a safe environment for vannies and recipients.

A sponsorship with Energy Australia has enabled a new van to be purchased for Moe but also has enabled greater awareness of the work of the soup vans in the broader community.

Camberwell Rotary which have been longstanding supporters of Margaret Gurry's homework program, also got behind the soup van program and provided a van for Fitzroy thanks to Rotarian Eric Heyburn.

Individual parishes also get behind the vans, taking on responsibility for ongoing rosters, fundraising and raising awareness.

Funding through philanthropic trusts and local councils has

also provided assistance in a variety of valuable ways. Over the years, this has included bringing kitchen facilities, where food is prepared, to the necessary food regulations standards and enabling the purchase of fresh food

As a Marist, he had put his hand up many times for a posting overseas, always to be told, he was needed locally. It would be the Society that enlisted his services as spiritual advisor and as national project officer – both fluid roles that Doug has made his own – to the National Overseas Development Committee. These opportunities would fulfil this need he had to work with the most marginalised in developing countries. Doug attended all their meetings in this capacity but he was increasingly more and more involved, spurred on as he was from his Manila Bagong Barrio experience. It was here he worked alongside many committed Vincentians such as John O'Brien, Jim O'Shea and Gerard Dowling.

Doug attended the four-yearly Pan Asian Congress Conference, an initiative of the National Society. This took him to many different places: South Korea, Myanmar, Indonesia, East Timor, Thailand, India and Pakistan. The Society has been able to assist in response to natural disasters and in maintaining support for vital educational projects. Doug was having direct contact with people living in dire poverty in these countries, meanwhile back home, the soup vans were growing as demand called for an increased response.

Panasco and associated overseas work and the soup vans were Doug's two priorities, running in parallel. He started working with Young Vincentians in order to develop educational projects overseas. The Victorian Society gained approval to trial Assist A Student for 12 months. This was over twenty years ago and it is still operating.



He credits the Young Vincentians he has worked with as inspirational and tireless in their efforts.

Doug credits the work of many he has worked alongside in the international projects arena as responsible for some valuable outcomes. He is immensely proud of Assist A Student Education program which was initially approved for a twelve month trial. It continues to assist many students overseas twenty years later.

He credits the Young Vincentians he has worked with as inspirational and tireless in their efforts.

Promoting the Society's causes

Doug regularly talks to groups as varied as school students to corporate gatherings in order to promote the good works of the Society and to help fundraise.

The extent of his experience over the years means that he has many stories down pat. There are three particular stories he tells about soup vans, to illustrate the breadth of the work. The stories are engaging and contain key, simple messages. He often visits schools that are intending to take students on a soup van shift. Doug intends the talks as a form of preparation for the students and teachers.

Doug wants the audience to better understand the nature of homelessness, disadvantage in all its manifestations and the difference vannies can make when they meet people in friendship, with respect and without judgement. He cautions the audience to never assume to know a person's circumstances. The soup van is also much more than simply food. It is a bridge to a relationship and the building of trust but vannies have to keep listening. Importantly vannies must know, that tonight might just be the night someone really needed support. Be open to respond to this call.

Doug often reflects that he was attracted to the Marist Brothers; it was a real calling. He never aspired to be a teacher but the experience of teaching migrant kids in north Western Australia was a pivotal one. He often ponders on how his experience was so markedly different to the way in which Australia today treats this vulnerable group of people.

"While there was a need then to be a teacher, I think that if I was starting out today, I would have just done what I've done through St Vincent de Paul. That really was the calling that started when Mother Teresa told me to go home and find the poor in my own country."

Doug thinks about the path that ensues; leading him to the soup vans and to the chance meeting with Johnny after so many years.

"I'm very grateful to the Society for letting me exercise my passion for the poor. They've been the catalyst and the vehicle."

Order of Australia 2009

In 2009, Doug was honoured with the Medal of the Order of Australia. The award citation was 'For services to the community through the St Vincent de Paul Society'. Some of course thought the award was for his soup van work. This is the focus of work by which many know Doug, but he is a man of many talents and achievements. The award was really acknowledgement of the full gamut of his involvement, also including his overseas work, especially the Bagung Barrio Education Fund.

Doug's contribution to people who are marginalised in our

society, however, goes well beyond that: it includes a sustained commitment to disadvantaged young people through the establishment of the Doxa schools; as well as service on the Council of Catholic Social Services Victoria as the nominee of the Leaders of Religious Congregations. In responding to offers of congratulations with his customary humility, Doug stressed that his gratitude for the many people who have assisted him in his endeavours – their love and compassion for the poor have always inspired him.

Exodus Community

Doug is now living in community in West Heidelberg, the public housing area that grew out of the former Olympic Athletes Village. Doug and another Marist, Br Harry assist with the Exodus Community, a Marist initiative which began in the late nineties at the invitation of the local parish priest. It is a welcoming place with many volunteers working with locals in a spirit of supporting, teaching and encouraging.

Doug smiles at how things have turned out. He recently talked to his Provincial.

“God has called me to spend the rest of my time in Melbourne. I think the overseas posting might be out.”

Doug still wants the opportunity to do further immersions. In the meantime, he prefers to live in a community in a disadvantaged area and be part of the daily operation of a Society conference.

Conclusion

Many themes run through Brother Doug’s life. He moved several times as he was growing up, from the outskirts of Melbourne to the Mallee and then Bendigo. As a brother, there were many more moves across Australia. He went where he was told to go. An acceptance of impermanence is one theme; so is obedience.

Doug recognised an inherent power in the discipline of obedience while at the same time, learning to let go and embrace discernment as the new approach following Vatican II. After Vatican II there was probably a little more consultation and less was imposed on Doug. Still, he has effectively set up home in at least fifteen places. Perhaps these moves helped form his easy going nature. He goes with the flow pretty much.

Turning 78 this year, he continues to draw energy from young people. They are a life force and an inspiration to him. He will take a group of sixteen school students to Manila at the end of the year, to experience Bagong Barrio. His drive to keep educating young people is limitless. His zest for life and for the ordinary person is a central motivator. That Doug now lives in community in West Heidelberg seems the perfect next stage in a life of responding to local need.

The Society would be a poorer place if Doug had never become involved in both the soup vans, the vital overseas work; indeed all the spheres where he has had influence. We give thanks for people like Doug.

1998	Joined Collingwood Assistance Centre
2001-2012	President, Collingwood Assistance Centre
2009	Joined and became President, Fitzroy Soup Van
2009	Awarded OAM
2007-2009	Melbourne Regional President
2010-2012	Acting Regional President, Melbourne
2010-2013	Melbourne Region, Twinning Officer National Overseas Project Officer

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St Vincent de Paul Society
VICTORIA

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