

The Record

SUMMER 2023/2024



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



EYEING THE FUTURE
CONGRESS 2023+



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NATIONAL COUNCIL of AUSTRALIA Inc. *good works*

The Society is a lay Catholic organisation that aspires to live the Gospel message by serving Christ in the poor with love, respect, justice, hope and joy, and by working to shape a more just and compassionate society.

This logo represents the hand of Christ that blesses the cup, the hand of love that offers the cup, and the hand of suffering that receives the cup.

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

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

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



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WELCOME TO CONGRESS 2023+



PHOTO: ROBIN OSBORNE

Uncle Brendan Kerrin, who delivered a Welcome to Country on Wongal land, pictured with National President Mark Gaetani before the start of Congress 2023+

On the cover...

St Vincent de Paul Society's landmark Congress 2023+ was held in Sydney from 27-29 October 2023. It was the first such event since 2017 and follows a long tradition of national conferences where the past, present and future of the Society have been discussed and debated within the spiritual framework that defines our Catholic-inspired mission of helping people in need.

Some 202 delegates from across Australia attended the event, which was focused on how the Society can revitalise its practices in order to meet the challenges faced by charities at a time of increasing pressures resulting from today's economic and social circumstances.

The Record is pleased to present a cross-section of photos taken over the course of Congress 2023+ by Gene Ramirez, a photographer who has widespread experience working with Catholic media organisations. A comprehensive gallery of images from the event can be seen online at vinnies.link/congress-photos or through this QR code -





My thanks for making this a rewarding first year

As we approach the end of the year, I would like to devote my final contribution for 2023 to reflecting on several events and subsequent highlights of my presidency to date.

Whilst I have only been in the role for a brief time there has been much that we have accomplished. I commenced formally in the role in March of 2023. I would like to formally acknowledge and thank my predecessor – Claire Victory for her time as National President. During Claire’s term she displayed and practiced many attributes which contributed to her success as National President - dedication, professionalism and compassion for the Society and her community, to name but a few.

In May of this year, I was honored to address the Ozanam Conversation held at the Australian Catholic University in Melbourne. The event is held each year and is in honour of our founder, Blessed Frédéric Ozanam. The theme of the conversation was “Surviving Through Disasters” and the role we can play in disaster recovery.

Global warming is now very much a part of our strategic thinking at a national level and with a predicted scorching summer and associated threat of bushfires, learnings from the Ozanam lecture will very much come into play.

In September, I was pleased to release a report at Parliament House, Canberra commissioned by the Society and prepared by the Australian National University, titled *A Fairer Tax and Welfare System for Australia*. The report revealed how modest changes to personal income tax, welfare and superannuation policy can significantly alleviate poverty and financial stress. The report models three options for the government to consider, with the highest, and preferred option, lifting 834,00 people out of poverty.

At a recent gathering at the Vatican on 19 November commemorating World Day of the Poor 2023, Pope Francis was quoted as saying, ‘And thinking of this immense multitude of the poor, the message of the Gospel is clear: let us not bury the wealth of the Lord. Let us spread charity, share our bread, multiply love... Poverty is a scandal.’

In June of this year, together with Claire, Frank and Kevin McMahon, I was fortunate enough to attend the ICG General Assembly, which occurs every six years with its primary tasks being the election of the new International President General (IPG), confirmation of changes to Statutes, updates on international activities and various presentations. Three candidates presented themselves for election, with Juan Manuel Buergo from Spain elected as the 17th IPG. The event was very much a mixed bag of highlights and challenges, with much work to be done on governance at the International Council General table.

Together with Frank Brassil, International Vice President for the Oceania region, we were honoured to be invited to attend the 50th anniversary of the establishment of the first conference in the Kingdom of Tonga.

The festivities include Mass celebrated by Cardinal Soane Patita Painin Mafi, Archbishop of Tonga, followed by a celebratory lunch. The lunch gathering included Tongan cultural festivities such as traditional dancing, singing and food. Tonga has a population of a little over 100,000 and a very active Society, with 19 Conferences spread across its main islands. Whilst in the region we also took the opportunity of visiting our Vincentian friends in Fiji.

A profound disappointment for many in our community was the failure of the recent referendum in enshrining an advisory First Nations voice in the Australian Constitution.

Whilst the result must be respected the decision not to enable First Peoples to have a greater say in government decisions that impact their families and lives has the very real repercussion of further disenfranchising them. We, including government, are all now called to provide innovative policy advice, direction and support to ensure we are ‘closing the gap’ and prioritising reforms.

Recently I was invited to attend the opening and blessing of the newly constructed Bethlehem House in my home state of Tasmania. Bethlehem House is one of the Society’s good works, providing transitional and medium-term housing and associated services for men experiencing homelessness in Hobart. The facility was established by members some 50 years ago and is a fine example of the practical work we do every day in all states and territories.

Without doubt the highlight of the year for me and I’m sure for the entire Society, including members, volunteers and staff, has been the delivery of an extremely successful Congress 2023+.

The need for revitalisation and change and the importance of managing change was a key theme to emerge from our gathering, and there is much work to be done. I am confident that Congress 2023+ will provide pathways for implementing the kind of change that the Society needs to revitalise our mission and to better serve people in need.

Finally, I would like to thank all our Members, Council office bearers, Volunteers, Society supporters and Staff for their dedicated work in delivering upon our Mission and Vision. We are truly blessed to have such wonderful people engaged in the work of the Society.

A happy and holy Christmas to all, and I look forward to working with you all in 2024. **R**



I, therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love...

Ephesians 4:1-6

Around the time of the International Year of the Family in 1994, the then-Prime Minister emphasised the meaning of the term 'equity' in public policy. A dictionary definition (Mirriam Webster. of this word gives "dealing fairly and equally with all concerned" For many social justice advocates, treating all Australians as equal disregarded the fact that not all Australians are equal, with differences arising from age, race, colour, gender, ethno-specific culture or other traits or characteristics that are not shared by everyone.

The International Year of the Family was a time to recognise and celebrate the uniqueness of the family and the building blocks that they provide and upon which our society flourishes. Our nation's recognition of the unique place of our First Nations peoples within our community, alongside our welcoming of diversity, is reflected in our multicultural communities.

For governments of all persuasions, ensuring that everyone has the resources to actively and fully participate in the life of their local community is a challenge. Place-based approaches to the offering of government funded supports teaches us that we must be mindful not to adopt a "one size fits all approach".

The Society's founders recognised that not all Companions were the same. They knew that individual Companions require different attention so that different options of support can be tailored to best address their hardships. For nearly two centuries, getting to know an individual by walking alongside them has been a proven approach for the way the Society's Members respect the inherent human dignity of each person they come in contact with.

Papal encyclicals, the first being *Rerum novarum* in 1891, have articulated the principles of social justice that Society Members have been putting into action since the first Conference was established in Melbourne in 1854 (see Michael Quinn's article, Faith, hope and charity, in this issue of *The Record*).

More recent, the promulgation of the Catholic Social Teaching *preferential option for the poor* epitomises the approach Society Members adopt when giving a hand up to our Companions and those who come to the Society for support. The needs of the most disadvantaged and most vulnerable Australians are prioritised. This can mean that the most disadvantaged received greater assistance in comparison to those not experiencing deep disadvantage.

A recent conversation with the Assistant Minister for Competition, Charities and Treasury revealed the

Albanese Government's commitment to bringing the synonyms of 'fair' and 'just' to its understanding of 'equity' and to incorporate a preferential option for our most disadvantaged citizens in public policy.

As Minister Andrew Leigh described it, 'I'm at a local sport track and can see amongst the youth lined up on the starting line a runner who has the very latest designer running shoes and another who is bare footed. Our approach is to assist the bare-foot young person before we provide assistance to the youth who is well resourced for the race.'

This nuance to the application of the 'equity' concept in the context of public policy is a watershed moment for Australian charities and social justice advocates!

With respect to the social justice appetite of our Members, we continue to draw on their feedback about the situations being faced by Companions and the many new people who are seeking assistance as a response of the ongoing cost of living crisis.

Things are bad and continuing to get worse. National Shelter, whose board I sit on, reported recently that rental affordability is hitting "all time lows" across the nation. Although mortgaged homeowners are not immune from rate rise pressures, most of our Companions are renters and many are struggling to keep a roof over their heads. Putting food on the table at every mealtime is no longer taken for granted.

We know this because we are now assisting the 'new working poor', dual low-income families who just cannot keep on top of their everyday expenses. The Society, along with other charities, provides some respite to allow mums and dads to access the essentials of life during these times.

National Council continues to prepare submissions that respond to the ongoing and numerous government inquiries and reviews being undertaken by the Australian Government. At the same time, we have established avenues of contact with Ministers and advisers, and we are using these to communicate current information about the dire circumstances our Members report are being faced by a growing number of people.

We thank our Members for the invaluable work they do to give Companions and those in need a ray of hope. We encourage them to continue to report to our State/Territory and Regional Councils the frontline facts about everyday life in local communities, both urban and regional. Your information is being shared with the Government and the Parliament in order to help bring about a fairer Australia. **R**

Making Space for more Grace

BY ANGELA UYBARRETA MGL

A puzzle reveals a story. I've been pondering these words as I relish in the graces from attending the recently concluded Congress 2023+. I have never been prouder to be a Vincentian as I engaged in various animated and fruitful discussions. I discovered more and learned from the collective voices of over 200 delegates from across Australia.

It was inspiring to be surrounded by driven, like-minded people who were simply open to immerse themselves in experiencing the Congress theme of "journeying together and revitalising mission".

The entire weekend was a unique opportunity to gather, to listen and be reminded of who we are and how we can grow as a Society in fulfilling God's deeper desire to relate in new ways to all companions we serve. More importantly, Congress 2023+ was an intentional time to look at important trends, issues, and challenges we were facing within.

The majority of the hard work and crucial conversations happened on Day 2. Here we looked at how we can focus and adapt as if we were turning puzzle pieces in the edges and middle, sorting centre-piece issues of membership, leadership, communication, collaboration, and governance.

Our sumptuous dinner was extra special, listening to insights from the panel discussion led by Ms Geraldine Doogue AO with guests Bishop Vincent Long OFM Conv (Diocese of Parramatta), Andy Rajapakse MAICD (Rotary International) and Ms Rebecca Bromhead (Society Member).

Each puzzle piece belongs somewhere.

Rebecca Bromhead highlighted how the youth are "finding God through Vinnies". In our ongoing search for meaning and purpose, this rings true because what we offer within the Society are not just the creatively unique volunteering opportunities but a faith and relationship-building culture they won't find anywhere else.

When we engage in authenticity, real connection happens. The hunger for spirituality is also met within the friendships borne out of sharing life's challenges.

All these were reinforced by Andy Rajapakse when he spoke of how charities need to invest for the future, which "belongs to the young", and that we need to "put all possible resources into the young generation".

It was heart-warming to hear that Bishop Long's first



"shopping experience" in Australia was at a Vinnies shop. He said he felt embraced and welcomed by the shop volunteers. His encouragement was for Vincentians not to be addicted to a "growth mentality", quoting Pope Francis about how "less is more".

All these gems from our panellists urged us to make space for God's movement as we look more closely into where each puzzle piece must go. Getting in touch with what's before us by looking at the realities facing us helps to take a closer look to see where everything fits now.

Puzzles take time. But the art of putting it one piece at a time will eventually bring it all to completion.

What I witnessed at Congress 2023+ was the enormity of love and commitment that each Vincentian had to bring the message to our companions that they matter. It can be a long and hard journey, especially when pieces don't seem to interlock and are not correctly placed.

Only God who is the Master Jigsaw Planner can see what its entirety looks like, but Congress will always be proof that there are no insurmountable barriers we cannot face together as a Society. For the task of the heart is to receive the graces of courage to "face new peripheries" and to open ourselves to new graces of trust and surrender.

Beyond Congress, each of us will continue to play a part in reviving our mission. The next puzzle piece is the invitation to respond from the head to the heart. **R**

Sr Angela Uybarreta is a member of the order *Missionaries of God's Love Sisters*

‘Adaptation to a Changing World... the Society constantly strives for renewal...’

- *The Rule*

BY LEO TUCKER

“For it is as if a wealthy person, going on a journey, summoned his servants and entrusted their property to them; one received five talents, another two and another one”. (Matt. 25.14-30)

This brief narrative account from the Gospel of Matthew, the parable of the talents, tells us that a man entrusted his property to three servants: one received five talents, another two, the other, one, then he went away. On return the man came to settle these accounts. The one with five talents and two talents transformed them, adding another five and two talents. But the servant with one hid the talent and returned only the talent given.

This parable holds much significance for the Society today. We have been given an important gift to be nourished and cherished, not just for our own sakes but for the people we walk closely with in service. However, we could hold this gift emotionally in fear and trepidation, returning only a single response of compassionate care to those asking our assistance, or we could step out of conservative comforts, striving for the best in care, practice, excellence in our preferential option for the poor and the vulnerable.

At the recent National Congress 2023+ there was much discussion and deliberation regarding our “story” and our “identity”. Our founding stories leave us much to ponder, especially Frédéric Ozanam who expressed, near the end of his life, that the “chief work of the Society, was the saving of souls”!

As challenging as these words may be, we need to reflect on them with a contemporary vision. In this way the chief work of the Society is aspiring to live the Gospel message or to live the call of our mission by serving Christ in the vulnerable or the heart of our spirituality, striving to shape a more just and compassionate society.



I heard this statement in one conversation at Congress, that in our identity “we are spiritual and connected”. Personally, I understand this statement to mean an “identity” embracing the ministry of Jesus advocating radical inclusivity, accompaniment and restoration. In this, our Vincentian spirit calls us to continue a pastoral ministry and to embed it in the very fabric of our story. But importantly this must be through listening and understanding the signs of the times, today and for tomorrow.

Such mission imperatives are lived out through our Catholic Social Teaching principles of dignity of the human person, preferential option for the poor and vulnerable, solidarity and subsidiarity, in striving to transform lives and support communities.

St Pope John XXIII expressed two reflections at the beginning of the Second Vatican Council; in the first he used the Italian term *aggiornamento*, which means to update, to renew, and to listen closely to the signs of our times. This thought is echoed in *The Rule* which states that the Society “seeks to be ever aware of the changes that occur in human society”.

The second reflection by Pope John was that *We are not here to guard a museum, but to cultivate a flourishing garden of life*, or as Pope Francis expressed it in *Querida Amazonia*, we are not here to *safeguard ashes!*

The St Vincent de Paul Society also needs to cultivate and hear these signs of the times as our Mission and *The*



The mission that inspired our founders is the very voice of our identity

Rule call us to listen, cultivate and transform those we serve and those we walk with in service. In this, *The Rule* reminds us that, ‘Adaptation to a Changing World, faithful to the spirit of its founders, the Society constantly strives for renewal, adapting to changing world conditions. It seeks to be ever aware of the changes that occur in human society and the new types of poverty that may be identified or anticipated. It gives priority to the poorest of the poor and to those who are most rejected by society’.¹

I believe our “identity” is multi-faceted but as many stressed at Congress it is Catholic at its heart. Bishop Vincent Long of the Parramatta Diocese stated that

we need to *act like critical yeast in critical time*. Yeast is the active ingredient which lifts and gives life and body to bread. Our identity, then, is the new wine for new wine skins in a Church with many challenges. The mission that inspired our founders, responding to the imperatives of the Gospels, and giving voice to the principles of our Catholic Social Teaching traditions, is the very voice of our identity as spirit-led leaders recognising new moments of opportunity for our future.

I share the Congress Prayer as we pray and continue this journey as one...

Lord,

We pray for the wisdom of the Holy Spirit as the St Vincent de Paul Society in Australia embarks on a journey together, revitalizing our mission. Give each of us a discerning heart, O Lord, to hear your voice, an openness to listen, and courage to elevate our voice and the voice of our companions today and in the future. Lead the Society to be open to inspiration and creative vision. Help us all to embrace new ways of serving each other and our companions, drawing inspiration from the spirit of our Founders.

Amen **R**

1. The Rule 1.6

Leo Tucker is Executive Director, Mission and Formation, St Vincent de Paul Society NSW

The Society of today and tomorrow

Congress 2023+ charts a revitalisation journey

Revitalisation, a word embedded with meanings for the St Vincent de Paul Society – growth, social relevance, diversity, inclusivity – was the central theme of the national Congress 2023+ held in Sydney from 27-29 October 2023.

The first such event since 2017, it was attended by 202 Member delegates from around Australia, as well as Vincentians from the USA (National Council President, John Berry) and New Zealand (President Gerard Stevens and Vice-President Mike Daly), and supportive staff members.

Congress 2023+ was officially opened by National President Mark Gaetani who was elected to the position in late 2022 and assumed the position in March this year, following the presidency of Claire Victory who was also a Congress 2023+ attendee.

Opening an event destined to spend much time on discussing the need for change, Mr Gaetani said Ms Victory was a ‘living example of how much things have changed,’ being the Society’s first national female leader. To the gathering’s enthusiastic acclaim, he noted her ‘dedicated service as National Council President’ and encouraged attendees to recognise her presence and acknowledge her many achievements.

The Society had travelled a great distance since the first Congress of fifty years ago, Mr Gaetani noted, and this year’s event was marked by ‘incredible diversity’.

‘One of our delegates has been with the Society for more than 56 years – what wonderful experience! Just as importantly, some Member delegates have joined us quite recently. Between all of us here tonight, we share over 2,326 years of experience’, he said.

‘Although today’s world may seem very different to the slums of Paris in the 19th century, the reasons for poverty and injustice are remarkably similar. The act of providing a hand-up to struggling families and individuals goes to the very heart of our work.

‘It links us with the Society’s foundations as they were laid by Blessed Frédéric Ozanam and his friends in those times of hardship and social turmoil.

‘In some of the many inspiring words attributed to him, Blessed Frédéric said, “The poor person is a unique person of God’s fashioning, with an inalienable right to respect.”



The Saturday evening panel discussed how faith-based organisations are adapting to new and changing circumstances. Chaired by Geraldine Doogue AO (right) it featured Rebecca Bromhead (Society Member), Andy Rajapakse (Rotary International) and Bishop Vincent Long OFM Conv (Diocese of Parramatta).

‘As we go about our Conference work and undertake other acts of service to those in need, this sentiment is a key motivation. We are there to help, not to judge. We do not expect thanks, but when we get them, as we often do, or just receive a smile, we know that we have helped make a difference, and this is what counts.

‘Here, in the company of so many dedicated Vincentians from around Australia and overseas, I am able to fully comprehend the power and the spiritual depth of our wonderful, Member-led organisation.’

From the Welcome to Country from Uncle Brendan Kerrin on Wongal land through to the Closing Mass, conducted by Fr Alan Gibson CM, Provincial Superior of the Vincentian Fathers and Brothers in Oceania, Congress 2023+ was inspired by spirituality as well as the quest to chart pathways to revitalising the Society to meet the many challenges of today. These included the need to attract



are adapting to new and changing circumstances.

Guided by the Think Place consultancy, which had been involved with the months-long preparatory work for Congress 2023+, delegates participated in a range of plenary sessions as well as targeted workshops, sharing and discussing ideas aimed at promoting the Society's resilience, relevance and faithfulness to mission throughout the second decade of the 21st century and beyond.

Identified goals were the need for 'New blood and revitalisation', 'Diverse, flexible conferences for impact' and being 'Ready for change'.

Submitted feedback showed that the great majority of delegates rated Congress 2023+ as a success, with many feeling it was a welcome opportunity for Members from across Australia to come together in solidarity to discuss practical ways of ensuring the Society in Australia will have a bright and secure future.

This consensus was summarised by one participant who said they had enjoyed 'the inclusive discussions and found meeting delegates from across Australia was incredibly satisfying... meeting up with so many dedicated Vincentians was a very humbling experience.'

The ideas and recommendation that emerged from the plenary sessions and the group discussions are being incorporated into working documents that will be considered by the Society's councils and conferences throughout Australia. The States and Territories made commitments to follow-through on priority actions.

Regarded as a great success and well deserving of the organisational effort, Congress 2023+ will make a significant contribution to the Society's resilience and revitalisation in Australia over the months and years ahead. **R**



Congress 2023+ was so vast that three group photos were needed to record the event.

more Members at a time of dwindling volunteerism and the importance of improving communication within and between conferences and throughout the whole Society.

The opening night's guest speaker Claire Madden analysed trends shaping the generations across Australia. The next evening's panel was chaired by Geraldine Doogue AO and included Bishop Vincent Long OFM Conv (Diocese of Parramatta), Andy Rajapakse (Rotary International) and Rebecca Bromhead (Society Member). The focus of discussions was on how faith-based organisations

This selection of photos by Gene Ramirez captures the diversity of the Congress 2023+ proceedings and activities.







This historic photo shows the assembly of the Society's members and Catholic Church representatives – including Melbourne's legendary Archbishop Mannix, front row, fourth from the right – at St Patrick's Cathedral, Melbourne in November 1924. The occasion was the Congress held that year, almost a century ago.

Faith, hope and charity: Celebrating 170 years of the Society of St Vincent de Paul Victoria (and in Australia)

BY MICHAEL QUINN

State President St Vincent de Paul Society Victoria

Many people are surprised to learn that the first Australian conference was established only 20 years after the St Vincent de Paul Society itself was established in Paris. This is quite an achievement, given the obstacles involved in travel and communication between countries on opposite sides of the world.

We are delighted to celebrate the milestone of the 170th anniversary, marking the establishment on 5 March 1854 of the St Francis Church Melbourne Conference by Father Gerald Ward. On this day, we are also reminded of Australia's good fortune and a certain poignancy that Father Ward brought the Society to our shores only a short period after our Founder, Blessed Frédéric Ozanam's death.

It is of course not simply a timeline milestone that is being celebrated; the Society in Victoria is the sum of many parts, most significantly our members who are the humble, often anonymous contributors in a history that has responded to so much unmet need.

The constant has always been the readiness to respond to human distress, poverty and disadvantage in its many guises, always with compassion and non-judgement. The response has been both personal and systemic, both locally based, statewide and national.

Given the extended period of our history, it is fascinating to recognise that there are many common threads even while

the setting and context over the decades have changed. The cost of living, the lack of secure and affordable housing, the impact of inhumane practices and natural disasters, and persistent inequity are repeated tales across the decades.

Father Ward's arrival after the rigour of a challenging journey in a new colony with its inherent disarray, dangerous yet familiar class system and the highs and lows of Gold Rush fever, must have been a wake-up call of considerable proportions.

From all reports, he was a compassionate man of deep faith and pushed on with what he believed he must do. His early example provided the impetus for so many good works to follow. There is much to celebrate in our 170 years.

There will be a number of events occurring in Melbourne in March 2024 to mark this occasion. The 2024 Ozanam Oration will be held on Monday 4 March, followed by a Commemorative Mass on Tuesday 5 March, the day the first conference was founded at St Francis Church.

An exhibition entitled *Faith, Hope and Charity: 170 years of the St Vincent de Paul Society Victoria* will be launched on 5 March to showcase the work of the Victorian Society throughout its history. There will also be visits to Father Ward's gravesite at Melbourne Cemetery. Details and invitations will be forthcoming soon. **R**



Canberra/Goulburn Council President John Feint completed his term by covering the symbols of office.



Pictured with Fr Richard Thompson VG and new Conference Presidents, Kym Duggan opened his term as President of Canberra/Goulburn Council by lighting the Society Candle.

Passing on the Light

Celebrated by Fr Richard Thompson VG at St Peter Chanel's Catholic Church in Yarralumla, Canberra on 25 November 2023, a Regional Festival Mass marked the completion of the term of office by Canberra/Goulburn Council President John Feint and a welcome to the incoming President, Kym Duggan.

The incoming Regional President for North Canberra, Peter Jean was also commissioned, along with new Conference Presidents Warwick McDonald, Andrew Gordon, Vincent McDonald, Neil Harkins and Jancye Winter.

After John Feint completed his term by closing the symbols of office, Kym Duggan opened his term as

President by lighting the Society Candle, opening the Word of God and *The Rule* and uncovering the Basket of kindness and compassion.

Fr Richard expressed thanks to those present and all Vincentians who show their love for those in need by undertaking Good Works throughout the Archdiocese: '*The Rule* is a symbol of the path that all Vincentians are called to walk... to heed the inspiration of the Holy Spirit as intended by your founders, especially Blessed Frédéric Ozanam and companions. Let it be your privilege to ensure that the spirit of the Society is upheld and lived energetically and authentically...' **R**

Bring the second Australia out of the shadows

BY MARK GAETANI

National President, St Vincent de Paul Society

It is said that the past is another country where things are done differently, and the same applies to a significant section of our own country in the present day. Certainly, many Australians are comfortable and secure, despite high mortgage rates and rents, and the rising cost of household essentials such as food, energy bills and petrol prices.

But there exists, largely hidden, a second Australia. A very different domain of more than three million people, some 761,000 of them children, for whom interest rates count little because they don't hold a mortgage, let alone several to cover investment properties. In the main, fuel prices aren't relevant either, because they can't afford to own a car.

Especially tragic is the large number of children amongst these 'have nots', to use a term I wish was outdated, whose present wellbeing and future prospects, including their physical and emotional wellbeing, and educational opportunities, are seriously compromised through living in impoverished households.

This year's Anti-Poverty Week (15-27 October) sponsors, which include our Society, rightly put a focus on children, given their utter dependency on Australia's underfunded welfare system.

Impoverished Australians must make a complexity of decisions every day, not only about what food to buy, but how many meals they can actually afford. This might mean skipping breakfast so the kids can take a packed lunch to school. So mum or dad can eat at work, because around one-in-four Australians receiving JobSeeker do work, although often in casual or 'gig' jobs that are underpaid and insecure, with few rights or protections.

Being poor means endless trade-offs. Not heating the house in order to save money that can be used to pay for a child's school excursion, because missing out would risk being stigmatised by classmates. Or medical bills, or that unavoidable necessity, the rent, for to skip that can mean jeopardising the home itself and running the risk of everyone becoming homeless.

Citizens of this second Australia are conspicuous in

the ABS census figures but almost invisible to most of us. Yet their faces and circumstances are well known to charities such as St Vincent de Paul Society, as our members pay regular home visits, or meet them at food vans, and hear their stories and assist where we can. In addition, the Society provides around \$50 million in emergency response support each year.

They are single parents, young people, First Nations people, long-term unemployed and those living with disability or ill-health. All are particularly vulnerable. What they have in common is relying on inadequate social security for income and struggling to maintain an affordable roof over their heads.

Catholic Social Teaching principles, which St Vincent de Paul Society applies across our Mission, are based on cherishing human dignity, solidarity with the needy, and advancing the common good. The final goal is that all members of our society can flourish to their fullest potential. The aim is to create a more just and equitable society by advocating for vulnerable people.

“Catholic Social Teaching principles... are based on cherishing human dignity, solidarity with the needy, and advancing the common good.”

For the Society, these are the values of our founders who two centuries ago in France showed courageous advocacy on behalf of the vulnerable, the powerless and the many others who needed not just a loaf of bread, but equality under the law.

The latest paper in our suite of [advocacy policies](#) grouped under the Let's Build a Fairer Australia banner focuses on “Income Support, Poverty and Debt - why Australia needs proper safety nets”. It welcomes certain Government reforms, such as the establishment of an independent Economic Inclusion Advisory Panel led by the Treasurer and Minister for Social Services and comprising experts to advise on income support payments.

However, a range of reforms need to be made

urgently. These include a further increase to the base rate of working age payments to lift recipients out of poverty; income support payments to be indexed biannually in line with wage growth or CPI, whichever is higher; an increase to the earnings threshold of income support recipients by \$150 a fortnight (to \$300); a broader assessment process for the Disability Support Payment.

Regulating the Buy Now Pay Later (BNPL) sector is also a priority. BNPL accounts now total \$11.9 billion, often being used on top of existing debts by people in financial difficulty

Most particularly, we support Anti-Poverty Week's call for child poverty to be halved by 2030.

Growing up in poverty is a strong predictor of a child being developmentally vulnerable by the time they start school. The Productivity Commission found that school children experiencing disadvantage are three times more likely to fall behind than other students.

The question often posed is how a fairer Australia can be afforded. The answer lies in policy priorities, as detailed in the report *A Fairer Tax and Welfare System* that we commissioned from the ANU (covered recently in [Eureka Street](#)).

This research showed that the most pressing welfare reforms could be funded by repealing the stage 3 tax cuts, making moderate changes to personal income taxation thresholds, reducing the capital gains tax discount and changing superannuation tax concessions.

These changes would reduce the after-housing poverty rate from 11.7 per cent of households to 8.6 per cent, lifting between 193,000 to 834,000 people out of poverty.

If the test of a fair society is measured by how it treats those living in poverty or who are marginalised, then Australia – regarded as one of the world's richest countries – is failing.

A robust safety net is needed, with social equity built into our economy. **R**

John Feint reflects...



At the completion of his service on National Council, John Feint received thanks from National President Mark Gaetani.

In December 2023, my term on the National Council of the Society in Australia ends. This gives me cause to reflect on my national and local journey over the past four and a half years. These have been momentous and challenging times and times also when new opportunities are opening to us.

We were confronted with the COVID-19 pandemic that significantly disrupted our operations. I am proud of how our Society worked together to support each other and the companions we serve.

The Society came out of the pandemic stronger, more resilient and better prepared to confront similar challenges in the future. We are closer together, know each other better and are more focused on common goals.

We also faced the major challenge of the 2019-20 bushfires. We reached out to those affected, offered not only financial and physical assistance, but companionship. We stayed in touch helping communities rebuild.

I acknowledge the tireless efforts of our bushfire recovery team in Canberra Goulburn, led by Ray Akhurst, including our bushfire recovery coordinators, Territory Councillors, conference support and finance staff. As summer nears, we are better prepared.

During my time we have made great strides locally and nationally in our governance, have built a quality national secretariate and our voice is better heard on social justice issues.

I have also valued the opportunity to contribute to our marketing, fundraising, curation of our brand, our emergency response and youth programs. I have also learnt so much in my time on Council, have met wonderful, spirit-filled Vincentians and look forward to the next chapter in my Vincentian journey. **R**

John Feint was Canberra/Goulburn Council President, 2019-2023



Rental market going from bad to worse

The latest Rental Affordability Index – published annually by SGS Economics and Planning, National Shelter, Brotherhood of St Laurence and Beyond Bank – shows that rental affordability has worsened in all major Australian cities and regions, except for Hobart and Canberra.

With the discouraging words, ‘Every year it’s worse again’, Ellen Witte, principal and partner at SGS Economics and Planning, introduced the ninth annual, [Rental Affordability Index](#), launched on 14 November at Parliament House, Canberra under the mantle of the Parliamentary Friends of Housing.

As the report makes clear, ‘it’ is the state of the Australian rental market, characterised by an outright lack of properties, now including regional areas as well as urban centres, along with rental rates that are either out of the reach of many people, notably those relying on government support payments, or at levels that cause significant household stress.

Staff representatives from the St Vincent de Paul Society National Secretariate attended the launch, including CEO Toby oConnor who is a National Shelter board member. The Society’s National President, Mark Gaetani, has joined a range of charities and social sector organisations in expressing deep concern about the availability and affordability of the nation’s rental properties.

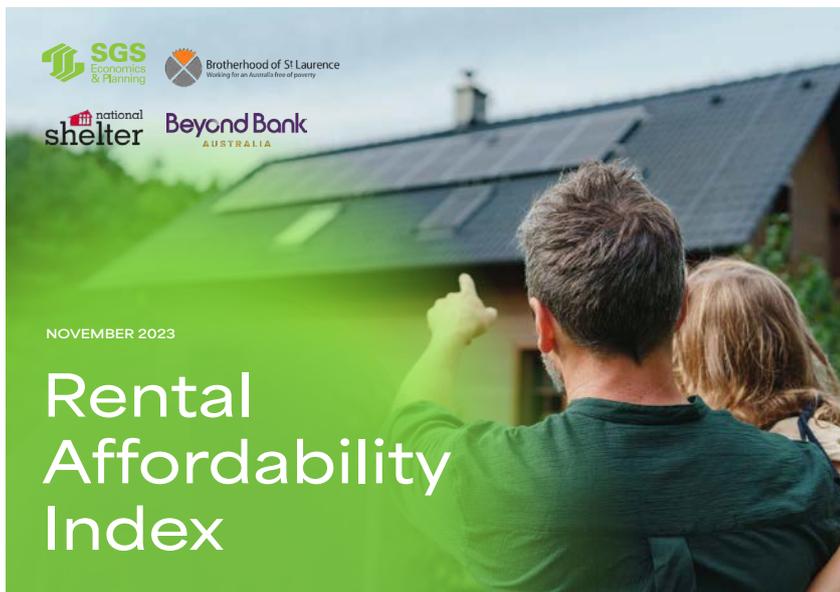
‘This crisis has been going on for much too long and it is getting worse, Mr Gaetani said, adding that the report gives a series of valuable, interactive snapshots of the rental situation right across the country.

‘The most visible impact of a lack of secure rental housing is the high number of people experiencing homelessness, currently at a record level of over 122,000 on any given night,’ he said.

‘On top of that are the many “hidden homeless”, along with the vast number of Australians living in poverty who forego paying for other essentials, including food, in order to cover their rent. Currently, some 3.3 million people are living below the poverty line, including 761,000 children. Our members working on the frontline tell us that many of these folk are sacrificing meals and utility bills in order to cover their rents.

‘Over the past year we have recorded a growing demand for emergency relief services, many of them first-time callers. The great majority were renters in low-income households.

‘The first priority is to have a roof over your head and ensuring that this happens should also be the number one priority for the Australian Government. Having access to decent housing is a basic human right that a wealthy nation like ours can afford and should deliver.



ACT Senator David Pocock at the launch of National Shelter's Rental Affordability Index at Parliament House.

***“It is vital that people on support payments are better able to cover their expenses.*”**

‘Rental housing should be more than an investment opportunity for those who can afford it. For this reason we support tax reform that would see a reduction of the Capital Gains Tax discount.’

The report showed that rental affordability is hitting all-time lows, including cities and regional areas, with few exceptions. The situation has been made worse by rent rises coming at a time of stagnant incomes, which in many cases have gone backwards because of inflation.

Availability is another issue, with some areas having one per cent or less of properties available on the rental market.

‘A well-functioning home market would have at least a three per cent vacancy rate,’ Ellen Witte said, making a connection between the lack of properties and rising rents, which also impact on inflation, the targeted enemy of the Reserve Bank of Australia, and in turn, the Australian Government.

Mr Gaetani noted that people on income support are being particularly hard hit, adding, ‘The report highlights how a single person on JobSeeker must spend more than 75 per cent of their income to rent a one-bedroom apartment in any capital city. Living in a regional or rural area is no longer a solution either, as rents have skyrocketed and there’s almost no vacant property.’

Mr Gaetani said a range of workable solutions to the rental crisis had been identified by the Government and the Society is urging that they be implemented urgently.

‘These include increasing social housing stock in accordance with the National Housing and Homelessness Plan and progressing minimum national rental standards such as limiting rent increases, ending no-grounds evictions and addressing energy efficiency for rental stock.

‘It is also vital that people relying on support payments are better able to cover their expenses. This is why the Society continues to advocate for increasing the rates of JobSeeker, Commonwealth Rent Assistance and other related payments.

‘Addressing the rental crisis should be done holistically. There are many facets, each of which needs to be tackled in a determined way in order to deliver housing justice across the country.’ **R**

Minister declares an end to ‘charities war’

Saying the former Coalition government had waged a “war on charities” for nearly a decade, the Assistant Minister for Competition, Charities and Treasury, Dr Andrew Leigh, has declared that the era of systemic underfunding, attacks on advocacy and the undermining of the Charities Commission has been left behind.

Instead, Dr Leigh said, ‘It’s time to rebuild. We want to empower charities... [not] because we want government to do less, but because we recognise that collaboration between the community and government sectors is key to tackling shared challenges and achieving ambitious goals.’

A major step is the release of the *Charities Toolkit*, a comprehensive document developed in consultation with charity leaders and launched in Canberra on 1 November at a town hall-style meeting attended by a range of charity representatives, including St Vincent de Paul Society National Council.

Dr Leigh’s series of town hall meetings are part of Australia’s ‘largest-ever charity consultation’. They have been held across the country throughout 2023 to share ideas on how community trust and engagement can be rebuilt, and to ‘reinforce the Australian Government’s commitment to partner with the sector to build a more connected Australia’.

The consultation process includes:

- initiating a once-in-a-generation Productivity Commission review of philanthropy, to help meet the Government’s goal to double philanthropy by 2030
- starting work on a Blueprint for strengthening the capacity and capability of Australian charities
- appointing a new head of the Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission (ACNC), and a new advisory board
- continuing to work with states and territories to harmonise charitable fundraising laws
- streamlining the process by which charities receive deductible gift recipient status
- modernising the law to allow the ACNC (Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission) to discuss ongoing investigations where this is necessary to maintain trust and confidence in the sector.



Assistant Minister for Competition, Charities and Treasury, Dr Andrew Leigh

“Australia’s charity and non-profit sector constitutes almost one-tenth of the national economy, and over one-tenth of employment.”

Earlier on the morning of the Charities Toolkit launch, Dr Leigh had officially launched the Vinnies Christmas Appeal 2023 for Canberra/Goulburn where statistics were revealed showing a significant surge in demand for the Society’s support.

The Toolkit’s self-described “ambitious plan” aims to strengthen the charity sector in a range of key areas – Fundraising, Fairness, Doubling Philanthropy, Reduced Reporting Burdens and Strengthening Communities. Topics covered include Workplace Giving, Applying for Grants and – a subject relevant to all charities at a time of diminishing community involvement - Volunteering.

Dr Leigh noted that in the year 2000, one-third of Australians engaged in volunteer activity, a number that has now dropped to one-in-four. The reasons for this decline include greater female participation in the workforce - ‘Not that we would want to change that’ – leaving women with less time for volunteer work, as well as technology’s influence in people having a ‘more internal focus’.

‘We really need to develop ways of turning this around,’ he said.

In the Q&A session following the Toolkit launch, the Society's National Director, Policy and Research, Rose Beynon, suggested that the Australian Government might consider running a national campaign to raise awareness and educate the community about volunteering and charities, saying that a better understanding of these issues could benefit charitable and other not-for-profit organisations and the community.

Ms Beynon said that the 2019-20 Black Summer bushfires had highlighted that many people were unaware of the compliance regime applying to registered charities and their relationship with the national regulator, the ACNC.

While not promising to pursue this strategy, the Minister voiced his appreciation for the suggestion, as well as for a range of other matters raised by charity representatives.

“Estimates suggest there are around 600,000 not-for-profit organisations in Australia (Productivity Commission 2010)”

The Government is currently working on a National Not-for-Profit Sector Development Blueprint, aimed at providing a roadmap for Government reform and sector-led initiatives to boost the sector's capacity to support and connect Australian communities.

Minister for Social Services Amanda Rishworth said the release of the Issues Paper by the Blueprint Expert Advisory Group [which includes St Vincent de Paul Society's National Council CEO Toby oConnor] is central to hearing from everyone on how to strengthen the not-for-profit sector for consideration in developing the Blueprint.

'Australia's not-for-profit sector contributes deeply to the social, civic, economic, cultural and environmental dimensions of life in Australia,' Minister Rishworth said.

Assistant Minister Andrew Leigh called the Blueprint an important way for Government to hear from the sector to ensure Australia's NFP sector is sustainable and thriving.

'Charity and community-based organisations, and their volunteers, are critical to the social fabric of Australian communities. They help to improve the lives of many of those disadvantaged in our communities,' he said.

Submissions are invited before 20 December 2023. The Society will submitting a paper to this process. Further information here [R](#)

Social housing boosted in Tasmania



Minister for Housing and Construction, Nic Street

The Tasmanian Government, through Homes Tasmania, has identified seven projects to be delivered under the Australian Government's Social Housing Accelerator program that aims to deliver around 125 new homes statewide, at a cost of \$50 million.

The projects are scheduled to commence in early 2024 and be completed by 2026. Homes Tasmania will partner with four community housing providers - Flinders Island Aboriginal Association Inc, St Vincent de Paul Society and Amelie Housing, Housing Choices Tasmania and Centacare Evolve Housing.

The Minister for Housing and Construction, Nic Street, said, 'The projects will deliver remote Aboriginal housing and medium-density development in well located areas experiencing high demand.

'Every Tasmanian deserves a roof over their head and our plan to build more houses faster is critical to achieving our vision to end homelessness in Tasmania and delivering a well-functioning housing system that provides safe, appropriate and affordable housing for all Tasmanians.

'The new homes built under the Social Housing Accelerator program will complement the Tasmanian Government's planned target of 10,000 more social and affordable homes by 2032,' Minister Street added.

'Through Homes Tasmania, we have already delivered 2,878 social and affordable homes as at 30 September 2023, with a further 860 new social housing, supported accommodation and crisis accommodation projects in the construction pipeline.' **R**

Inaction on widening crisis hurts children the most

BY ANNA SCOTT

Acting Director of Homelessness and Housing,
St Vincent de Paul Society NSW

The number of people experiencing homelessness in Australia has grown 5.2 per cent in the past five years, with women and children, as well as Indigenous Australians, bearing the brunt of the housing crisis.

It was a time when governments responded by raising income support payments, housing rough sleepers and allowing for us all to envision a better and more equitable society.

We are not so far removed from that time, yet the crisis facing communities shows it was just the tip of the iceberg.

There are any number of statistics to be highlighted during this Anti-Poverty Week that tell an alarming story of the hardship faced by the youngest among us. We can point to the one in six children growing up in poverty at a higher rate than the general population or that one in four people without a home are children, according to the most recent census.

These figures are alarming and increasingly becoming commonplace.

For the past five years I have worked in the Housing and Homelessness team with St Vincent de Paul Society NSW, predominantly as a frontline service manager at Pete's Place, a drop-in service in Coffs Harbour, and similar services throughout the north coast and wider NSW.

When I first began at Pete's Place, it was rare to encounter families with children in need of assistance due to housing stress or homelessness. In instances where we were faced with these circumstances, we had the ability to achieve a quick response by securing crisis accommodation and offering ongoing support with an ultimate outcome of finding stable long-term housing.

These stories were infrequent, but, more significantly, we had the ability to quickly get people into housing.

I can no longer say this is the case. With the withdrawal of the COVID-19 support supplement, mass migration of people from metropolitan to regional areas and decades-long under-investment in social and affordable housing, the current crisis has resulted in a dramatic increase in calls for support, including all-too-common cases where



Anna Scott

families have nowhere to turn due to prohibitive housing costs.

These factors are all interrelated and speak to a broader systemic issue in Australia that has seen housing shift from a necessity for all to a commodity for the personal gain of a few.

With increasing need and resources that are stretched beyond capacity, the changing face of people seeking assistance in recent

years can be summed up by the heartbreaking stories of parents who are unable to send their children to school because they cannot afford to provide lunches.

Services like Pete's Place play an important role in the short-term in alleviating these pressures for people in times of acute need, but without the stability, security and safety of long-term housing the fundamental issues of poverty will remain.

Housing must be affordable for people - we cannot accept a world where paying the rent inhibits the rest of a person's wellbeing and life. We should not accept the trajectory that forces families to move from one tenancy to another while struggling to get by each week without any hope of ever being able to afford a home.

If we continue to do so we will guarantee that children are entrenched into intergenerational housing insecurity.

Our services have seen first-hand how transformative it can be for families to have the stability of secure housing. Families can connect to a community, children find a sense of identity through a school they feel a part of, parents can look beyond immediate struggles to future possibilities.

Housing is now more firmly on the federal and state government agenda, with an understanding that the issue requires policy change and working together with the sector to address the scale of the problem.

It finally feels as a country we are having a promising and serious conversation around addressing housing, homelessness and, in turn, poverty.

We cannot keep just envisioning a better future – the time is now to make it a reality for the sake of our kids and the generations to come. **R**

Anna Scott has worked as a frontline service manager with St Vincent de Paul Society NSW since 2018. She is currently its acting director of Homelessness and Housing. This article appeared in regional media during Anti-Poverty Week, 15-27 October 2023.

Former hotel becomes refuge for Brisbane's homeless

BY CALLUM JOHNSON

Communications and Media Coordinator,
St Vincent de Paul Society Queensland

An unassuming hotel in Brisbane has been converted into a place of hope for people experiencing homelessness in the capital city.

After The Park Hotel in Spring Hill was closed during the COVID-19 pandemic, St Vincent de Paul Society Queensland and the Department of Housing worked together to re-open the building as a home for people experiencing homelessness.

This partnership between the Society and the Queensland Government is now even more secure in the long-term after the Government officially bought the hotel to ensure it will stay as a place to provide a home to people experiencing homelessness.

The Society will continue to manage the property and on-site teams will support and service its residents, including supporting them in the transition back into the community with longer-term accommodation.

Society staff at the hotel work closely with Members from the local Spring Hill Conference to support residents in building resilience and life skills, including employment support, to prepare them to return to the community and secure long-term housing.

'We envisioned SVDP The Park as more than a shelter – it's a place to provide new hope, confidence, and opportunity to Queenslanders experiencing homelessness on their road to permanent accommodation,' CEO Kevin Mercer said.

'Our work in supporting Queenslanders through our state housing crisis has shown that we need to focus on long-term support and a road out of homelessness, not just providing temporary help.

'The Park provides more than just a warm bed to sleep in – our teams work with residents to build the skills, confidence and opportunities to secure safe long-term accommodation.

'With the purchase of the Park Hotel, our Society looks forward to continuing our fruitful relationship with the Department of Housing and provide even more Queenslanders in need with a renewed sense of hope for the future.'



Staff and residents at the refurbished SVDP The Park... more than a shelter.



CEO Kevin Mercer welcomes Education Minister Grace Grace (left) and Housing Minister Meaghan Scanlon to The Park Hotel.

"The Park is the Society's largest homelessness support centre in Queensland"

With capacity for up to 79 residents, The Park Hotel is the Society's largest homelessness support centre in Queensland.

When a resident is supported to find a permanent home, Members also support them with a Starter Pack of basic household items, linen, bedding, kitchenware, and more to help them get settled into their new lives.

'We've already heard several success stories from former residents since The Park became a homelessness support facility in mid-2021 and I'm sure we will have plenty more to come,' Mr Mercer added. **R**

Callum Johnson is Communications and Media Coordinator, St Vincent de Paul Society Queensland

Bethlehem House opens to those in need



The St Vincent de Paul Society Tasmania celebrated the opening of the newly constructed Bethlehem House in Harrington Street, North Hobart on 17 November, with this component of the site now able to assist up to 50 men who are experiencing homelessness.

The facility, built by Fairbrother Constructions for Homes Tasmania and leased by the Society, is on the site of the old Waratah Hotel car park and includes light and spacious accommodation, meeting rooms, a rooftop garden area and a workshop in the basement.

Bethlehem House Executive Manager, Stephen Shreeve, said the new facility has opened up many opportunities to further enhance the variety of programs that benefit residents' journey toward independence, attaining financial and social stability.

'A new building not only provides a fresh new place to live, it tells our men they are valued, which goes towards restoring their dignity and provides hope,' he said.

'Many of the facility's new areas, especially the onsite workshop and kitchens, will aid residents' skills development and support the recently launched Employability Program.

'We now also have the ability to accommodate men with dogs, as three kennels have also been located within the boundary of the new property.'

The new facility will also include a café open to residents and visitors which will encourage better connections with family and important support networks.

In taking a future-focused view, the purpose-built site offers scope for additional support to those experiencing

Pictured l-r, Bethlehem House Executive Manager Stephen Shreeve, The Hon Nic Street MHA, Tasmanian Minister for Housing and Construction (cutting ribbon), Homes Tasmania CEO Eleri Morgan-Thomas, St Vincent de Paul Society Tasmania CEO Heather Kent, The Hon Julie Collins Federal Minister for Housing.

increased vulnerability, with the inclusion of a secure wing on level one should this be required.

Local architect, Tim Penny, has been pivotal in working with Bethlehem House and Homes Tasmania to ensure that the site affords suitable accommodation for at least the next fifty years.

The Society's Chief Executive Officer, Heather Kent, said this was a significant moment in the Society's local history, given that the first Bethlehem House was established in 1972, just over 50 years ago.

'We are Tasmania's largest provider of crisis and transitional accommodation for men experiencing homelessness and this new facility allows us to provide greater assistance to those men in Hobart seeking help to establish a new chapter in life,' Ms Kent said.

'We will lease the building from Homes Tasmania, demonstrating the vital importance of collaboration. Projects of this scale simply cannot be undertaken without the investment and ongoing assistance of Homes Tasmania and the Tasmanian Government - for this we are extremely grateful.'

The new facility is adjacent to another site in Murray Street, the former Waratah Hotel, which is home to a further 24 men under the Society's Bethlehem House program. **R**



At the launch of the WA Rental Relief Program at St Vincent de Paul Society's Perth office were Sue Ellery, Minister for Commerce, Louise Giolitto, CEO WA Council of Social Services, Kath Snell, CEO Shelter WA, WA Premier, Roger Cook, Susan Rooney, CEO SVDP WA and Mark Glasson, CEO Anglicare WA.

Society to help deliver WA rent relief program

St Vincent de Paul Society WA has welcomed the Western Australian Government's announcement of a \$24.4 million Rental Relief Grant program to help state residents at risk of homelessness as they struggle to afford soaring rent prices.

The program was announced on Wednesday at Vinnies head office in Canning Vale by Premier Roger Cook, Commerce Minister Sue Ellery and Housing Minister John Carey.

It is expected that up to 4,500 households will be assisted by the WA Rental Relief program to be co-designed and delivered by Vinnies WA, Anglicare WA and partner agencies.

Premier Roger Cook said his Government was committed to delivering cost-of-living relief and supporting Western Australians who are doing it tough.

'The WA Rent Relief Program will help to keep a roof over the head of families that have hit hard times, helping them to get back on their feet,' he said.

SVDP WA CEO Susan Rooney, who has been at the forefront of advocating for a rent relief program alongside other organisations, said the announcement was welcome news for vulnerable West Australians.

'Across the board, through our Emergency Assistance and Support program and our Financial Counselling services, we are seeing an increase in demand for our services, including 350 calls a day for emergency assistance from across WA,' Ms Rooney said.

'The Rent Relief program is an important addition to the measures we have to address cost-of-living pressures for West Australian families.'

The program is expected to start in the coming months and run until June 2025. More details at www.wa.gov.au/service/community-services/grants-and-subsidies/wa-rent-relief-program **R**

News coverage - <https://youtu.be/-KfRwSbgyVc>

HOUSING & HOMELESSNESS



Coming soon to this space... the design of the 38-unit housing project for older women in Hobart is displayed by Amelie Housing CEO Graham West, SVDP Tasmania State President Corey McGrath and CEO Heather Kent.

Inter-governmental partnership helps house older women

Hailed by the Tasmanian Minister for Housing and Construction, Nic Street, as 'a great example of the Tasmanian and Australian Governments and community organisations working together towards the common goal of ending homelessness', a project to develop homes in Hobart for older women was launched in early December.

The new 38-unit development is located behind the St Vincent de Paul Society offices in Argyle Street, Hobart. It will provide homes for women who are priority applicants on the Housing Register and who are at risk of homelessness, with a particular focus on women aged 55 and over.

The \$16.7 million project includes \$13.36 million from the Albanese Labor Government's Social Housing Accelerator funding for Tasmania, which will deliver more than 110 new social homes at a total cost of \$50 million.

The development will be delivered by St Vincent de Paul Society and national community housing provider Amelie Housing, with oversight from Homes Tasmania. The site currently hosts a Vinnies charity shop and an emergency relief centre, as well as a warehouse. The retail shop and relief centre will be relocated during the works, so service can continue and will remain open to Tasmanians.

'This new project goes to the heart of our Government's commitment to ensure more Australians have a safe and affordable place to call home,' said Housing Minister and local federal MP, Julie Collins.

'The women who will move into these homes in Hobart are in critical need of a safe home, which is why the announcement we are making today is so important.'

Tasmanian Senator Carol Brown said, 'Having a home is life changing. It's great to see Tasmanian women being able to make that dream a reality. This... demonstrates our commitment to supporting vulnerable women in Tasmania and across the country.'

Tasmanian Liberal Minister Nic Street said, 'I was delighted today to visit the site of a new development by St Vincent de Paul and Amelie Housing that is being funded under the Australian Government's Social Housing Accelerator program.'

Maguire + Devine Architects explained that the building is designed like a village, with communal green space on the rooftop where residents can enjoy open space, sunlight and views.

'The lower floors are the neighbourhoods, with the front doors of each studio apartment gathered around a semi-enclosed vertical rainforest. On the outside, each studio opens to a private balcony for fresh air, sunshine and views.'

Work on the project is expected to begin in February 2024 and be completed by December 2025. **R**



The 18-unit Cairns facility will be converted to social housing... pictured from left, Moira Lyons and Sharon Shearsmith from Vinnies Housing, Far North Queensland Diocesan President Veronica Innes, State Housing Minister Meaghan Scanlon and Society Vice-President Dennis Innes.

Housing response continues with new Cairns partnership

With 2023 setting the groundwork for the Society's "500 Homes in 5 Years" project, we are ready to hit the ground running in 2024 to build up our housing response and provide more Queenslanders with a safe, long-term place to call home.

In the last few weeks, our first major step in this project, building 147 social and affordable homes in Bundaberg (60 units), Gold Coast (60 units) and Toowoomba (27 units), received Member approval at the recent AGM and the Project Managers have also been approved, meaning we are ready to commence the development approval phase with the respective Councils.

Recently, our homelessness response was bolstered with the [announcement](#) of the State Government working with the Society to convert an 18-unit facility in Cairns to crisis accommodation for locals experiencing or at risk of homelessness.

We are exploring other options across the state, with a total of more than 450 homes in our development pipeline. **R**

REFUGEES



Refugees complete a long walk to freedom

The trek began in Melbourne in mid-September and ended in Canberra four weeks later, when a group of 22 refugee women from Iranian and Tamil backgrounds completed their mission to call attention to the need for permanent visas for refugees in Australia.

Known as Refugee Women Action for Visa Equality, the women were some of the more than 10,000 people who were left out of the decision in February by the Labor government to grant permanent visas to those on Temporary Protection Visas and Safe Haven Enterprise Visas.

Many in their situation have no rights to study in Australia after the age of 18. Some have no rights to work. They cannot apply for family reunion with loved ones overseas.

Their walk comes after Neil Para, a Sri Lankan refugee who was also in their situation, was given permanent residency after walking from Ballarat to Sydney.

The women were asking for permanent visas for all those who were imprisoned in the offshore detention centres on Manus Island and Nauru and for the abolition of the unfair “Fast Track” system for refugee status determination. This system, deliberately designed by the previous government, has led to a rapid decline in positive assessments and appeals. Although the ALP’s platform in 2015 promised to abolish it, action is yet to be taken.



Some of the group are mothers whose children have never met their grandparents or whose children will not be able to study in higher education of any kind.

The 640 km walk ended at Parliament House on 18 October where a large rally welcomed their arrival and heard participants explain their circumstances. Rathi Barthlote said, ‘We are refugees who came to Australia seeking safety, but after a decade still do not have a clear pathway to permanent residency.’

‘I lost my first child because of the Sri Lankan civil war and I haven’t seen my mother for 18 years. It breaks my heart that my mother is living alone and I cannot reunite with my family.’

Ms Barthlote added, ‘All of us are still waiting, after 10 years, for a permanent place to call home, a place to belong.’

Asylum Seeker Resource Centre director of advocacy Ogy Simic said the women had shown courage: ‘The Australian government must now listen, abolish the flawed ‘fast track’ system, and offer the 10,000 people

failed by the system for 10 years a clear path to permanency.'

Joining the women was Tamil asylum seeker Thienushan Chandrasekaram, who cycled to Canberra from Brisbane, averaging 90km a day. He came to Australia with his family in 2013 but is still awaiting a decision on his permanent residency.

'My aim is to present my case to the minister for home affairs and the minister for immigration not just for me and my family but for whole community of 12,000 like me struggling on bridging visas or no visas,' he said.

The St Vincent de Paul Society calls for Australian Government action to:

- provide an adequate safety net for all asylum seekers and implement a fairer process for all affected by the unjust fast track process.
- resettle all people still subject to offshore processing and immediately move people held in PNG to Australia while they await resettlement.
- legislate to make immigration detention a last resort, limited to a maximum of 90 days, and improve the living conditions of those that must be detained for security reasons.
- increase the annual humanitarian intake to 27,000 by 2025-26, increase the community support program to 10,000 (making it additional), accept refugees in South-East Asian countries within these increased intakes and reform the family reunion process.
- conduct a parliamentary inquiry into immigration detention both offshore and onshore starting in 2023.

The Society's policy documents on assisting asylum seekers and refugees are at [St Vincent de Paul policy on refugees and asylum seekers \(vinnies.org.au\)](https://www.vinnies.org.au). **R**

Support is vital on the long refugee journey



Kym Duggan, 3rd from left, at the Parliament House rally to support the refugee women walking from Melbourne to Canberra.

BY KYM DUGGAN

My wife and I have been supporting one of the refugee women walkers Piumetharshika Kaneshan (shortened to Piume, to help Aussies pronounce her name) and her mother Vinefreeda for around 10 years now.

Piume and her mother have struggled with our border protection system for over 12 years and still have no final result. Working with the Canberra Refugee Service (CRS) and Vinnies in Canberra/Goulburn we have journeyed with Piume from her earliest days at school through her very successful time in high school and now that she is embarking on her tertiary training to become a nurse.

Our role under the CRS has been to be a friendly neighbour to the family, to regularly catch up and share some of the challenges they have faced in their very long journey seeking asylum in Australia. The CRS has also helped the family with financial assistance to cover ongoing expenses like rent while Vinnies has assisted with vouchers for food and other fundamentals.

The ACT is a Refugee Welcome Zone, in part because the ACT Government has provided a range of supports to asylum seekers and refugees and in the case of Vinefreeda and Piume this has resulted in their finally being able to access a newly built public housing unit on a long-term lease.

The pressure on the family over the last 10 years has been intense and the wheels of the administrative processes that are involved with resolving their refugee status have ground exceedingly slowly.

Recently, Piume's father died in Sri Lanka. Piume had not had physical contact with her father since she fled with her mother all those years ago. Piume was devastated by the untimely death of her father so far away.

Despite the lack of certainty about their immigration status, both Piume and her mother have remained positive and committed in their desire to make a new life for themselves in Canberra.

Vinefreeda has taken work in a very physically demanding role in a laundry. She has recently retrained as a childcare worker in an industry that has a critical shortage of qualified staff and is already employed in a local centre. Piume had great success with her time in school in the ACT, particularly in secondary college, and we are sure she will make a real contribution to her chosen career of nursing. **R**

Kym Duggan is the President of St Vincent de Paul Society's Canberra/Goulburn Council

VINNIES SHOPS



Lucy Hohnen, CEO of St Vincent de Paul Society Canberra/Goulburn, with some of the new Braddon shop's offerings.



Lindsay Rae, Director Commercial Operations SVDP Canberra/Goulburn, CEO Lucy Hohnen, Retail Development Manager Isla Smith, and mural artists Geoff Filmer and Raff Taib from the Graffik paint Collective.

Tutu much to wear in Canberra's new glam shop

So keen were shoppers in Canberra's CBD to get their hands on some Vinnies bargains that they lined up outside the Lonsdale Street, Braddon store before its first day of trading on 24 November. Over the following days, the momentum continued, with more than 1,000 people coming through the doors of the stunningly designed premises and revelling in the offerings on display, especially the vintage fashions that are a feature of the new store.

The takings were solid, to say the least, boosted by the presence of an ABC Radio Canberra outside broadcast, which interviewed volunteers and staff as well as happy pre-Christmas shoppers.

Vinnies Braddon is the 28th location in the Society's Canberra/Goulburn network of shops, a "flagship shop" with a focus on donated items that have special appeal to the Millennials and Gen Z markets.

'Our plans include more than a hundred racks bursting with every thrifter's dreams, including men and women's clothing, garments for children and babies, Manchester, bedding, home décor and more,' said Isla Smith, Retail Development Manager at SVDP Canberra/Goulburn.

'And then there's what we can fit on the g-zillion wall

shelves... Bric a Brac, curios, collectables, antiques, ornaments, gizmos, thingamabobs, knick-knacks...

'You can see how the Vinnies magic happens... Each of our centres is a shop-family, with all volunteer roles designed so each worker gets the most from what they are doing.'

Designed in-house, the fit out of the 610 square metre space (about twice the area of a tennis court) uses reclaimed timber and metal sheeting along with bespoke fixtures and shelving. The exterior wall surfaces, featuring vibrant artwork by Graffik paint Collective, include a listing of how the money raised is put to good use.

Julie Bartley, formerly the Shop Manager at Vinnies Dickson store, is the inaugural Braddon manager: 'I have a young daughter and I want to make the world a better place for her and the future. Working at Vinnies allows me to do that by giving back to the community while being creative.'

'I am excited to set up the new shop to make it beautiful, and excited in general to build our community of volunteers and patrons.'

Vinnies Braddon is open seven days a week, with late night trading Thursday-Saturday. **R**



The annual Vinnies Christmas Appeal helps put smiles on people's faces.

Vinnies Christmas Appeal will help restore hope to households

The Society's ever-popular Christmas Appeal was launched across Australia in early November, giving donors, including worshippers at parish churches, ample opportunity to reach for their bankcards or go online at www.vinnies.org.au to help provide support for Australians in need.

Saying the aim is to assist people experiencing hardship with relief to cover food, clothing, household bills and accommodation, the Society NSW revealed that the number of people seeking assistance for the first time from the Society has increased from one-in-four to one-in-three over the past year.

'Data recorded by the Society reveals four-in-five people requested support with food, while close to half were facing housing stress,' said Yolanda Saiz, St Vincent de Paul Society NSW CEO.

'Our members supported more than 87,000 people over the past year, an 18% increase from 12 months earlier. We have noticed a concerning trend among the increasing number of people seeking assistance in that they are people who we would broadly consider to have security in their quality of living.

'We are seeing people in full-time employment and households on dual incomes turn to our members for assistance because of financial pressures from essentials that they cannot do without. People cannot cut back on having a roof over their head, feeding their children or

paying for utilities. We are seeing instances where, to be able to cover an increase in rent, families are turning to the Society in order to put food on the table,' Ms Saiz added.

Paul Burton, St Vincent de Paul Society NSW State Council President, said funds raised will enable Members to distribute food hampers, financial and material relief to struggling households over Christmas and into the New Year.

'The Christmas season should be a time of joy for all. With ongoing cost of living pressures, it will be a time of great uncertainty for those on the margins. We, as a Society, understand that everyone is being impacted by the rising cost of living to some extent, but those already struggling, whilst also having the least capacity to withstand the increases, are once again being the worst affected.'

The ACT launch was attended by Hon Dr. Andrew Leigh MP, Assistant Minister for Competition, Charities, and Treasury with Lucy Honen, CEO of St Vincent de Paul Society Canberra/Goulburn, saying there had been a significant increase in people in need, including a rising proportion of those who have never approached a charity before. The local fundraising target for this year is \$300,000 to provide emergency relief in the ACT and surrounding regions. **R**

To donate to the Vinnies Christmas Appeal, visit www.vinnies.org.au or call 13 18 12. All donations over \$2 are tax-deductible.



Society expands across the Northern Territory

In a significant move to extend its impact in the NT, the St Vincent de Paul Society Northern Territory is thrilled to announce the re-establishment of the Alice Springs Conference and the opening of a new Vinnies Store in nearby Ltyentye Apurte (Santa Teresa).

Located an hour from Alice Springs and accessible by 4WD, the Santa Teresa Store will open in early 2024, providing support for this remote community. The location is currently being planned for a Store fit-out, with clothing racks, display cabinets, counters and point of sale equipment on the list. The new Store will provide the Santa Teresa community with culturally appropriate clothing, shoes, and items to meet the community's needs in a sustainable partnership.

The re-establishment of the Our Lady of the Sacred Heart (OLSH) Alice Springs Conference is a momentous occasion. With a rich history spanning over 60 years, the Conference has been a loyal provider of the Society's good works in the Alice Springs community.

This Conference is set to meet again in December

under the leadership of Sue Marshall as President. The Society extends a warm welcome to our new and renewed members who will play pivotal roles in continuing the Conference's legacy of good works. They are Kathleen Leahy, Cindy Egginton, Prakash Menezes, Sue Marshall (President), Matilda Byrne (Secretary) and Charles Gamon (Treasurer)

The Society NT expresses gratitude to the Our Lady of the Sacred Heart Parish for spearheading the revival of the OLSH Conference and reinforcing the Society's commitment to advocacy in the Northern Territory. The team looks forward to continuing vital programs, including visitations and emergency relief services.

The announcement comes at a critical time for Alice Springs. Recognising the urgency, the St Vincent de Paul Society NT Council wholeheartedly supports the Conference in its mission to help the Alice Springs community. **R**



Then-principal of Darwin's Mother Theresa Catholic Primary School, Stephen O'Shannessy, accepting a certificate of appreciation for the school's support for last year's Christmas Appeal from Frances Abbott, Holy Spirit Conference President and Member Rose Manison.

Spreading Christmas cheer in the NT

Last Christmas, over 50 Members, Volunteers and Staff across the Northern Territory worked to deliver 450 hampers to Companions around the Darwin, Palmerston, and Daly River regions. Vinnies Hampers also voyaged across the Beagle Gulf, thanks to the support of Sealink, who generously gift free freight across the open waters, to reach Tiwi Island communities.

The collaborative efforts of St Paul's, Holy Spirit, Holy Family and St Mary's Conferences exemplified the compassion that defines the St Vincent de Paul Society community. The Hamper Project reaches out to Companions who visit our Emergency Relief Services or Parishes in the lead-up to Christmas.

The Society now owns a purpose-built Mercedes AWD sprinter van, which ensures that no community is left untouched by the spirit of giving. A \$20,000 Commonwealth Grant has enabled the fit-out of the van which can now transport Christmas hampers as well as transporting passengers and essential goods, including racks for clothes.

The Society is planning fundraising initiatives to support the Vinnies Bush Mobile Service operation in the Top End.

This year's Christmas Hamper Project received generous donations from schools and the corporate and community sectors, enabling the Society to bring hope and joy to many people in need. **R**

Better Than Happiness

Gregory P. Smith

Penguin Random House 250pp

Reviewed by Robin Osborne

Dr, as he now is, Gregory Smith emerged from the Goonengerry, northern NSW rainforest in the year 1999, after a decade of surviving in rough isolation, barely expecting to be alive a few weeks later.

Two decades on, he has cleaned up his act in previously unimaginable ways, completing high school education, then a degree, later a PhD (on people who, like him, suffered institutional out-of-home abuse), and now holds an academic position at Southern Cross University.

This is his follow-up to the highly successful *Out of the Forest*, which triggered features in weekend magazines and captivating appearances on ABC RN's *Conversations* and ABC television's *Australian Story*, the latter, twice.

As the book's introduction says, he is 'one of Australia's foremost lived experience experts in post-traumatic stress disorder, mental illness, domestic violence, alcohol and drug addiction, rough sleeping and homelessness.'

He is a survivor of removal from his family, as dysfunctional as it was, and confinement in a Catholic boarding school where the child-inmates were treated appallingly. The psychological impacts were immense, causing him to turn to a transient life of petty crime, and later to committing arson for which he would be charged. The result was a tough and severely damaged man.

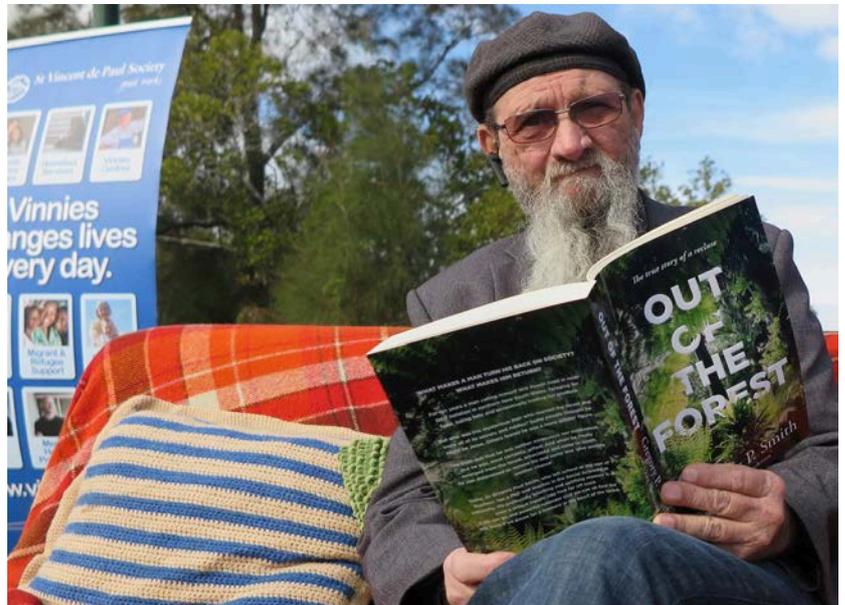
Some years ago I encouraged Gregory Smith to speak at a Vinnies sleepout event in Tweed Heads to raise funds for Fred's Place, a homeless person's resource centre. Before the event he walked around, chatting with the clientele and listening to their stories. They recognised him as one of their own yet a personification of other possibilities.

To have become a practising academic is a fate that gave him a great laugh, given he had never finished school, or dreamed of going to university.

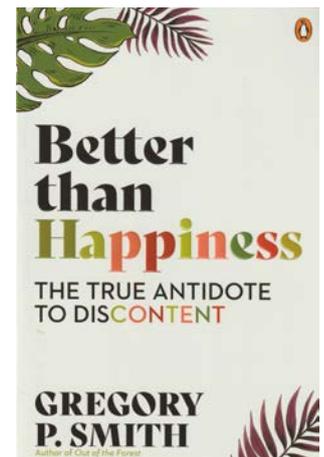
Now, he writes that, 'My brain is functioning at a level I'd never thought possible: fresher and sharper than it ever has been... the most amazing part is it has happened in spite of my best efforts to utterly destroy my mind.'

While a shorter memoir than its predecessor, again with editorial input from Craig Henderson, it offers greater detail on the challenges of substance misuse, both the author's own, having lived for years in denial, and observations about the problem at large.

'After wasting half of my life, I have gone from being



Dr Gregory P Smith, pictured with his first book, has attended Vinnies Fred's Place community sleepouts in Tweed Heads.



an unsmiling anti-social recluse who struggled to communicate with a shopkeeper to a public speaker, an advocate and leader in my field.

'It's been a very challenging journey. I am grateful for the doors that have opened in front of me, and particularly that I now have a platform from where I can shine a light on and work to address homelessness, abuse, neglect and trauma among some of the most vulnerable people in society.'

This is a great story, or a series of them, and well told – running a second-hand goods stall in Tweed Heads is especially amusing. Moreover, it ends well, with Smith falling in love with Catherine Player, a journalist who had interviewed him for a regional magazine, and moving in with her and her two children in a house near Orange, NSW.

Last year they had a boy of their own, prompting Smith, now in his late 60s, to wonder, 'How long will I live to be his father?'

Whatever the answer, there is no doubt that the lad will have some extraordinary reading when he grows up. **R**

Society continues to support good works in overseas partner countries

The St Vincent de Paul Society in Australia continues to support fellow Vincentians in the Asia-Pacific region to undertake good works through its Overseas Partnerships Program (OPP). Support is realised through Twinning relationships, Projects and the Assist-a-Student (AAS) Program, along with responding to Emergency Relief requests from its overseas partner countries.

The OPP is enabled through relationships between the National Council in Australia and the National Councils in our designated overseas partner countries of Cambodia, Federated States of Micronesia, Fiji, India, Indonesia,

Kiribati, Lao PDR, Myanmar, Philippines, Solomon Islands, Sri Lanka and Thailand.

Good works at the Conference and Council level in each of these countries are supported by the Overseas Partnership Committees (OPC) in Australian State and Territory Councils and the Overseas Partnership Advisory Committee (OPAC) at the National Level.

For detailed information about the scope of the OPP and funds remitted in financial year 2022-2023 to our overseas partners please see the *National Overview 2022-23* on our [website](#).



JOHNSON VARGHESE
INTERNATIONAL TERRITORIAL
VICE PRESIDENT, ASIA 1
(INDIA)

Twining

Twining is the direct link between an Australian Conference or Council and an overseas Conference or Council to build solidarity and help others in need. As *The Rule* (Part 1, section 4) reminds us Twining is 'one of the activities most cherished by the Society' that 'contributes to world peace and to understanding and cultural exchange among peoples'.

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

“When we talk about Twining, it’s not the transfer of money that takes place, it’s the transfer of hearts that take place. They share with each other, they pray for each other”

Johnson Varghese, International Territorial Vice President, Asia 1 (2023).



Projects

Conferences and Councils in our partnered countries are supported to undertake good works locally through small and large community development projects. Projects must be sustainable and benefit the community over the longer term. They are developed at the Conference and Council level and endorsed by the National Council. All proposals are reviewed and approved according to the policy and procedures established by Counsel General International, the National Council in Australia and the National Councils of our overseas partners.

Community Development projects improve the circumstances of people and communities in need in a local area. They can be requested by overseas Conferences and Councils through their National Council.

Community Development projects include projects in India that provided for the purchase of milk cows or buffalo. The beneficiaries sell their milk to receive income. They can also use it for their families, improving their health and nutrition.

Special Vincentian Support projects support the efficient and effective operations of an overseas National Council. They can only be requested

“And now we have 800 students. When we finished this building, I stand under the tree and I cry, my tears run down. I always ask, God you say let all the children come to me. So I brought the children, so the children can change their family and change their living to a better future.”

Julian Ketei
National President, Solomon Islands (2023)

by our partner overseas National Councils and have included funding for:

- The Solomon Islands Superior Council to visit its conferences in outer islands.
- The National Council of Indonesia to hold its National Congress to elect a new National President and office bearers.

A previous Community Development project undertaken in the Solomon Islands, supplied desks, chairs and other furniture to a school on the outskirts of the capital, Honiara and funded local contractor to build and supply the furniture, creating employment.

Emergency Relief

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

When a request is received, our National Council will determine if this is appropriate and work with State and Territory Councils to assist where they can.

Previous emergency relief requests funded by the St Vincent de Paul Society in Australia have included emergency relief in Tonga after the volcanic eruption.



“The relationship with New Zealand and Australia, we developed a close rapport with them. You know there is somebody that you rely on, they can help you instantly ... so you always have that comfort that people will help you. And I think that equal relationship is very, very important.”

Sakapo Lolohea, National President, Tonga (2023)



“You can see among your students ... they lack money for the fees and things like that ... It’s really rewarding seeing the ones that are receiving this funding. To me, it’s just great to see them working better because they have those tools.”

Rabaere Rikare
National President, Kiribati (2023)

Assist A Student

Unique to Australia, the Assist A Student (AAS) Program recognises the importance of education as one of the key planks to help break the cycle of poverty by providing the equivalent of \$100 AUD to support the educational requirements of students in need as identified through nationally agreed processes.

The importance of the program can be seen in this report from our overseas partner in Kiribati.

If you'd like to help a young person with their educational needs, you can donate online at:

[St Vincent de Paul Society - Assist a Student \(vinnies.org.au\)](https://www.vinnies.org.au)

If you'd prefer to donate off-line you can download a donation slip at:

www.vinnies.org.au/media/v5ncxk3a/odp-donation-slip.pdf

More information

If you'd like to read more about the Overseas Partnerships Program, please visit:

www.vinnies.org.au/page/Our_Impact/International_Impact/

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



St Vincent de Paul Society

NATIONAL COUNCIL of AUSTRALIA Inc.

good works

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PRIVACY STATEMENT

The St Vincent de Paul Society of Australia respects the privacy of the people it assists, our Members, Volunteers and employees. As a result, the names of clients, members, volunteers or employees featured in this report may have been changed and pictorial models used.

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