

A CALL TO SERVE

VINCENTIAN STORIES

“Let us do without hesitation
whatever good lies at our hands.”

BLESSED FREDERIC OZANAM



St Vincent de Paul Society
VICTORIA
good works

2024 CHAPTER



**“All have the right to lay
their burdens on us...
Be kind and love, for love
is your first gift to the
poor. They will appreciate
your kindness and your
love more than all else
you bring them.”**

BLESSED ROSALIE RENDU

Contents

Our mission, vision and values	4
State President's message	5
Stories	
Lawrence Chee	6
Dennis Griffin	12
Jim O'Shea	18
Albert Pruscino	24
Brian Richardson	30
Trevor Scott	36
Acknowledgements	44

OUR MISSION

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

OUR VISION

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

OUR VALUES

Commitment

Loyalty in service to our mission, vision and values.

Compassion

Welcoming and serving all with understanding and without judgement.

Respect

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

Integrity

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

Empathy

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

Advocacy

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

Courage

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

STATE PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE



Dear members, volunteers and staff,

I am delighted to introduce another six stories in video and written format in the A Call to Serve series in this, the 170th anniversary year of our wonderful, membership organisation.

Since 1854, St Vincent de Paul Society Victoria and the people we serve, have been blessed by the thousands of Vincentian men and women who have given compassionate service and a dedication to alleviate the hardship experienced by the poor, the lonely and the marginalised.

The A Call to Serve series honours members and volunteers for this dedication to service, and for their compassion, courage and selflessness. We also recognise them for being modern day examples of servant leadership within their respective communities and in our Society more broadly. Common themes in this year's stories are:

- honourees' recognition of their conference teams – the honouring is a joint effort and achievement;
- the dedication of each honouree to always give of their best, no matter the challenges;
- the impressive results in terms of numbers assisted and the impact of hands up examples;
- balancing the desire to deliver a hand up with the urgent immediacy of helping with cost of living pressures;

- the importance of remaining available in an ongoing way for companions in need and;
- the immense camaraderie and life enrichment members derive from being Vincentians.

As Frederic Ozanam himself was challenged, so too are our Vincentians in addressing immediate, pressing needs while seeking to counter underlying causes. Cost of living pressures and the lack of affordable housing are particularly tough this year with many flow on effects. The stories echo these and more realities for our companions and our members. The hands up versus the hand out balancing act along with recruitment of new members continue to be key underlying challenges for our Vincentians.

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

I hope you enjoy the stories and the videos.

Thank you for your ongoing, steadfast commitment in living out the Vincentian spirit in all you do.

God bless.

Michael Quinn

State President

St Vincent de Paul Society Victoria

A person wearing a blue hoodie with rainbow-colored stripes on the sleeves is gesturing with their hands. The background is a blurred indoor setting.

LAWRENCE CHEE

LAVERTON/ALTONA MEADOWS CONFERENCE

CONSCIENCE OF THE CONFERENCE

Growing up in Malaysia, one of five children, honouree Lawrence Chee remembers the kindness of friends and neighbours who would tide his family over when they were short on rice. His father was hard working and a very good role model, but in the early years, the family often struggled.

On his first conference home visit thirty-two years ago, recollections from his childhood came to the fore. He was surprised by his emotional response.



I think it was realising the difficult situations many people must be in that had been largely hidden from my view of Australia.

In 1992, when Lawrence started with Laverton/Altona Meadows Conference, members visited alone and he felt thrown in the deep end. Since then, he has learned what to say and do when meeting companions and importantly to be compassionate and show empathy. He acknowledges his fellow members who together, provide a wonderful team response. He is accepting this award in recognition of this team effort.

Lawrence believes that the Mission of the Society is to do the work of Christ. He believes his faith has guided him and he has had a blessed life. In turn, he wants to bless the lives of others who have not had opportunities. Lawrence graduated as a bio chemist and has had a successful working life in the pharmaceutical industry. He is an enthusiastic advocate for the hand up and particularly for the importance of education as a way for people to escape the poverty cycle. He also believes more must be done by governments to address the lack of affordable housing.

People need the firm foundation that stable, affordable and adequate housing provides.

Changing nature of conference engagement

In the 1990s when Lawrence commenced, the conference gave food to people in need, but not much else. Lawrence is pleased that today, more is done. There is effort made to understand the true circumstances of a person who calls for assistance.

Two teams visit people three days per week. When calling to make a time, members gather some preliminary information about income and rent to ascertain living expense pressures. The conference mainly sees families, usually six per day and ensures they inquire about the children; how they are doing at school, what they need. Often, the family needs household goods. The conference provides what it can even though the budget for white goods has decreased. The local NILS scheme is a good option

and one that Lawrence was involved in establishing as a Special Work of Altona Regional Council. He explains that successful applicants usually contribute \$20 - \$25 per fortnight towards paying for the purchase of their choice and manage to pay off with generous loan periods.

We are always hoping to go some way to alleviating and if possible, to solving long term problems.

Expanding the reach of geographical boundaries

When Lawrence first joined the conference, members visited Altona Meadows and Laverton, which aligned with the parish boundaries. Today, their coverage extends to include the new estates of Point Cook, William's Landing and Truganina as well.

The western suburbs were initially considered the cheapest area for growth with house and land packages relatively affordable. Development boomed in this area. Many young families including migrant and refugee families moved into these new estates.

There are cost of living pressures exacerbated by inflation, increased mortgage payments and rents. The schools are often predominantly catering to students from marginalised families.

As well, certain areas once considered cheap such as Laverton where low income and many older residents lived, have gentrified. The original residents have been pushed out by rent increases or sold and left as they age. It is now an expensive suburb where two incomes per household are required to remain in the area.

The role of advocacy

Lawrence is adamant that the government must take greater responsibility for supporting refugees in the early years and process their applications more quickly to reduce anxiety.

It is unjust that refugees are left to defend for themselves, particularly when they have no work rights.

He believes the Society is well placed to talk about inequity and disadvantage and should use its voice



Laverton/Altona Meadows Conference meeting.

at every opportunity. He acknowledges the excellent advocacy over the years on utilities which has contributed to many subsidies and wins for low-income Australians.

Lawrence regularly speaks about the work of the Society and conference, particularly through his involvement in his Holy Trinity Parish, one of Victoria's largest parishes.

Addressing ongoing housing crisis

Lawrence reflects that it is beyond the capacity of conferences to enable residents to remain in homes that are unaffordable due to spiralling rents that absorb too high a percentage of a person's income. As well, many Centrelink payments are insufficient. Together these factors make it impossible for people to enjoy an adequate level of comfort and security.

Coming from Malaysia, he has a strong belief that

government should play a bigger role in the provision of affordable housing, seeing housing as an essential foundation on which people can build their lives. Without the safety net of an affordable, adequate home, people remain in limbo.

Lawrence is an avid supporter of schemes that enable low income renters to acquire equity in their home so that in 20-30 years, the property belongs to them. He believes this would relieve families from the perpetual pressures of annual rental increases.

I feel sad for the many families we see who are unable to pay the high rent demanded by landlords.

The importance of education

Discussion of challenges such as housing brings Lawrence back to the importance of everyone having access to a good education and ideally, this includes gaining a TAFE or university qualification.

This is essential to enable people to gain skills to enter the workforce. Lawrence believes this is a modern day necessity to enable people to escape the poverty cycle.

If we aren't helping to end poverty, we are doing an injustice to these families.

Breakfast Club

In recognising the poverty circuit breaker that education provides, Lawrence encourages members to always inquire how companions' children are going at school. It is a way to keep education at the forefront and emphasise its importance.

Lawrence realised many children were going to school without breakfast, a recipe for poor concentration and disengagement. Laverton Conference started a breakfast program at Mary of the Cross Primary School, Pt Cook, with great support from the principal. Volunteers who came from the school community also helped. He describes the program in glowing terms.

The children loved to eat what we provided, especially the cheese toasties. It was a real joy to see their enthusiasm and encouraged us to do more for them.

Assist a Student

Lawrence has been involved in the Overseas Development Partnership Committee as a member and as treasurer. He sees the good that comes from this partnership whose clear aim is to improve the livelihood of twinned communities. Conferences submit ideas for projects to their twinning coordinator, who assesses and refers these to the National Committee. These projects are then supported by Victorian conferences to cover the costs of the projects.

Lawrence's avid support of education as a way out of poverty extends to overseas programs such as the Society's Assist a Student Scheme, offered in many developing countries. This scheme is made possible by donations from the public. Society funds cannot be used for this purpose, so Lawrence's conference members decided to take up a collection to supplement this valuable scheme.

This is such an effective way to lift the standard of living for poor people in our twins program.

Lawrence loves seeing the enabling and flow on effect that these supported projects have; for example, providing two cows to a village. As new animals are born, there is a multiplier effect with new families being given livestock.

The role of Treasurer

Members across Victoria have found the modernisation and transformation of processes relating to finances and budgets in recent years daunting. This is why Lawrence's willingness to take on the treasurer role at conference, regional and central council levels has been a gift to Western Central conferences.

Lawrence has undertaken an accounting course and is qualified for this role. He is always available to help, is diligent with details, financial stewardship, and meeting timelines. A valued contributor and involved in so many roles, he has particularly come into his own with this willingness to deal with figures and budgets. Members particularly appreciate his ability to make finance information easy to understand and his willingness to help people overcome their discomfort in this domain.

The conscience of the conference

If you want to know the true measure of a person, ask their peers. One Member simply describes Lawrence as "good value", high praise in Australian terms.

He is known as the conference's quiet achiever, keen observer, a solid and steady leader, who knows right from wrong and actively supports members in decision making. He is a good listener, thoughtful and highly dedicated to the work of the Society. He is also someone who gives credit to others; notably this is why he has agreed to accept this award on behalf of the team. In the words of Western Central Council President, Grace Pulis,

Lawrence's actions reflect a deep integration of faith and service epitomising the transformation of



Photograph by Nazem Kacmaz on Unsplash

Sunset over Altona pier.

belief into tangible assistance for others. He is always focused on the care and assistance of others.

Other members reflect that Lawrence models humility, compassion and dedicated service. One member believes the best summation of Lawrence’s contribution is as “The conscience of the conference”.

In a recent visit, the conference discovered a woman escaping domestic violence, who was sleeping on a porch. The visit had been done by two male conference members. Lawrence was concerned that not enough examination of best options had been considered and insisted this case be discussed and further engagement involve women in the conference.

Lawrence recognises the Society can only do so much, but we must be astute in how we use our resources. Sometimes, members’ presence and accompaniment of people through challenging times is the most important gift to a companion.

Lawrence is aware he is getting older and does not know how long he will continue doing this work. He believes God will tell him when it is time to hang up his Society calling card. When that time

comes, Lawrence can be reassured he has made an immense contribution to alleviating disadvantage through his diverse involvements with the Society.

Record of service

Lawrence Chee

1992 –	Member, Laverton/Altona Meadows Conference
1992-2003	Conference President
2007-2010	Conference President
2010 –	Conference Twinning Officer
2011 –	Conference Treasurer
2004-2007	President, Altona Regional Council
2008-2008	A/President, Essendon Regional Council
2013-2017	President, Altona Regional Council
2017-2022	Treasurer, Altona Regional Council
2018 –	Treasurer, Western Central Council
2010-2014	Co-ordinator, Hobsons Bay NILs-Special Work of Altona Regional Council
2018-2023	A/President, Sunshine Conference



DENNIS GRIFFIN

BELGRAVE CONFERENCE

FIND THE NEED AND NEVER GIVE UP

Honouree Dennis Griffin's Vincentian story spans an action-packed, thirty five years. The settings are two strikingly different locations; the hills region of Sherbrooke Knox, particularly centred within the Belgrave Conference boundaries and the South Melbourne public housing estate, a Special Work of the region, where Dennis visited for many years.



Dennis' abiding, deep faith and his vitality, enthusiasm, compassion and curiosity motivate his desire to help people. Dennis is a diehard Melbourne Football Club tragic who wears his club scarf to great effect as a conversation ice breaker. Dennis' fellow members believe he exemplifies the essence of a true Vincentian. Dennis simply reflects that what keeps him going are people's ever-present needs.

His Society involvement and the extent of his visiting and assisting is vast and he recalls cases of assistance with clarity, even when from decades ago. He remembers people he has encountered and helped and the names of past members. Dennis paints vivid pictures and his story telling is gripping. Every twist and turn demonstrates how driven he is to do more regardless of challenges.

As well, Dennis is always quick to put his hand up, motivated always by the need imperative. Some examples include volunteering every Friday for two years at the Box Hill Call Centre, his involvement in the former Hills Vincentian Scholarship Scheme, and working to advance the establishment of Compeer.

Belgrave Conference

Around 1990, Dennis joined Emerald Conference. In the beginning, it was a tiny conference of four members. Since then, Emerald has merged with Belgrave Conference and currently has 22 members. The members are passionate about what they do and Dennis has the highest regard for them all.

The conference covers a large area that extends out to Gembrook, Mt Dandenong and Belgrave. As Dennis details visits, the particular peri-urban, rural and often, subsistent nature of living here is apparent. Many people assisted live on bush blocks and in sub-standard buildings with few facilities most of us take for granted. Some people's circumstances dictate the need for anonymity and seclusion. Fellow members recount cases where Dennis has driven return trips of 90 minutes to respond to a caller. Cases

of homelessness, often with the key cause being family violence are common.

In Dennis' telling, one example of a person assisted spills into another; many of the people Dennis meet become long term and ongoing engagements. Dennis remains respectful and onside with the companion. This does not mean that he won't challenge or gently encourage. He is motivated to find a way for the person through their hardships, while if required, he will advocate on their behalf. He keeps up to date about forms of assistance and concessions that are available. He is well across The Rule and guidelines that determine what a conference can provide.

We're listening to people. While at their home and with consent, we can ring the electrical company and mediate and advocate on their behalf and do more.

Former Regional President, Gordon Veerasawmy, who convinced Dennis to replace him at the end of his term, describes Dennis as a true Vincentian with staying power, who enjoys people and a chat or two and is very entertaining.

He follows faithfully in the footsteps of Ozanam. This award is very well deserved. He is one out of the Hills!

Like many members, Dennis is frustrated by the paucity of affordable, adequate housing options available and laments the high incidence of homelessness. He has visited many women escaping family violence; examples such as one woman with two young children living in the State Forest, another in similar circumstances whom the conference supported in the long term. It is a tragic, repeating pattern.

We put the women and their kids up in motels for short periods and put them in touch with relevant services. A caravan or affordable home may become available, but it is always challenging.

Dennis is rarely surprised these days by what he encounters, although he is frustrated that these circumstances exist in our prosperous country.



Dennis and wife Carol embarking on a home visit.

The conference visit a couple who are loving parents of a large family, but there are issues of parental capacity, abuse, mental health and squalid living conditions. A number of professional agencies are involved with the family.

One visit, the lady asked if we'd mind meeting outside as the sheep had given birth in the house.

The members support the family as best they can, always inquiring after the children and checking basic needs are met. The conference arranged for essential repairs to ensure the family's health is not compromised.

We do what we can. It is hard to estimate the impact sometimes, but we are always here if they need us.

Dennis understands the importance of making time to be with a person, share in their anguish and listen attentively to what they are saying. He had visited a destitute man on several occasions, when the

man asked for further help. His father had died and he had no money or understanding of what was involved for a funeral. Dennis looked after the details, the Society covered the costs and Dennis attended the funeral to support the man.

Dennis and his colleagues are accustomed to 'No shows'. Homelessness is chaotic and exhausting and being in impermanent situations makes it hard to keep appointments. Phone calls are not always answered. Dennis perseveres. In the current cold snap, he has been trying to connect with a new caller, a young man living with his partner in a caravan in a remote area. He will keep trying.

The area cops its fair share of natural disasters, most recently storm damage. Fire is a constant threat over the warmer months. Dennis recalls that after the 1983 fires, the Society provided a number of caravans to victims of the fires. For a time, Cockatoo



The forest environment of parts of Knox Sherbrooke region.

became a place where there were cheap rentals and a concentration of struggling people.

We used to help there a great deal, but not so much now. Places change and average rents today are between \$440 and \$500, way beyond our companions' capacity.

Visiting South Melbourne, a Special Work of Knox Sherbrooke Region

In 2002, Dennis started visiting the South Melbourne public housing estates as part of a Knox Sherbrooke Special Works. There was no conference in the area and Boronia Conference, understanding the imperative of need among a high density, high needs community, initiated these visits. Dennis was part of the initial Knox Sherbrooke region visiting team started by Phil Johnston and including Bernie Starling, Carol Stones and the late Willy Magnus.

Every Saturday, the region sends two teams with each team usually visiting 20 people seeking assistance. Dennis describes the estate as a bit like the United Nations.

When it works, it's ok, but sometimes there is racial conflict.

The cases and the detail of many people visited

in South Melbourne spill from Dennis. Some are desperate, worn down; others are resilient, determined and truly deserve a break. Some may have no other visitors or human contact. The common theme is that the visiting team stick by these people, doing what they can and exploring options.

It can be a very lonely place to live for some. The stories of the spiralling downwards some people endure in their lifetimes are often unimaginable.

We saw tenants who have recently left prison. They were genuinely blown away that we visited and often followed up unasked.

Even though Dennis no longer visits Park Towers, these people have left a lasting impression on him. It is likely his impact has been the same for them.

Dennis tells of several young refugee women with children, trying to break free from controlling, violent marriages in pursuit of better lives, relying on help from supposedly humane, 'on side' lawyers, demanding large sums of money to defend these cases. The team sought pro bono legal assistance, called on Vincentians with appropriate skills and used the Society's resources responsibly to alleviate



Photograph by Pen Ash on Unsplash

financial and emotional pressures, helping one woman gain Australian citizenship and contribute to her HECs fees

We called this woman the lioness, for what she endured. Phil and I went to St Kilda Council to witness her becoming an Australian citizen. She has since graduated, gained a professional role. Her life is a success.

Dennis is at pains to emphasise that amidst the challenges, there are also great success stories where people study, and get on their feet. He is aware of many works in progress that are destined to end happily.

Box Hill Call Centre

Dennis learned a great deal from volunteering at the Call Centre every Friday for two years, witnessing people in all their vulnerabilities. It was a valuable lesson and he has immense respect for the volunteers who continue to give their time to this critical function.

Compeer & Hills Vincentian Scholarship Scheme

Two effective programs no longer operating which Dennis was instrumental in starting and

delivering were firstly, Compeer, a program addressing the isolation many people with mental illness experience by matching them with well trained volunteers. Secondly, the Hills Vincentian Scholarship Scheme which operated for nine years across 24 state and Catholic schools and assisted over 2,000 disadvantaged school children by supporting their education needs. The Society contributed close to \$500,000 in support of this scheme.

Acknowledging others

Dennis started off as a foot soldier and in his own words, “Knew nothing.” He has many he wishes to acknowledge for what he has learned from them, too many to list here. In summary, there are many individuals whose caring example showed him the Vincentian way; the entire Knox Sherbrooke regional team; his wife Corol, a steady, beautiful presence accompanying him and the wonderful South Melbourne team.

Never give up

Dennis believes that the poor will always be with us. This is a major driver impelling him to keep going.

He has gained a great deal of respect from other visiting members with his staying power and total dedication. He gives of himself. He has driven and walked countless kilometres to assist people, knocking on house doors, barn doors, shed doors, Office of Housing doors. Dennis will never give up on a person in need. With his boundless energy and dedication, he is indomitable.

Record of service

Dennis Griffin

1992	Member, Emerald Conference
	President, Emerald Conference
	Knox Sherbrooke Regional Council President 2 terms
	Vice President, State Council
2002-2004	Volunteer, Box Hill Call Centre



JIM O'SHEA
CAMPERDOWN CONFERENCE

A HAND UP ALL OVER THE WORLD

Jim O'Shea has given over 50 years in service as a member of the Society around the Western District region of Corangamite and in particular, as part of Camperdown Conference. His wife, Annette has also been a Society stalwart, devoting 47 years alongside her husband.



In the early days, the conference visited the sick and aged in hospitals as well as conducting home visits. In addition to his conference involvement, Jim delivered meals on wheels. These activities ended with Covid. He and his family have continued to provide long term care to a local resident, incapacitated through ill health and age. Jim has staying power when it comes to responding to need.

He has been active on Parish Council, the school board, the bowls club and service clubs such as Probus. He is well respected and proud of his town and its people. Jim initiated the establishment of the adjoining Cobden Conference and has always acted to address unmet need.

Significantly, his conference work has also included considerable achievements with the Society's Overseas Development Committee in twinned countries and with a particular emphasis on the Assist a Student Scheme. Jim is a big supporter of a hand up and has been convinced of its impact by what he has witnessed through his involvement in this education Special Work. It is hard to encapsulate the extent of Jim's volunteer efforts over half a century, but suffice to say, many thousands of people's lives have improved as a consequence.

Jim comes from a long line of family – a number who joined Religious Orders – who are steeped in deep commitment to improving the lives of those who are disadvantaged and impoverished. The span of years of involvement in the Society of St Vincent de Paul by Jim and his wife, his mother, aunts, uncles and cousins – fifteen individuals – amounts to an astonishing 300 years of dedicated service and commitment. As well, his adult children inherited the Vincentian spirit and are active in supporting the homeless and fundraising for worthy causes. As Jim sees it, volunteering is a way people with fortunate lives give back to those with less opportunities.

His honouring follows in the footsteps of other local A Call to Serve recipients, Marie and John

O'Brien (Cobden, 2023) and Maureen Larkins (Camperdown Conference and Vinnies store, 2019). The nature of country conferences exemplifies standing with and helping each other, particularly through tough times.

Importance of building trust and connection

Jim has an easy, disarming manner which helps in putting at ease people who are in stressful situations. He sees people come to the Corangamite Assistance Centre, beaten by life's challenges, who leave with their load made a little lighter. It might take 20 minutes before the real needs and best ways to help emerge, but Jim is an ardent advocate for active listening and the gentle, gradual building of rapport. He believes the quick chat and handing out of vouchers is under selling what conferences can provide.

The need for food is often only scratching at the surface. We usually spend half an hour with people. It is very satisfying when you feel you have made a breakthrough.

Jim keeps up to date with relevant information such as Centrelink's suite of offerings, payment plans for services and local businesses in order to be well placed to advocate on behalf of a companion.

Jim recognises that conferences are now working more often with other agencies and this achieves better outcomes for companions. Jim was involved in the establishment of the Family Resource Centre, a Special Work of the Society. In recent years, it has been replaced by the Manifold Place Welfare Centre, which is conveniently located near the Assistance Centre. This centre offers a range of professional services such as financial and other counsellors, physiotherapists and for a time, a dentist.

Other agencies have specialist expertise and can assist with the increasing demand for help such as with managing money. Jim has seen this demonstrated in the way financial counsellors find a path through layers of indebtedness to



I to r, Mary Brown and Jim interviewing a companion.

consolidate and retire debt and to assist with unexpected expenses. Jim recognises the Society cannot respond to every need and can leverage what these agencies offer for the benefit of companions.

Accompanying a person through their challenges is integral to the model of care Jim believes conferences and assistance centres can and should provide. This can include offering ongoing support, giving ample time to listen and properly understand the core needs and always showing respect. Jim finds taking a person to their first appointment with a counsellor is an effective way to overcome any reluctance on the part of the companion. Jim reflects that while home visits play a valuable role in supporting companions, increasingly people in regional and rural areas

feel coming to an assistance centre is less intrusive and has a more professional feeling.

The Society's spiritual dimension

It was always drummed into Jim that first and foremost, the Society is a spiritual organisation and this remains very important to him. He values the time at meetings to explore and reflect on readings. He is disappointed that this integral element has dissipated a little. He believes that a greater embrace of spirituality can enhance how members meet with companions and build meaningful connection. Still, he reflects that while there are near empty churches everywhere, many people, like his own children, live out their faith and spirituality in practical ways. Actions speak louder than words, but Jim has also found that words can spur action.

While in India, a meeting with Mother Theresa had a powerful impact on Jim. They discussed the importance of education as a long-term way to address generational disadvantage and its wonderful flow on effect. Inspired by Sister Theresa's words, Jim came home to revise what was then the Adopt a Student program.

Overseas Development and Assist a Student

*Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day.
Teach him how to fish and you feed him for a lifetime.*

Lao Tzu

Jim has been involved with the Society's Overseas Development work with twinned countries for over 45 years at conference, State and national levels. It is his greatest passion work with the Society. In the early years, he convinced his fellow committee members, John O'Brien and Br Doug Walsh that it would be beneficial to visit some of their twinned communities to ascertain their true needs and to witness first-hand what the twinning grants were achieving. It was an eye-opener that motivated their efforts and in turn, inspired conferences and other community members to support and achieve as much as they could in many of the developing countries where the Society is active.

In 1992, Jim attended the National Council in Calcutta and was approached by a National Project Officer who had started a Technical Training Scheme for 500 students. Jim undertook to find funding and out of this encounter and the meeting with Mother Theresa, Assist a Student was born.

Funds are raised from individual sponsorship, schools and parishes: all do their bit to support the program. It has been highly successful over its 30 years' operating and has assisted a staggering 400,000 students in this time. The ripple effect is sometimes hard to quantify, but it is fair to estimate that for every child who receives a good education through the scheme, a further ten people benefit directly and indirectly. Receiving a good education leads to



l to r, John O'Brien, Maureen Larkins and Jim O'Shea.

a job and the ability for one person to support three generations.

There could be as many as four million whose lives have benefited from the Society's education support. This gives you a great feeling.

While age and caring responsibilities limit his capacity to travel as much, Jim still takes an immense interest in the scheme's progress. His sister, Sister Marie SGS keeps him updated with the evolving story of the 100 students recently assisted in Kiribati.

Marie recently told me that the program was an enormous help to needy students there.

He now focuses more on conference work and reflects that like any older program, Assist a Student will benefit from others taking the reins and helping with increasing interest and promotion of the program.

Leadership and succession

Jim recognises that support and mentoring can help members feel more inclined and confident to take on the task. Over the years, he has contributed



by injecting some fun and interest in training sessions with engaging role plays. Jim became Regional Secretary at 34 years of age and soon after Regional President. He has been Conference President three times as well as holding various positions with his overseas development involvement. He is grateful for the privileges bestowed upon him through these roles. His Society involvement has been a gift and continues to bring joy and fulfilment.

Like so many, he worries about shrinking numbers in conferences and ensuring a solid base is retained on which a conference can be re-built as necessary.

He has one plea to safeguard the sanctity of the name of the Society of St Vincent de Paul. The use of the term 'Vinnies' has its place, but not at the expense of the much respected name of its esteemed mother organisation.

Blessed Frederic Ozanam encouraged members "In their life time, to do a little good." Jim has well and truly exceeded this modest objective in his own corner of the world and many, far flung places. Jim can be justifiably

proud of the flow-on impact he has achieved through his half a century as a valiant contributor to addressing disadvantage and increasing opportunities. From his good flows more good.

Record of service

Jim O'Shea

- 1972 – Joined St Patrick's Conference, Camperdown
- 1975 – Secretary, Colac Regional Council
- 1975 – Twinning officer, Camperdown Conference
- 1979 – President, Colac Regional Council
Two terms
- 1982 – Founder Cobden Conference
- 1986 – President, Camperdown Conference
- 1988-1993 State Chair, Overseas Development Committee
- 1993 – National Twinning Officer
- 2000-2006 Volunteer Manager, Camperdown Store
- 2005-2008 President, Camperdown Conference
- 2012-2015 President, Colac Regional Council

ALBERT PRUSCINO

BAIRNSDALE CONFERENCE

**“WE ARE ALL
SERVANTS.”**

What is it about Bairnsdale and the Society? The trip to Bairnsdale is the third time the A Call to Serve Team has come to honour one of its members. Previous honourees have been Dick Pepper, honoured posthumously in 2017 for his innovative approach and inspired leadership and Cath McMahon, 2022, a dynamic president and member, who made a particular impact in supporting victims of the 2019/20 bushfires and promoting the conference to the broader community. Both personified the essence of rural, regional conference ‘can do’ and enthusiasm for service.





l to r, Trish Veevers, Bairnsdale Conference President, Albert and Cath McMahon, member and East Gippsland Regional Council President.

This spirit lives on in this year's honouree, Albert Pruscino who insists he is accepting the award on behalf of the entire Bairnsdale Conference team.

Servant leadership

Albert's strong sense of team is evident at the Bairnsdale Conference meeting, which commences with an inspiring reflection, "We are all servants." It is a beautiful call to all present to be servant leaders and to see Jesus' example as the benchmark. All are asked to go that extra mile, wash the feet of those who may at times disturb us and frustrate us. This reflection is like holding a mirror up to Albert whose approach has always been to do more.

When Albert was Regional President, he came across a struggling mother living in a small town. The region would go on to support her for five years. Albert's compassion is particularly on display where family violence and children are involved.

The woman, who had escaped an abusive relationship, had four children, three with chronic illnesses and special needs. She was living in a mould-ridden, Housing Commission house.

The Housing Department were taking no action to remediate this risk to the family's health.

We found her a new house and subsidised her rent for 5 years. Her kids' health improved immensely once they moved away from the mould.

The woman wanted to turn her life around and find work. The conference bought her a computer so she could study aged care online. She graduated and found work. Another agency donated a car to enable her to travel to her workplace. Later, the conference helped with essential repairs to get the car back on the road. Albert acknowledges the continuum of support from fellow members right up the line to then State President, Michael Liddy. It was an example of feeling able to always take the next step because of everyone's encouragement.

Albert checks on the woman every so often. Last time he dropped by with a box of vegetables, she said she was fine and no longer needed the help.

That's a satisfying outcome; the ones who have gained independence.

Supporting each other

The conference has a motto: we support each other so that we can best support the people who need our assistance. The spirit in the conference meeting echoes this message and is respectful and engaging. Bairnsdale is fortunate to have over 45 active members, who are invested in each other and have a shared purpose and enthusiasm. It is easy to see why recruitment is not a concern here.

The members in turn share their recent, difficult encounters, providing helpful advice and support for each other. Several express heart-felt frustration on the increasing number of homeless people living by the river and in sheds and what are the best, warm and weather-proof, bandaid solutions. There have also been confronting visits involving intergenerational families living in squalor with vulnerable children and a challenging case involving hoarding.

Albert is very proud of his hometown Bairnsdale – he has lived here all his life apart from 15 years with external postings as a bank officer. He is equally proud of the wonderful work of the conference and the assistance centres at Bairnsdale and Lakes Entrance. He describes the easy vibe and positive attitude of all members as what emboldens him and others to keep trying new ways of delivering the best service to the people seeking assistance. While the model of assistance is to see people in need at one of the two assistance centres, Albert will always undertake a home visit if this is required.

Joining the Society

In 2006, Albert took time off work for a lengthy recovery from an injury and illness. Mentor Dick Pepper, always alert when it came to spotting a good opportunity, knew Albert from when they both lived in Darwin. He suggested Albert become volunteer manager of the local Vinnies store, a role he would hold for three years.

In 2010, he became a member of the Bairnsdale Conference. Since then, Albert has gone onto broader involvement and has held many leadership

positions such as conference, regional and central council treasurer, twinning officer, social justice officer, conference secretary and regional president. Throughout, Albert himself has been a strong mentor and a good listener who shares his experience and support to all across the conference and broader region. His warm, outgoing manner, support of the team, dedication to doing the job well and sense of fun have brought him immense respect from his peers and the broader community.

Albert believes there is a flow on effect across the conference which sees members emboldened to do more; this has grown from day one. The members feed off each other's' example and pushing of boundaries.

You are prepared to go out on a limb because we back each other. Let's do it as long as within our rules.

Albert credits Dick Pepper with teaching him a great deal about conference work. Dick became Central Council President and he needed a treasurer. Albert held this role for many years. He remembers proud moments such as allocating \$350,000 to support bushfire victims in the Moe district and allocating money for the region's tertiary education support scheme.

I learned a lot from Dick. Looking back, I realise he was probably grooming me for different roles.

Albert has had a run of serious health issues but if asked to do anything for the Society, always says yes. At times, his poor health has prevented him from certain roles, such as on the ground support, during the 2019/20 bushfires. However, he was invaluable off-site, keeping accurate records of the interviews and assistance given in that extraordinary period of intensive support from the conference and other Gippsland conferences. It was not uncommon for members to complete over 150 interviews per day in the heady aftermath of the fires.

As well as experience in banking, Albert had managed a food store. He brings this dual experience to the Assistance Centre, where his

budgetary management and purchasing of items for the pantry, are second to none.

He is an astute shopper, always getting the best value for all items, which in turn is best value for the companions and the Society. He keeps a watchful eye over the pantry, ensuring items are dispensed in order of use by date. It is an example of Albert's approach to life: if it's worth doing, it's worth doing well.

An experienced mentor

Albert is generous with imparting advice and wisdom when sought. He does so in a spirit of respecting others' viewpoints and with the aim of always achieving the best outcome.

Members particularly appreciate Albert's guidance on how to work with companions to help them understand budgeting. He believes members must be prepared to tell companions in a respectful way when they are stretching their budgets unrealistically.

Members have learned a great deal from his example of patience, active listening, building of trust and non-judgement. Albert's own life has had challenges and he has a deep understanding of the difficulties many in the community face. He lives out the Vincentian values with sincerity and constancy.

His cheerful disposition, always on display in his dealings with everyone is a further quality that builds and models positive relationships.

Calling on the community for support

The Bairnsdale Assistance Centre and now Lakes Entrance, as well as the bright blue polo shirt emblazoned with the logo "We are here" that members wear with pride, have contributed to putting the Society on the map here. People ask about the organisation now more than ever and donations are more frequent. There is a strong sense of the value the township places on the Society's work.

As a life-long resident and respected community contributor, Albert is very well connected to the local community. He calls on help from those he knows

when help is needed and his network are generous in their support. Bairnsdale is a giving community. He has rustled up donations and desperately needed items at discounted prices, such as water, hay, gas bottles and car repairs. These items are often lifelines, particularly in times of natural disasters.

Albert has also always actively promoted the work of the Society at Masses in Bairnsdale and Lakes Entrance to promote Appeals and recruit new members. He has also been active across the local Catholic schools in an effort to inspire younger membership.

Lakes Entrance Assistance Centre

Albert is quick to acknowledge others in the conference for their success in establishing the Lakes Entrance Assistance Centre. Members describe the number of campfires in the sand dunes as an ever-present reminder how many are sleeping rough.

Homelessness is particularly dire here, fuelled in part by the high demand from holiday makers prepared to pay higher rates. Even a basic cabin in the caravan park can cost \$650 per week, well beyond the means of Centrelink recipients.

Albert acknowledges the contribution of Conference President, Trish Veevers and her key team, who advocate strongly for the cause of addressing homelessness and think creatively about short term solutions.

Practical faith

Albert sees his conference work and involvement in the parish as co-existing. The St Vincent de Paul Poor Box is a constant reminder of the Church's involvement in supporting the poor. He often reminds members that Jesus is the benchmark in what they are called to do. The members often reflect when a successful outcome is found for a companion that the Holy Spirit intervened.

The Holy Family is my guide and role model. There is definitely a vibe and shared purpose that everyone feels.



Hope is definitely part of what we give people – even when we have to knock back a request sometimes, people know we are here to help. They can come back. We give hope.

Members praise of Albert is lavish and he is variously described as the ‘anchor’ of the conference, a caring, father figure, a steady and enthusiastic presence and steadfast in his commitment to addressing need.

There is definitely something precious, alive and well across the Bairnsdale Conference – what the members call “a lack of egos” – and this can be largely attributed to the role modelling of Albert. He agreed to accept this award on behalf of the conference and credit is due to the many members who have contributed alongside Albert. He intends to continue his involvement as long as his health allows. His influence will live on.

Record of service

Albert Pruscino

- 2006-2009 Volunteer Manager,
Bairnsdale Vinnies Store
- 2006-2010 Treasurer Gippsland Central Council
- 2010 – Joined Bairnsdale Conference
- 2013-2017 Bairnsdale Conference Secretary
- 2014 -2018 East Gippsland Regional
Council President
- 2015 Twinning Officer and Social
Justice Officer
- 2018 -2020 East Gippsland Treasurer
- 2020-2023 East Gippsland Regional Council
President
- 2023 – Bairnsdale Conference Project Officer

The background features a blue banner with a circular logo on the left and the text 'Good M' on the right. Below the logo, the words 'MARY'S' and 'AN' are partially visible. The main text is overlaid on this background.

BRIAN RICHARDSON

SWAN HILL CONFERENCE

EMPOWERING THE TEAM

When the Swan Hill Conferences meets every month, the first agenda item after prayers is 'Making a difference.' Honouree Brian Richardson introduced this item to enable members to reflect on how they are making a tangible difference for the people they help and for themselves. It's a well-received addition to the meeting and provides valuable lessons and stories.



Vincentians are people of diverse dimensions. When they share their gifts as members, a conference literally buzzes with energy, positivity and a wonderful sense of shared purpose and friendship. Add to this an exceptional president and a core team and you have the making of a dream team and an 'anything is possible' approach.

The members speak of President Brian Richardson's impact on creating an environment where good ideas are enabled. They also speak of him as an empowering leader who is comfortable to be with and hard to say no to. He has a mighty presence and personality. Other key qualities are fairness, integrity, ease with networking, knowing how the system works, always including a strong element of fun and enjoyment of each person. He trusts people to get on with tasks.

Brian has re-invigorated the conference which recently celebrated its 60th anniversary. As a member for fourteen years, Brian brings three decades with Victorian Police Force in diverse roles and locations. It taught him a great deal about people.

As a young constable, I arrested a young woman for shop stealing. She couldn't speak English very well, so I arranged an interpreter. She was very intelligent, new to Australia and her qualifications weren't

recognised. Lesson no 1. Never pre-judge a person. Lesson no 2. Really listen to what a person is saying.

Brian ran a farm for ten years and for fifteen years, managed a local motel. Throughout, he has remained involved in sporting clubs as well. Put simply, Brian has a deep understanding and rapport with people. He has a beautiful way of treating everyone as equals and building connections.

Brian is a very good listener and believes this is one of the most important skills a Vincentian should have. Sitting with a person who needs help requires dedicated listening to truly understand the real need. Sometimes the person mainly wants the opportunity to discuss their challenges and be heard.

Swan Hill Assistance Centre

Having a setting that promotes good listening is key. When Brian joined, the conference was working out of the back of the Vinnies store. It was not ideal in terms of privacy and compassion

Brian was determined premises worthy of the work would be found and in 2018, secured the current office, which was formerly the office of Peter Walsh Member for Murray Plains.

His secretary asked us if we'd like the furniture. What a gift! We completely fitted out this new centre.



The Big Murray Cod, iconic feature of Swan Hill.

Brian was then treasurer and petitioned the owner for a reduced rental. The premises are welcoming, well located and the two offices provide privacy for interviews.

According to Brian, this is critical as it often takes courage for a person to come into the Assistance Centre and ask for help. Recently, a young man who was knocked over by a van came in after a week in hospital. He was battered and bruised, had trouble walking and was understandably in distress. He was seeking assistance to pay his medical costs and just as importantly, was wanting conversation. Brian was able to provide empathy and hope; helping him feel confident that he would recover and TAC would compensate him.

Taking the time to talk through this experience was more important than the provision of food and financial assistance. The man left reassured that his situation would improve.

The Centre is open twice a week, with three members on site. Assistance ranges from food and clothing to help with transport costs often associated with medical appointments in Melbourne. Keeping a car on the road is a critical need in rural places. Members listen carefully to discern real needs. The members usually see 40-50 people per week, working often with other agencies to come up with appropriate solutions.

We have great people who do the welfare responses in the Centre. It is their decision; listen to what's been asked for, can we do it? If we can do it, support them. If we can't, be honest with them.

The decision making must always be made by the people closest to the request and able to discern what is needed. The principle of subsidiarity is alive and well in Swan Hill as well as compassion, empathy, using common sense and communicating transparently. People leave the Centre appreciating that they had had a fair hearing and their plight is understood.

Making new connections

On a cold Monday evening, Brian and other members are welcoming a group of East Timorese, who are here on seasonal working visas, performing essential roles as farm workers. Brian is keen to build rapport with this community, ascertain

their needs and whether conference work is a possibility.

We see the East Timorese at Mass and wonder how they are getting on. Non English speakers are the majority of the congregation now.

We realised how hard working they are to leave their own country, send money back to their families and be without their loved ones.

The Swan Hill district comprises a massive food and agriculture service centre. A large, seasonal workforce is needed to grow and harvest vegetables, grapes, olives and pistachios.

Samia, Refugee Support Officer who works with asylum seekers, refugees and migrants is also at the meeting. She explains that she visits farms and workplaces and sees if the workers need anything. She also updates the conference on a recent relaxation for permanent residency applications, that some of the seasonal workers and their families may benefit from.

The meeting ends on a positive note with a decision to hold a barbeque once a month after Mass as a way of getting to know each other better and continuing the connection.

Joining the Society

Brian is a firm believer in giving back to others. He is motivated by a strong faith, sense of purpose and the fulfilment of doing a job well. His father was an active member in Geelong, operating the Society's half way house for men leaving the former Geelong prison.

Dad was very respectful towards the men. They had done their time and deserved the best chance to re-make their lives. He looked after them.

When Brian was managing the motel, he initially took on the role of treasurer. Coming up to fifteen years, Brian has been secretary, interim president and president. He is astute when it comes to recruiting new members, never missing an opportunity.

I tapped a few parishioners on the shoulder to join the conference and asked Damian Kelly to take on the presidency, which he did diligently for the four year term while I was treasurer.

Brian also recruited Ross Cleeland and Mully Pearse, both well known in Swan Hill. Shirley Deola came on as spiritual leader and Margaret Hoare and Helen Fordham also joined, all three, very experienced people.

We have always had a very strong core group with diverse skills who add so much.

Brian pays tribute to two long standing members, Yvonne Richardson, 50 years and Jocelyn Ingram, 45 years who were the main members seeing people in need.

The conference sees the extent of people getting into strife financially and emotionally. Loneliness and mental health issues are common, exacerbated by the cost of everything increasing. The conference has seen a thirty seven per cent increase in demand since September 2023 quarter and has been assisting 270 families these last three quarters. It is a stressful time for anyone on a low income, particularly young people and anyone with medical issues.

They feel it's not their fault; they are caught in a web of misfortune and financial struggles. Where once some may have had a small buffer, this is now gone.

Education is key

Brian emphasises the importance of everyone having access to good schooling. Education is key. The conference has a mantra: no young person will miss out on fully participating in education.

School disengagement multiplied during and post Covid. Schools' welfare teams find this a huge challenge.

One lady came to us. Her child hadn't been going to school since Covid. He's now 12 years of age. We supported and connected her to appropriate assistance.

The cost of going back to school is significant especially when a child is transitioning to secondary school. There's a different uniform and the students need a laptop and calculus, all pricey items. There are also many excursions.

The conference also sees the inverse of this: the young people attending school who don't want to go home due to family violence and conflict issues.

The conference works in with all the schools to identify needs and they in turn support the conference in many ways such as food drives and Christmas hampers.

A Good Kitchen Project

In 2018, A Good Kitchen (AGK) started. A member with lived experience on the streets suggested providing a regular meal would be a great way to promote the Society's work to the broader community while meeting possibly hidden needs. The parish priest offered the St Mary's Welcome Centre and commercial kitchen as a venue.

The aim was to serve a warm, nutritious, two course meal every Tuesday evening, while providing a spirit of connection and friendship. As well, guests can take home donated fresh and packaged food. As Vincentians know and Brian attests here, food is often the circuit breaker.

On the first night, only one person came. She was a domestic violence victim. We talked to her, and were able to organise accommodation for that night and put her in touch with Mallee Family Care the next day.

Since then, numbers have increased to 70 per night or more. Many families attend, sitting at tables of ten, which encourages mingling with others. Many of the children have never developed the skills of sitting down with family for a meal. They now know the drill and along with the many others such as men who live alone, enjoy time with others. There are currently 41 volunteers on rotation, responsible for different elements to what makes these Tuesday nights successful. Fifteen volunteers have signed up as Associate Members.

Brian pays tribute to the tremendous team under Mully's guidance, who every week achieve a welcoming, well organised and fun evening.

So many support the conference's work particularly the Good Kitchen which is well known as the flagship for the Society in Swan Hill.



Brian with A Good Kitchen volunteers.

Brian speaks often of people's generosity to AGK : The jeweller who donated the money he receives for cleaning customers' jewellery; a young athlete who on a very hot weekend, swam repeated crossings of the Murray, did hundreds of sit ups and raised \$18,000, donating half to AGK.

The conference sees these dinners as directly reflecting the Gospel story of feeding the poor and befriending those in need.

It takes a team

Every Swan Hill Society venue is a place of welcome. The Assistance Centre, the shop, A Good Kitchen. Each are vital parts of the town and interlinked. Members are valuable parts of the town's network and work well together. Brian brings the best out in the team and is tenacious in helping and supporting in whatever ways he can to do more for his beloved local community.

Brian emphasises the team in everything: every initiative and success is down to the team. He acknowledges the support, commitment and openness of the North East Central Council.

He honours the Society's roots as a lay Catholic organisation:

Christ is our inspiration. He gives to us and we in turn give to those in need, aiming for a hand up, not a hand out. The main thing is to give and be involved wherever you can be.

Record of service

Brian Richardson

2000	Joined St Mary's Swan Hill Conference
2008-2023	Treasurer, St Mary's Swan Hill Conference Secretary, St Mary's Swan Hill Conference Interim President, St Mary's Swan Hill Conference
2018 –	President, St Mary's Swan Hill Conference



TREVOR SCOTT
NARRE WARREN CONFERENCE

DOING GOD'S WORK

One Vincentian quality that truly encapsulates honouree Trevor Scott would have to be humility. He is the master of the understatement when it comes to admitting to contributions or anything out of the ordinary he has done over his 42 years. To him he is “Hopefully, doing God’s work.”



Trevor truly believes he gets more out of giving than receiving. His description of conference work emphasises the camaraderie between the members, the relationship with companions, the friendships formed, and that the members are on the same page in wanting to give generously and support each other.

Trevor is compassionate and practical in his assessment of people's circumstances and what he believes the members can do to assist. He, like so many, scratches his head about how to solve deeply entrenched social problems. He firmly ascribes to the Ozanam quote "*No work of charity is foreign to the Society*" but also knows the limitations of changing a person's life path where there is deeply entrenched disadvantage. He is proud that the Society will always be there for a person in need even if we can't change their deep-rooted circumstances.

Trevor has a very loyal following in the conference, including from his beloved dog Charlie, a treasured companion and the unofficial mascot of the conference. There really is no show without Charlie and he brings a softness and humanising impact to every encounter with members, companions and parishioners.

Joining the conference

In 1982, Trevor moved to Narre Warren with his three daughters. His first contact with the Society was through member Dan Keogh who invited Trevor to participate in running the bingo afternoons as part of the Our Lady Help of Christians Parish. Trevor remained involved for ten years in which time they raised \$1 million profit for the parish.

Trevor remains grateful for the welcome he received from so many good people in the parish and the Society. He and his children received a great deal of support as well.

In the parish car park, Trevor has constructed a Stations of the Cross. Our Lady and St. Joseph are close by Christ on the cross and the path leads visitors to Cephas the rock. Until recently, Trevor did all the gardening at the parish.

In everything he does, there is a sense Trevor wants to give back.

He joined the conference in a time when there were no police checks or paperwork, so it was a very easy process. His overall recollection of those early days is of the benefit he received from being surrounded by good people.

As he recalls, it was also then a very uncomplicated matter when it came to helping people. The uniform response was to give a \$10 voucher for the local IGA at each home visit, together with a food parcel. Three sizes of food parcels were made up by people with a disability as part of their daily work in a sheltered workshop.

Today, the conference has about 12 members and does visits five days per week. The visit reports demonstrate that besides material assistance, members are focused on lifting the spirits of their companions. They limit calls to six per day. Calls are received at a phone room at Cranbourne store which Trevor was instrumental in establishing.

Trevor has been conference President and Regional President twice and held other official roles. While Regional President, Trevor established, with the guidance of Hampton Park member Steve Ward, a mobility aids program. The program provided eligible people with mobile chairs, wheelchairs, walkers and other aids at no cost. The program which continued for ten years, was supported by the region and grants from the Bishop's Foundation, Sale Diocese. Trevor has always appreciated the support of his peers, including the region's conference presidents.

Home visits

Trevor affirms that the essence of the Society's approach to helping people, centres around the home visit. It is the feature that sets the Society apart from other charities. Home visits stopped during Covid with vouchers left in letter boxes. Some went missing and while members could chat over the phone with the person seeking assistance, it was not the same as visiting them.



Trevor on home visit with member Jacques Thomson and Charlie.

Entering a person's home enables members to better understand the full picture of a person or family's circumstances and therefore, often to provide more help. Other models have their uses, but to Trevor, you don't grasp the full extent from a phone call or an interview in an assistance centre.

We recently came across a broken window, covered over with cardboard but not keeping the cold out. We replaced the glass.

More often now, people are asking for a bed and mattress but on visiting, the full extent of what a family may be going without is apparent. Cost of living is biting hard. Trevor is always proactive and will assemble beds, fix a tap and attend to any practical need. He sees these as little

offerings but his willingness to do more, alleviates the burden for the people visited.

Lack of affordable housing and increased costs

Trevor despairs at the lack of affordable housing. He thinks it comes down to a simple mismatched equation of supply and demand.

Average rent for a three bedroom house in the area is \$600, which is impossible for low income people.

Changing circumstances for the conference

The conference boundaries include Cranbourne, Pakenham, Narre Warren, Endeavour Hills, Berwick and Hampton Park. The population profile has changed considerably over the



Typical streetscape in Narre Warren/Berwick.

decades, with many more newly arrived communities; migrants, refugees and asylum seekers and more broadacre estates.

Once the conference heavily serviced the caravan parks; members now only visit one or two people living on their own, mainly to help with petrol. The landscape has changed.

Now people have many other needs – white goods, utility payments, other bills. The conference prioritises education needs to ensure children are well equipped to participate in their school activities.

Trevor recognises most people assisted will become regular callers. There is a strong sense and acceptance that many people will never get ahead.

If we are always playing catch up, it is hard to deliver a hand up. People can't meet their day to day costs. It is beyond them. They need outside support.

Trevor may seem pessimistic about how we can ever lift people out of their financial challenges, but his view is formed from many years of experience as a member. He believes that the assistance the conference provides alleviates pressure on companions so the members will continue with this approach and do the best they can. When particular skills are required the members call on financial counsellors and other agencies.

He often refers companions to NILS, but sometimes they are not eligible. Recently a family who needs a fridge had a second loan from Centrelink which disqualified them. The conference is likely to buy a fridge for this family now that other options are not available.

Berwick Soup Van

There are always hidden pockets of need and this was one of the reasons Trevor pushed for the establishment of the Berwick Soup Van, along with Young Vinnies members Lauren and Melissa. The

operation commenced in 2009, starting with an old Ford transit van and later, Br Doug Walsh gave Trevor authority to purchase a new van. A plumber fitted it out with stainless steel shelving and drawers to make it fit for purpose. The van goes out three nights per week and currently has 95 active volunteers. Since 2022, a mobile pantry van has also gone out during the day, packed with toiletries, frozen food and fresh vegetables and fruit. Trevor can be proud of his initial action that has gone from strength to strength in serving the current needs of low income people in the Casey area.

Always available for practical help

As a now retired builder, Trevor is used to fixing things and getting on with a job. He doesn't like red tape holding things up and has had the odd stoush in the pursuit of achieving the best outcomes. With his fellow members, he has built a ramp for a wheelchair reliant person, built shelves in the food store at the parish and contributed to fit-out work and renovations at the Cranbourne and Pakenham stores.

In the early days, 'Trevor's trailer' was a great bonus for collecting and delivering donated furniture. Every weekend for many years, Dan Keogh and Trevor would go out picking up furniture for the former Sladen Street Cranbourne store.

There was a great sense of community of our conferences working together towards a shared purpose.

Trevor's trailer still picks up goods from school drives, and delivers Christmas hampers and toys.

Plight of refugees and asylum seekers

Trevor believes the big social problems are mainly the responsibility of government to fix, but he despairs when they leave people in precarious circumstances.

He and the conference have supported many migrant, refugee and asylum seeker families such as a Sri Lankan family here on a limited visa. They were really struggling, due to not being allowed to work. The Immigration Department called the family in for interview, one at a time.

They were trying to force them to return home. We were feeding them and the man was doing some cash work for me – we were trying to keep their heads above water. It was very tough for them.

It was a protracted case – a judicial ruling finally decreed the family needed support and eventually they received a permanent visa.

It's incredibly tough that people who have lived here for 30 years can suddenly be pressured to return to their home country. We even had a 100 year old woman the Department tried to deport.

When people obtain their permanent visa, that is often when the connection with the conference ends. Former companions are then able to get on their feet when working rights and other entitlements are granted. Trevor sees that refugees want to make a go of their new life here and will help themselves if enabled to be in a position where this is possible.

Final words

Conference President Carol Arnett says: *We can always rely on Trevor. He will always put his hand up and goes further than many of us in order to make a difference to a person's life. If children are involved, he is particularly generous.*

Trevor calls on those contemplating volunteering with the Society with these heart-felt words:

It is a great feeling to be serving the Lord and being able to respond flexibly. You'll get far more than you give.

I have a great love for the parish and the Vinnies. I haven't done this for 40 years just for kicks. There has to be something more that keeps me doing this.

Record of service

Trevor Scott

1982 Joined Narre Warren Conference

President, Narre Warren Conference
– two terms

Berwick Regional President – two terms

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St Vincent de Paul Society
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