



St Vincent de Paul Society
NATIONAL CONGRESS 2023+

WORKBOOK TWO

FOR DELEGATES ATTENDING CONGRESS 2023+



St Vincent de Paul Society

NATIONAL COUNCIL of AUSTRALIA Inc.

good works

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WELCOME FROM THE NATIONAL PRESIDENT

In a three-piece letter to the world conferences enthusing volunteers, Council General International (CGI) President General of the St Vincent de Paul Society wrote:

IMPORTANCE OF RECRUITING YOUNG PEOPLE

In many cities, we might nearly all say in all those which attract a great number of students, it is also a general complaint that our Conferences, founded on behalf of youth and intended to keep it by charity under the mild influence of religion, include few if any young.

“We are old”, say those who write to us, “We do not attract youth, and, after us, what will become

of the Conference?” Without quite sharing those fears, we must acknowledge that this needs to be remedied. For, if those already advanced in age and mature in piety reap fruit for their own improvement from their mutual relationships, how much more valuable still are those fruits for young.

Written by M Baudon
President General in November 1851

Dear Member delegates

In my introduction to the Workbook One, I invited all Vincentians and Congress 2023+ delegates, to journey together as we seek to revitalise our mission.

Central to our revitalisation challenge is having the confidence, the agility and the resilience to accept that some change is essential. Tomorrow cannot look like today. As a family we need to adapt our organisation so that it better reflects tomorrow. Adaptation is a key feature of our family’s journey along a change.

I urge you to seize the moment presented by Congress 2023+, to work constructively with fellow delegates to help reshape the Society in ways that are innovative and courageous so that we can secure our mission to serve Christ in the poor for the next 15-20 years and beyond.

Our future, the Society’s future in Australia, is in our hands. The decisions we will make during Congress 2023+ will impact on those we will serve going forward. It is especially in the hands of the young, for as noted in the guidelines of The Rule, ‘Young Vincentians reflect the original spirit and charism of the Society by enhancing its mission with their enthusiasm and dynamism.’

Our Society relies on the efforts of Members, Volunteers and employees working collectively. As our structures continue to grow, we look to our employees

who directly support Members to work together to address the challenges facing the Society. We also appreciate the role senior Society employees play in advancing the goals and objectives of their respective Councils. Both groups of employees have been included in Congress 2023+ so they too can hear direct from the Members in the room and to listen and support these new pathways forward. All Councils recognise we are stronger when we are working together. One Society, united in one voice.

Workbook Two provides us with a guide for our journey. It reflects the thoughts and questions about how things operate now, and how these things might be better tomorrow, that were shared by Vincentians far and wide. Let us use the information we have been given to help shape the Society in Australia so that it continues to be a strong national and local provider known for giving a hand up.

Let us reflect upon the design of Congress 2023+ being a reflection of a grand vision of the conferences formed by Blessed Frédéric Ozanam and his confreres in Paris in the 19th century. Our motivation is the same. Our honesty and our dedication are the same.

I bid you a warm welcome to Congress 2023+ and wish all of us success with our deliberations.



Mark Gaetani
National President

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

National Council commenced a members and membership research and support initiative over two years ago in response to challenges concerning the decline on Society Member numbers identified by Councils. We know the decline in Member numbers has been evidenced since the early 2000s.

Since the Green Paper on Members and Membership was circulated in 2022, National Council has been actively working with State and Territory Councils to explore how Society Members can be supported moving forward and how the Society can attract new Members.

Congress 2023+ is the culmination of two years of research, listening to how other National Councils in overseas countries have approached declining membership and building a strong National Member Network to encourage the exploration of new possibilities around how Conferences might adapt in a contemporary Australia.

Our Congress is designed to reflect the spirit of fraternity that inspired Blessed Frédéric Ozanam and his colleagues when they founded the Society in impoverished Paris 190 years ago.

The theme of Congress 2023+ is 'Journeying Together, Revitalising our Mission'.

Our theme highlights the purpose of delegates coming together to agree on how best we can offer our good works into the future.

Not all our Members can be in Sydney to attend the face-to-face Congress. To include the voices of as many Members and Society representatives as possible, a series of Listening Forums were held in late August and early September to gather feedback on a number of topics.

Listening to the views of Members

Feedback received from Society Members is summarised under eight headings on pages 12 through to 20.

Analysis of all the feedback identified a single major subject which is how the Society and its Members currently operate. Comments around this subject included:

1. Questions or reflections on the way Society best offers **support to Companions**, with the increased complexity of their needs. There was an emphasis on the need for greater collaboration in ways that will lead to better service to Companions, including enhanced knowledge around other specialist services for referrals.
2. **Spirituality** – many differing views were expressed as to what the Society's expression of Catholic identity looks like now, how it might/should look like in the future, and how this expression of the Society's spirituality impacts the **core purpose of the Society**.
3. Questions about the core purpose of the Society. Is the core purpose to 'serve Christ in the poor' or is it to grow and evangelise the Catholic faith by serving Christ in the poor?
4. Inquiries about what the Society's strategy(ies) is to address the **decline of Member numbers** (and ageing demographics of Society Members). This included a desire to better define and communicate the role of Members and Volunteers within the Society (within the context of addressing membership decline).
5. Concerns about the growing size of **Members' workloads**, and requests for greater support / training / induction for Members, Volunteers and employees.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY CONT.

6. Apprehensions about current moves to IT systems and the place of technology **within a future Society**.
7. Some questions of governance were raised in regard to **clarifying the functions and decision-making roles of Members and Society employees**. Some Members were unaware of where decision-making sits within the Society (Regional Councils were often the focus point).
8. **Poor internal communications**. At all levels of the Society, concern has been raised about how important information was poorly communicated (frequency and accessibility) and the lack of opportunity for communication from Members and Conferences to be conveyed to State/ Territory and National Councils.
9. There was across the board strong **support for the advocacy** work done by the Society on behalf of Companions and the broader community. However, some respondents indicated unease on some policy positions when these conflicted with personal views; e.g. The Voice.
10. The **Society brand** - in the context of questions about whether the public fully appreciates the scope of the good works carried out by Members. Is the weight of the Society's activities conveyed appropriately in the public domain when using the alternate terms 'Society' and 'Vinnies'? Members expressed a view that their good works were not strongly connected in the public's mind to the Society because the public mind most frequently sees 'Vinnies' as the Society brand from how the market is flooded with this term beyond the Society's retail activities.

Responding to the views of Members

Now that we have listened to you, our Members and employees, it is appropriate for all of us, but notably for our delegates, to spend time prayerfully discerning and absorbing the feedback and wisdom that is synthesised throughout this Workbook.

Our mission in Sydney is not to mould solutions that only address individual situations, but rather to forge solutions that move the Society, wholly and collectively into the future that starts tomorrow.

The Society's Founders recognised from the outset of their charitable work, that the strength of the Society rested within local communities. This is what makes our Conferences the soul of all our good works.

National Council seeks to draw upon the strengths of our existing Conferences and Conference Members to explore our future.

This is why our discussions at Congress 2023+ will focus on generating an agreed vision and roadmap for how new Conferences can thrive in the future. Relying on the wisdom and the stability of our existing Conferences, and our older Members, will bring to our emerging leaders so they can feel empowered to explore more diverse forms of Conferences, and how they might support our future younger Members.

There is no doubt that we will all emerge from Congress 2023+ with new friends and newfound wisdom.

But, National Council is seeking more.

National Council, our present national leadership team, is looking to agreed, tangible guidelines and a roadmap that will move the Society in Australia in an exciting spirit of renewal.



There is no act of charity that is not accompanied by justice or that permits us to do more than we reasonably can.

- Saint Vincent de Paul

NATIONAL CONGRESS 2023+ PROGRAM

FRIDAY 27 OCTOBER 2023

- 5:30pm Registrations Open
- 5:30 - 6:20pm **Informal Dinner**
- 6:30pm **Welcome to Country**
- 6:45pm **Opening Ceremony, Opening Liturgy**
- 7:00pm **Plenary Session One**
- Orientation to Congress 2023+
- Exploring Context
- Key Note Speaker: Claire Madden (Social Research)**
- Q and A
- Close for Evening** - Social spaces opened for those eager to continue conversations
- 9:30pm

SATURDAY 28 OCTOBER 2023

- 8:30am **Morning Reflection**
- 8:50am **Plenary Session Two**
- Our Identity
- 10:00am Morning Tea
- 10:30am **Plenary Session Three**
- Our Purpose, Our Impact
- 12:30pm Lunch
- 1:30pm **Workstreams**
- Membership, Leadership, Collaboration, Change, Strategy, Wildcard
- 3pm Afternoon Tea
- 3:30pm Workstreams contd.
- 4:30pm **News Room:** Sharing back from workstreams
- 5:00pm **Day Close**
- 6:30pm **Pre-Dinner Drinks**
- 7:00pm **Congress 2023+ Dinner**
- Panel Discussion hosted by Geraldine Doogue AO, featuring Bishop Vincent Long OFM Conv (Diocese of Parramatta); Andy Rajapakse MAICD (Rotary International); Rebecca Bromhead (Australian Marist Solidarity).**
- 9:30pm **Formal Close** - Social spaces opened for those eager to continue conversations



SUNDAY 29 OCTOBER 2023

- 8:00am **Check out** - place bags with reception
- 8:30am **Plenary Session Four**
Review Actions, Prioritise Actions
- 10:00am **Morning Tea**
- 10:20am **Committing to Action**
- 11:00am **State and Territory Group Meetings,**
prioritisation lists
- 11:45am **Final Session**
- 12:30pm **Transition into Mass space**
- 12:45pm **Closing Mass with Fr Alan Gibson CM,**
Provincial Superior of the Vincentian
Fathers and Brothers in Oceania
- 1:45pm **Lunch** - including takeaway options
- 2:00pm **Official Close** - Social opportunities
will remain in hotel space until transfer
to airport is arranged

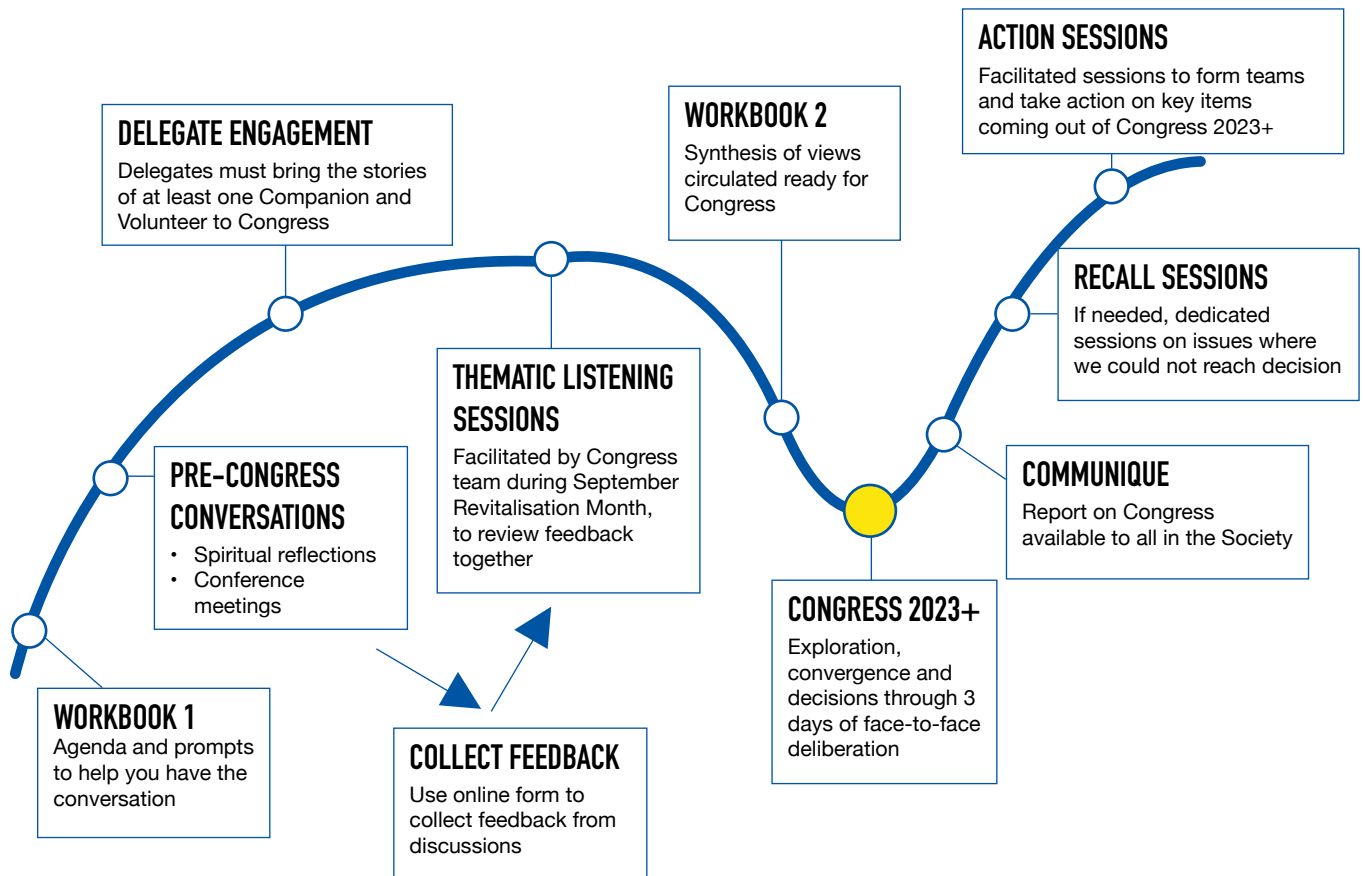
**Schedule subject to change*



OUR JOURNEY SO FAR

ENGAGING THE SOCIETY

How you engage within your state or territory is up to you. We're providing an agenda and framing a way to provide feedback, so we can compare perspectives before we get to Congress 2023+



After Congress, we will provide avenues to continue the conversations (where needed), and to turn to action.

JULY TO SEPTEMBER



OCTOBER



NOVEMBER +

Our journey does not end when Congress 2023+ closes...

PURPOSE OF WORKBOOK TWO

As we continue to journey towards Congress 2023+, Workbook Two provides the opportunity for delegates to delve into the insights and ideas shared by our fellow Society representatives. We are setting the stage for what we hope to be a transformative experience.

During the pre-Congress conversations and Listening Forums, a commitment was given to summarising all feedback received. Workbook Two provides a detailed summary of the feedback in pages 12-20 and a condensed version is provided within the Executive Summary on page 3.

The next step for delegates is to spend some time prayerfully discerning and absorbing the feedback and knowledge that is synthesised throughout. There are offerings of advanced reading, for those who have a particular interest in that space. These advanced readings are optional.

Workbook Two is more than just a tool for knowledge sharing. It is a catalyst to assist delegates to engage in an innovation and problem-solving mindset that is critical for our time together in Sydney.



Help honours when to the bread that nourishes it adds the visit that consoles, the advice that enlightens, the friendly shake of the hand that lifts up the sinking courage; when it treats the poor man with respect not only as an equal but as a superior, since he is suffering what perhaps we are incapable of suffering; since he is the messenger of God to us, sent to prove our justice and our charity; and to save us by our works

- Blessed Frederic Ozanam

OUR HOPES FOR CONGRESS 2023+

What's our shared challenge at Congress

The tasks given to our Members in Workbook One were to reflect on their own personal journey with the Society and to encourage them to discuss their ideas with their Conference Members, Council Members and Vincentian colleagues. The Congress Team was keen to get as many Members as possible involved in providing their feedback via attendance at Listening Forums or via electronic means.

Workbook Two asks delegates to reflect on the information received from the listening phase.

In Sydney, delegates will be asked to move from reflecting on the issues raised by consultation to exploring actions that will deliver actual change. This is a shift from 'talking' to 'creating'. It is designed to ensure delegates can leave Sydney with tangible actions and initiatives that can be delivered back in their community with support from their Councils.

How do we ensure our Congress will have long-term impact?

Feedback gathered in the pre-Congress engagement processes raised a wide array of issues and concerns, the majority of which relate back in some way to the Conference experience.

Focussing discussion at Congress 2023+ on the what and the how of future Conference experience will provide delegates opportunities **to explore the merits of different potential features of Conferences going forward.**

It is important during these discussions for us to confirm our shared foundational beliefs as we explore and shape the future Conference experience. These foundations are:

- Our Catholicism and Vincentian spirituality and Catholic Social Teaching are part of our identity.
- We are a Member-led organisation that embraces grassroots leadership.
- We exist to serve our Companions. Faith in Action.
- Local knowledge is critical to achieving results in our community.
- Working together as a national organisation is necessary to achieve strategic impact.
- We are part of, and influenced by, a global Society that we, in turn, can influence but not control.

Grounded by our foundations, we can turn our focus to the Conference experience and give careful consideration to changes that could be implemented to address the feedback received.

When we talk about the 'Conference experience' it is also useful to recognise that one size does not fit all. We will be considering diverse future experiences that may differ depending on local Member's needs.

As a Member-led organisation that embraces grassroots leadership, this means for any lasting change to occur within the Society, it needs to come from the Members through the Conference structure. Key questions to be considered during our conversation include:

- How might Conferences be enabled to better uphold the core principles, identity and purpose of the Society?
- How can Conference experiences and Society structures support diversity of membership?
- Where are the opportunities for collaboration whilst still maintaining a grassroots approach, to provide better outcomes for our Companions?
- What support do Conferences (and Members) need to deliver their best work?

There is considerable flexibility afforded by the current governance arrangements to trial and test new and innovative approaches. Where the governance arrangements are found to contain barriers to progressing new ideas, consideration will need to be given to how these barriers can be addressed, noting that a [review of Part III of The Rule](#) is currently underway.

OUR HOPES FOR CONGRESS 2023+ CONT.

What goals can we work towards by the end of Congress?

All of our discussions during Congress 2023+ will build towards the co-creation of a vision and a practical roadmap for the future of Conferences.

Some details we need to think about when working towards our goal:

- **Exploration of context:** Articulating the current and future context, identifying the drivers for change and where we may need to adapt.
- **Change:** Scoping out the changes required, what role each Conference, State and Territory Council, National Council and delegate has, in supporting and delivering on the change agenda, and looking for barriers or roadblocks that may prevent the change from occurring.
- **Identity and purpose:** Our shared story of who we are and why we do what we do, as a Society in 2023 and beyond, and how this is expressed by Conferences within diverse local situations.
- **Our People:** Exploring the needs of the people we are designing for, including Companions, Members, Volunteers and staff.
- **Conference Stories of Impact:** Sharing stories of how Conferences have impact, and looking at the opportunities to increase the impact different types of Conferences can have with diversity of Conference models and strengthening our network of charity to enhance collaboration between Conferences.
- This means exploring the different Conference experiences that Members may have now and in the future.
- **Enabling:** Detailing mechanisms to support Conferences to thrive, through attracting and retaining Members; identifying, fostering and supporting leadership; improving communication, sharing and collaboration across Conferences; and guiding more organisational support for diverse Conference types.



Frédéric didn't seek to win people over with his words, but rather with his actions.

The highly-intelligent young lawyer did not seek to enter into verbal debate to defend his position, but rather showed people with his life that simple acts of kindness to those in need could evoke lasting change.

Frédéric wasn't perfect in his service of the poor.

He was often cheated and became frustrated when those he sought to assist didn't want to help themselves.

- Sr Melissa Dwyer, Former Spiritual Advisor, QLD



SYNTHESIS OF FEEDBACK

CONTEXT

What's happening in our Society family, with our Companions, and in the community around us?
Where do we need to adapt?

Background / context setting

Optional pre-reading: The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare publication entitled 'Australia's Welfare 2023 in brief', click there to read: [aihw-aus-245.pdf](#)

Membership	2017	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	Change since 2017
Canberra/Goulburn	680	644	653	573	546	497	-183
New South Wales	4,282	4,554	3,625	3,341	3,138	3,765	-517
Northern Territory	37	51	31	59	57	57	20
Queensland	2,962	2,828	2,643	2,606	2,581	2,509	-453
South Australia	883	824	787	724	796	748	-135
Tasmania	278	279	254	244	263	263	-15
Victoria	4,603	4,306	3,841	3,345	3,574	3,632	-971
Western Australia	1,035	1,070	1,405	1,120	1,114	988	-47
NATIONAL TOTAL	14,760	14,556	13,239	12,012	12,069	12,459	-2,301

Volunteer	2017	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	Change since 2017
Canberra/Goulburn	1,320	1,700	2,164	1,569	1,386	1,457	137
New South Wales	14,499	9,625	9,119	9,119	7,742	6,878	-7,621
Northern Territory	192	298	30*	295	295	594	402
Queensland	6,336	6,098	5,086	5,853	4,770	5,035	-1,301
South Australia	3,400	2,094	1,817	7,017	1,782	1,750	-1,650
Tasmania	1,114	1,235	1,150	1,150	721	1,267	153
Victoria	11,727	7,345	6,910	2,239	6,434	6,434	-5,293
Western Australia	1,783	2,720	2,738	2,738	2,738*	2,253	470
NATIONAL TOTAL	40,371	31,115	29,980	25,868	24,204	25,668	-14,703

TOTAL (Members and Volunteers)	2017	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	Change since 2017
	55,131	45,671	42,253	41,992	37,937	38,127	-17,004

The NCS team has found consistent challenges in reporting accurate data, as differing information is provided by jurisdictions throughout the year. The Volunteer Insurance information has been used as a way of ensuring data integrity

WHAT WE HEARD

Membership

Respondents (i.e. people who provided feedback which includes Members and staff) highlighted the loyal and committed group of Members who are ageing, that perhaps in some cases don't have the skills that are sometimes required (see also Leadership section). Coupled with a decrease in Conference membership and church numbers, many respondents felt that membership was a key issue for the Society. It was also noted that there are less Volunteers available to assist at Vinnies shops.

Community

The community view of the Society was raised by many respondents (see also Identity section). There was a general view that some people are only aware of the Vinnies shops, however where that knowledge extends to the assistance that is provided, this is considered largely in a material sense. The changing needs of Companions was repeatedly discussed, with nearly all respondents agreeing that the complexity of Companion needs is increasing, with the increase in loneliness and mental health issues, highlighting the value of the spiritual assistance provided.

Many respondents spoke of the impact the increase in cost of living is having on Companions and how this impacts the Society's ability to provide support. Others spoke to the impact of natural disasters such as the flooding in northern NSW, which has led to an increase in community need for assistance.

The global context of war, unrest and increase in refugees was noted.

The specific and changing needs of younger people were also identified, with a greater focus on behavioural assistance such as providing more support in teaching younger people to use kind language, learning to share, making good choices with friends etc.

QUESTION FOR DELEGATES TO CONSIDER:

How can our current service model, based on home visitation, be expanded or adapted to meet these changing needs?

Diversity

The increasing diversity in Australia was raised in several different contexts, including the impact our advocacy work has, how to increase our membership, the changing needs of the community in terms of our services, and perhaps most frequently in context of our identity.



How do we provide more options and resources for Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) and different faith backgrounds to join us?

- Posed by member during Listening Forum

How does this item further our 'Vision and Roadmap for Future Conferences?'

Our exploration of context (including what's happening with Members, Companions, our Society and our community) helps to understand what we need to adapt to.

What are the challenges to which our Conferences need to adapt?

IDENTITY

Who are we in 2023? What is enduring and what is changing? What is our unique story, and how do we share in it?

Background / context setting

Optional pre-reading:

1. The 2016 Social Profile of the Catholic Community in Australia provides a comprehensive snapshot and time change summary of the Australian Catholic population using customised data from the 2016 Australian Census. National Centre for Pastoral Research. 2019. "Social Profile of the Catholic Community in Australia: Based on the 2016 Australian Census". ACBC National Centre for Pastoral Research. Available at www.ncpr.catholic.org.au
2. Plenary Council Commitment
[Carrying Forward the Plenary Council - Plenary Decrees Pastoral Study Guide FINAL](#)
To meet the formation needs of the present and future, the Plenary Council committed the Church in Australia to developing a culture of lifelong faith formation that will ensure:
 - the diversity of the Catholic community is explicitly recognised;
 - intercultural competency is encouraged, especially in relation to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and spiritualities;
 - the equal dignity of women and men is affirmed and demonstrated;
 - the renewal of faith formation within and for families in the context of the critical role that marriage, parenting and care-giving play as a school of formation is prioritised and strengthened;
 - the apostolate of the laity, along with new ecclesial realities, acting as "leaven in the world," (Lumen Gentium n. 31) is promoted, encouraged and supported;
 - the hopes, spirituality, giftedness, energy and modes of communication and connection of young people are identified, incorporated, encouraged and celebrated;
 - ongoing support and strategies for those who minister to young people;
 - the rich variety of spiritual and devotional traditions of the Church are appreciated and celebrated; and
 - synodal practices such as encounter, accompaniment, listening, dialogue, discernment and collaboration are fostered and deepened.
3. A biblical reflection authored by Archbishop Christopher Prowse on Evangelisation: available at [Evangelisation: Encounter, Discipleship, Mission](#)

WHAT WE HEARD

Our Catholic identity

Many respondents raised our Catholic identity as one of the greatest strengths and a defining element to the identity of the Society, however many also noted that this could be a barrier to new Members and government funding opportunities. One respondent was interested as to whether this could also be a barrier for donors. Another respondent very pertinently suggested that Companions don't care that we are faith-based, and that this doesn't prevent them from seeking assistance from the Society.

Several respondents discussed a faith-based approach as compared to a values, or ethos-based approach, a discussion that is also relevant to the conversations on membership.



Such a tension in the organisation at the moment. We do need to be inclusive, but how do we not let go of that original intent?

This quote succinctly summarises the thoughts of many respondents – being a spirituality-based and Catholic organisation is non-negotiable for many Members, however it is widely recognised that greater inclusion is desirable. The challenge for delegates to Congress 2023+ to consider is, how to negotiate this space and set the direction for the Society in the coming years.

One respondent suggested that an aspect that is unique to the Society is that Society representatives create time and reflection points to think about their interactions with Companions, others and our teachings. Being deliberate in offering space for reflection is a unique aspect of our identity.

Our core purpose is home visitation

Respondents felt our core purpose was to do home visitation and provide services to our Companions. This is an enduring purpose, which is unique to our story.

In this context, the use of the term 'Vinnies' for the Society remains a point of contention for some

respondents, who feel the use of this term dilutes the community awareness of the strong identity of our Catholic faith, and this may lead the broader community to see the Society solely as a retail outlet rather than recognise the services we provide to Companions as being central to our purpose. Some respondents felt this hinders our ability to attract new Members, as there isn't an understanding of what being a Member means. In contrast, for many, there is an understanding that many people external to the Society, that is, the broader community, refer to the Society as Vinnies and this is unlikely to change.

Some respondents queried how we express our origin story in a way that doesn't give a sense that we are 'using Companions' for our own spiritual growth, but rather an expression of our faith.



How do we articulate a spirituality of companionship?

Society position on advocacy issues

As noted in the Collaboration section, there was significant commentary on the importance of the advocacy work done by the Society at both an individual Companion level and at a community level. Some respondents indicated their personal views can at times differ to the Society's position on a particular advocacy matter. The answer to this could lie in a statement offered by one respondent: personal stances may need to be set aside where not aligned to Catholic Social Teaching.

How does this item further our 'Vision and Roadmap for Future Conferences?'

We need to explore our identity as a Society, and which aspects of it are universal. We can also consider the extent to which Conferences may express that identity in different ways

What is the story we all share in, and how are we expressing that in a way that promotes inclusion in our Conferences?

PURPOSE

What drives us to do what we do? What is the change in the world that we seek to create together?

Background / Context

Catholic Social Teaching (CST) offers a way of thinking, being, and seeing the world. In a Society perspective, it provides a vision for a just society in which the dignity of all people is recognised, and those who are vulnerable are cared for. For many, this is the reason we do what we do. CST consists of an interrelated body of Catholic social thought and principles which can be used to reflect on and guide how we relate to one another in our local and global communities.

Indeed, the perspective and principles of Catholic Social Teaching are rich in heritage, developed as the Church has engaged with key social issues throughout history.

Optional pre-reading: Catholic Social Teachings for the St Vincent de Paul Society: <https://vinnies.link/cst>



The question which is agitating the world today is a social one. It is a struggle between those who have nothing and those who have too much. It is a violent clash of opulence and poverty which is shaking the ground under our feet. Our duty as Christians is to throw ourselves between these two camps in order to accomplish by love, what justice alone cannot do.

- Blessed Frédéric Ozanam

WHAT WE HEARD

What drives us?

Many respondents described elements of the external environment that drive the membership of the Society, most of which relate to the advocacy issues that the Society focuses on. These elements included:

- Greater job security would lead to fewer people on government support
- Affordable housing for all – including the Society providing housing
- Income support that would allow people to live with dignity
- Responding to natural and human-induced disasters
- A more equitable society where the economic gap between people is smaller.

Several respondents recognised a responsibility to assist marginalised and impoverished in our Society, to give hope and help to those we serve. Others noted their desire to be part of an organisation that advocates for social justice.

Some respondents commented on a role for the Society in caring for our environment, with one respondent noting the Society is a significant contributor to reduced landfill waste via the Vinnies shops.

Other respondents focussed on the importance of the youth programs provided by the Society.

A couple of respondents felt the driver was based in spiritual growth and spreading the message of the Gospel.

What is the change we seek?

One respondent queried if change was necessary, as the mission of the Society remains relevant to them.

Other respondents queried the role of Conferences in the future, suggesting they focus more on sharing the load, and that a team-based approach could help the community or diocese (see also the Collaboration section).

One respondent suggested that the role of individual Members needs to go beyond the current scope of companionship and spirituality and move into 'quasi-social work'.

QUESTION FOR DELEGATES TO CONSIDER:

Does the Society have a clear and consistent understanding of its purpose?

Does this purpose remain relevant given the feedback on our changing context including the changing needs of Companions?

How does this item further our 'Vision and Roadmap for Future Conferences?'

Our purpose is clear from The Rule. Nevertheless, each Member brings with them their own motivation, and these drivers can vary across Conferences.

What is our shared purpose, and how might Conferences help to achieve it in different ways, based on local needs and Member's motivations?

IMPACT



There are many ways of providing charity. The assistance of money or assistance in-kind that we give to the poor will not last long. We must aspire to a more complete and longer lasting benefit: study their abilities, their level of instruction and try to get them work to help them out of their difficulties.

- **Blessed Rosalie Rendu**

What impact are we having in the world? How could we achieve more impact?

Optional pre-reading: [How One Nonprofit Communicated Impact And Why You Should Too \(bloomerang.co\)](#)
[ACNC Australian Charities Report](#)
[Outcomes Measurement Initiative | Department of Social Services, Australian Government \(dss.gov.au\)](#)

WHAT WE HEARD

Impact for Companions

For many respondents, a clear indication of the impact the Society has is reflected in the Good Works and Special Works that assist our Companions. It was noted that there is flexibility in what constitutes Good Works or Special Works, which allows services to be tailored to the community needs, which has the potential to positively impact our Companions.

Comments from other respondents talked about material and spiritual aid, which is provided without judgement and often for people who have nowhere else to turn.

Impact for Members

Several respondents articulated the positive impacts being a Member has for them, including friendships, being with like-minded people praying together and supporting one another, learning more about their faith and the scriptures from other Members, fulfilling their spiritual path, and the opportunity to give back.



Personally, I feel that by being a Member of our Conference, I get more than I give back.

- Member response

One respondent spoke to the negative impact that can sometimes be experienced, when left with feelings of hopelessness after a home visitation, and the feeling of not being equipped to support people with complex needs. This respondent commented that there is not a lot of support for Members, which is explored further in the Leadership and Membership sections.

Impact for the broader community

The impact of the Society's advocacy work was raised by respondents, in particular for refugees, people facing homelessness, and more generally in addressing social justice issues.

Spreading the word about Good Works in their parish was identified by one respondent as having an impact.

Global impact

One respondent identified that the Society is active in 150 countries and helps over 30 million people per year, including projects for our twinned Conferences, as having meaningful impact.

Addressing short term vs longer term needs of Companions

Several respondents commented on doing more to address the needs at a more foundational level, as opposed to addressing problems in the short term, would lead to a greater impact for Companions. Specific feedback identified mentorship, resilience, and future planning skills as opportunities to provide this foundational support.

One respondent queried if we understood the demographics of those seeking services from the Society and used this information to tailor services. This would, in their view, allow different causes to be factored into the services that are provided.

Collaboration

Some respondents suggested that a stronger Companion voice is needed to improve the impact made by the Society.

One respondent commented on the intrusive nature of the questions asked of Companions during interviews and noted that there is some repetition of questions. It was suggested that systems could be reviewed to reflect more closely with our compassion and spiritually.

Other respondents suggested that working more closely with staff to increase engagement with schools / youth and local Councils would be beneficial.

Please refer to the Collaboration section for further thoughts.

How does this item further our 'Vision and Roadmap for Future Conferences?'

At Congress, we will share and celebrate our stories of impact: the change that we help drive in line with our purpose. We can also consider what limits our impact, and how we could achieve more of it in support of our Companions and community.

What is the impact we are having, and ought to be having, through our Conferences?

MEMBERSHIP

How do we address the decline? Should we?

Background / Context

Optional pre-reading: [Project X Report](#), [Green Paper](#)



There is no act of charity that is not accompanied by justice or that permits us to do more than we reasonably can.

- Saint Vincent de Paul

WHAT WE HEARD

The case for 'Yes' – we should address the decline

Of those respondents who provided feedback on this issue, the majority agreed that the decline in membership needs to be addressed. One respondent noted that in 10 years membership has dropped 25% and if this trend continues, the Society will be defunct in 30 years.

Many of these respondents focussed on attracting young people or people within their parish. Some success stories with Festival masses, 'Open House meetings', or simply a direct approach to an individual were provided as demonstration of how people within their parish have been engaged to consider joining the Society.

Some respondents spoke to structural changes that could be considered to attract new Members, including consideration of the needs of people who work or have other commitments and therefore are not able to meet during standard business hours. It was noted that there can be some reluctance to conduct meetings at different times, and this was evidenced by some respondents noted that attracting new Members may be unrealistic because of the meeting times. Other

structural changes proposed included reconsideration of the different categorisations of people within the Society, such as Associate Members; shorter meetings or changes in agenda structure to centre more on Companions.

Diversity targets were suggested by one respondent to increase membership. Several respondents raised the issue of task allocation not always aligning to the Member interests, particularly for Youth Members. A specific example of shops being the only option for Youth Members was raised, as well as the limited options available for Members who are not available during business hours. For example, it was suggested that calls don't necessarily have to be made during business hours but can be made by appointment after hours.

Smaller or more specifically defined tasks were suggested by some respondents to better manage expectations, make recruitment easier, and giving people a 'taste' of the Society without expecting them to stay but with the intent of planting the seed for the future.

One respondent queried whether the reason why the Night Patrol service was so popular was due to it being

WHAT WE HEARD

available outside of standard business hours and a more clearly defined task.

Other suggestions to address the decline in membership included more recognition of Members and Volunteers, beyond the transactional or expectational; preparing short videos 'day in the life of' a Volunteer or Member for promotional purposes; and greater promotion in general on what the Society stands for.

Some respondents indicated that better expectation management of new recruits is essential, as the process to join can be daunting (police checks, working with vulnerable people requirement, technology used), and some potential new Members overestimate the amount of time that is spent by Members.



Better onboarding [is required] – every single staff member and Volunteer should be able to give a basic spiel about what we do and why. They should be a walking mission statement.

- Member response

Several respondents suggested that greater flexibility is required to allow for virtual Conferences, and for geographic areas that don't have a Conference, and for Members to move between Conferences particularly the move from Young Vinnies to the 'senior' Conferences. One respondent commented that although the model is for Youth Members to grow the Society's membership, the pathway to do this isn't defined.

The case for 'No' – perhaps we don't need to address the decline?

Some respondents felt that in order to retain the primary purpose of the Society, we may have to embrace a smaller membership – this is a key tension within the Society that is covered in the Identify and Leadership sections.

Others noted the reluctance of some longer-term Members to implement changes that could assist in attracting new Members.

The reasons for the decline

Respondents suggested external factors such as societal changes, such as community engagement, is valued less by younger generations and the changing nature of Church membership as reasons for the decline in membership.

As noted elsewhere, there is a tension between our core identity as a faith-based organisation, and what roles we provide for people from outside the Catholic faith within the Society. Some respondents cite the inflexibility on this as a reason for the decline in membership. Other respondents clearly recognise this is impacting membership; however it is keenly felt by some that this should not be a driver for change. Several respondents suggest there is a middle ground to be found, whereby our Catholicism and Vincentian spirituality and Catholic Social Teaching will always be a part of the Society's identity, there could be ways to be more inclusive and accepting of other religious views (see also Identity section).

Some respondents suggested that the work done by the Society can be very confronting, which can be a barrier to attracting new Members. It was also mentioned that burnout for Members, Volunteers and staff can be an issue.

It was suggested that the Society must look at Conferences with poor leadership, as this can put people off joining, and in smaller communities this can have a longer-term detrimental effect as it can be difficult to rebuild.

One respondent commented that the extreme corporatisation of the Society is hindering our ability to increase membership.

How does this item further our 'Vision and Roadmap for Future Conferences?'

We can address challenges of membership through more diverse Conference types, as well as promoting inclusion and flexibility. We can also consider other strategies for attracting and retaining Members to strengthen our Conferences.

What should we be doing to in response to the decline in our membership?

LEADERSHIP

What kind of leaders do we need? How do we foster it?

Background / Context



Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up.

- Galatians 6:9

With upright heart he shepherded them and guided them with his skilful hand.

- Psalm 78:72

Optional pre-reading: Optional pre-reading material on the value of training: this article uses the Boys and Girls Club of America as a case study, an organisation that contains interesting parallels to the Society. This article is a five minute read: [Putting a value on training | McKinsey](#)

WHAT WE HEARD

Leaders need more support

If there is one clear message from the feedback received, it's that our leaders need more support. Several suggestions regarding support were proffered:

- Leadership or training programs
- Changes in structures to reduce burdens
- Access to information.

The call for training and access to leadership programs was widespread, with many contributions on the impact an increased focus on training could deliver the Society. There were suggestions for mentoring programs within the Society to support new and emerging leaders, setting up support hubs to cover regional areas of large geographic spread, and even [suggestions about leadership courses offered by the De Paul University in Chicago](#).

There was some discussion of the range of tasks that are allocated to Conference Presidents, which respondents report is ever growing. Some respondents suggested that consolidation of some tasks might

be possible – for example, Treasurer tasks may be consolidated at a regional level rather than at a Conference level. Other respondents have suggested that Society staff should be tasked with some of these activities, however this needs to be tempered with the strongly stated desire from many respondents to ensure that elected officers are managing the Society and not paid staff, as per The Rule.

Respondents also recognised the increasing Government requirements for leaders or directors, which requires a significant commitment and detailed understanding, and is seen as very onerous. This is cited as a barrier to leadership for some Vincentians.

QUESTION FOR DELEGATES TO CONSIDER:

Do all of the tasks need to be done by the Conference President?

Who is best placed to manage some of these tasks?

WHAT WE HEARD



Young members want to honour the wisdom of older members and their experience.

- Member response



Many new Conference leaders can be overwhelmed.

- Member response



A lot of people want to help, not lead.

- Member response

Access to information for leaders was also raised (see also Collaboration section), and in particular the need to increase the knowledge of potential new leaders in terms of the scope of the role. Some respondents suggested that marketing leadership roles would be helpful.

Skillset of a good Society leader

Respondents had many thoughts on what makes a good leader in the Society:

- Kindness
- Tolerance
- Good listening skills
- Understands vision
- More a mentor than a manager
- Authentic
- Vulnerable

- Understands Evangelisation in the context of our mission of charity
- Recognises and fosters relationships with higher councils at regional and state/territory level
- Able to inspire Members to understand 'why' we do what we do
- Promote spiritual growth of our Members
- Plans for succession
- Life experience
- Fresh ideas and directions
- Reflect the diversity in our communities

Several respondents suggested it was better to leave a leadership position vacant, rather than having the wrong person in the leadership role.



One of our Members was asked once by a Companion "why do you do what you do". His answer was "because we love you". That was leadership.

- Member response

How does this item further our 'Vision and Roadmap for Future Conferences?'

Leadership is important for the future vitality of Conferences, and may look different across different kinds of Conferences. We need to consider how to promote and support appropriate leadership.

How might we identify and support leaders at every level of our Society?

COLLABORATION

How can we communicate, work and learn together across the Society?

Background / Context



None of us, including me, ever do great things. But we can all do small things, with great love, and together we can do something wonderful.

- Mother Theresa

A survey found that 31% of baby boomers (1946 – 1960s), 40% of Gen X (1960s to 1980s) and 49% of millennials (1980s to 2000s) support the use of social tools for workplace collaboration (Source – Queens University).

Knowledge workers spend an average of 14% of their working week communicating and collaborating internally. Improving internal collaboration through social tools could help raise the productivity of interaction by as much as 20 to 25% Source: [McKinsey](#)

Optional pre-reading: [Article entitled “Attributes to effective collaboration - insights from five case studies in Australia and New Zealand](#)

WHAT WE HEARD

Internal collaboration

Feedback was overwhelmingly consistent on one point – hearing from other Conferences is incredibly beneficial. From hearing the success stories and learning about available resources to problem solving, respondents were eager to collaborate in order to better serve our Companions.

Respondents were also eager to collaborate to feel connected within the large Society, and respondents were eager for the Society to embrace alternative forms of communication – it was noted that email correspondence isn't always read (see Change section).

One respondent said their Conference in Tasmania was trialing the use of WhatsApp to share notes and minutes, and do event planning.

Furthermore, one respondent commented that established communication systems communicate

down, but bottom-up communication is not facilitated. Another respondent suggested that confusion can be created when there is a lack of communication between different levels of the Society.

Related to this is commentary on information management – respondents felt the Society could improve on sharing information to build capacity, share lessons or successful approaches more broadly, share demographic information of Companions in their area, and also sharing to aid our spirituality.

For example, during the fourth Listening Forum, one participant commented on how useful it would be to have access to spiritual reflections. Another participant explained how they referred to the spiritual reflections prepared by colleagues in New South Wales.

WHAT WE HEARD

EDITOR'S NOTE:

See, for example, Spiritual Reflection Guides prepared by NSW or Spiritual Reflection Guides prepared by Victoria, which are available from the Society's website.

One suggestion offered was for a national database of Members to enable efficient information sharing.

It was noted by some respondents that Congress was a great opportunity to share experiences.

QUESTION FOR DELEGATES TO CONSIDER:

How can the Society communicate more effectively to Members, Volunteers and staff in ways that are efficient and effective, at the National Council, State or Territory Council, and Regional levels?

Collaboration with service providers

Other opportunities to collaborate were also discussed, with many participants wanting to connect with other service providers, to build a relationship at a Conference level, to better serve our Companions. This was mentioned many times by many different respondents.

In a similar vein, respondents noted that compliance processes often make it difficult to serve our Companions in efficient ways and suggested that collaboration with other agencies may reduce duplication in processes. Other respondents suggested that implementation of systems to manage this would be helpful.

Collaboration with local community

The desire to collaborate within the local community was often raised in context of growing our membership, with many suggestions of finding ways to involve the community in Society events. Some respondents provided examples they have experienced such as Festival masses and Open House meetings.

Collaboration with policy makers / government

There was significant commentary on the importance of the advocacy work done by the Society at both an individual Companion level, and at a community level. Several respondents suggested that connecting Companions to policy makers would be beneficial, querying how the Society could make better use of what Conferences are learning, connecting these learnings across the Society, and feed this information up to the National Council.

International collaboration

The value of events such as World Youth Day, a meeting with international Vincentians, was highlighted by some of our younger Members. This event allowed participants to share stories, make connections as well as experience and build community.

If there's no communication in the team...



How does this item further our 'Vision and Roadmap for Future Conferences?'

Communication and collaboration helps our Conferences to be more than the sum of their parts. The better at it we are, the more we can learn, grow and do great things together.

How might communication and collaboration between Conferences be improved, to help each other achieve more?

CHANGE

How do we make it easier to adapt to the change around us?



Let us allow God to act; He brings things to completion when we least expect it.

- Saint Vincent de Paul

Background / Context

Covid-19 has widened wealth gaps across the globe. The richest 10% of the world population now owns 76% of all wealth.



SOME GROUPS OF PEOPLE ARE MORE AT RISK OF POVERTY THAN OTHERS. FACTORS SUCH AS AGE, GENDER, FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS, PAID WORK, SOURCES OF INCOME, DISABILITY AND OTHER CHARACTERISTICS CAN ALL HAVE AN IMPACT.



62% of households in which the main income-earner is unemployed are in poverty.



34% of sole parent households are in poverty.



60% of households reliant on JobSeeker payment are in poverty.



25% of people with disability are in poverty.



52% of tenants in public housing are in poverty.



18% of households where the main income-earner is a woman are in poverty, compared with 10% of households where the main income-earner is a man.

Image Source: [Poverty in Australia 2023: Who is affected – Poverty and Inequality \(acoss.org.au\)](https://www.acoss.org.au)

As of January 2022, the number of internet users in Australia had risen by approximately 5.5 million, from 18.1 million users in 2012 to around 23.6 million users in 2022. [Australia: number of internet users 2022 | Statista](#)

There has been a continued upward trend of the population share of active social media users in Australia. As of February 2022, approximately 82.7% of the Australian Population were active users compared to just 58% in 2015. [Social media use in Australia 2022 | Statista](#)

Optional pre-reading:

[These five Census graphs tell a story about a rapidly changing Australia \(thenewdaily.com.au\)](https://www.thenewdaily.com.au)

[Wealth gap widens as pandemic deepens economic inequality | World Economic Forum \(weforum.org\)](https://www.weforum.org)

WHAT WE HEARD

Role of technology

Many respondents indicated that the Society's use of technology needs to evolve, citing this as necessary for renewal. There were many comments on the need for wider and more consistent engagement within the Society and expanding the methods of communication to meet the needs of Members. Examples provided included allowing use of social media, SMS, phone calls, video conference calls, and electronic group chats (such as WhatsApp).

Feedback was also received about the assistance provided to Companions around technology, with some comments suggesting the poor and marginalised are being left behind or dismissed as they are either not computer literate, or don't have access to computers.

For example, people who are experiencing homelessness may not have access to a computer and filling out forms to access government assistance is extremely challenging on a mobile device.

Conversely, some respondents noted that increased use of technology is proving challenging for some Members.

QUESTION FOR DELEGATES TO CONSIDER:

How can we evolve our use of technology to meet Member needs particularly in context of new Members being encouraged to join the Society, and balance this against the needs of current Members, some of whom will understandably not wish to embrace new technologies?

Divide between rich and poor is widening

There was significant commentary on the changing needs of Companions, and the societal changes contributing to that such as the rising cost of living, breakdown of families and communities, etc. (see Context section for more detail).

Some respondents suggested that one outcome of these changes is that the gap between rich and poor is widening. This led these respondents to comment on the Society's role in encouraging nations and people who have material prosperity to give to those who do not (see also Purpose and Impact sections).

This extended to our Twinning Conferences, and the work we do in the International Development Program. Others commented on the importance of our advocacy work, to ensure social justice concerns are heard in political forums.



We cannot take full responsibility for the widening gap between rich and poor or signs of cultural divides like racism growing. But we can make a difference if we are better organised, relevant and contemporaneous in our methods and contemporary in inclusiveness. We can do this and not be apologetic about being faith based and leading action-based spirituality.

- Member response

Structural change

Some respondents have suggested that the traditional Conference structure may not be fit for purpose in all cases. Alternatives such as a Chapter concept whereby satellite groups link to a larger group are being trialled in some areas. One respondent noted that nothing stops Conferences from creating themselves to suit Members – suggesting this isn't a true structural issue, but its cause emanating from other sources.

Relying on Catholic dioceses to structure Conferences within the Society was also raised, as was the point that our structure doesn't change as the demographic needs around us are changing.

Another respondent commented that they miss the feeling of belonging to the bigger Society rather than just isolated in a Conference. Connectivity is a strong theme for respondents (see Collaboration section).

WHAT WE HEARD

Change within the Society

Many respondents talked about how Members are engaged (or more precisely – not effectively engaged in a timely manner) in decision making, with a clear perspective coming through that the differences between staff and Members on a variety of issues needs to be resolved. Members generally indicated that a Member-led and Member-requested model is preferred, with staff focussing more on administrative tasks and providing support for Conferences (see also Leadership section).

QUESTION FOR DELEGATES TO CONSIDER:

How can the Society honour its subsidiarity principle as enshrined in The Rule, while at the same time deal with increasingly complex Companion needs and government requirements, with a declining membership?

Some respondents talked about change at an individual Member level, and the challenges that change presents. It was suggested that more engagement of Members, as well as listening to their answers, is required, along with a willingness to take on the difficult answers which challenge our current views. This will lead to consideration of how these changes will affect a wide variety of things.



I feel we have to appreciate that change is hard for our Members, respect that and gently encourage them to embrace it.

- Member response

How does this item further our 'Vision and Roadmap for Future Conferences?'

For the Society, and its Conferences to adapt to the context around them, some change will be required. For some Conferences, this may be minor change, while others may be trying many new things.

How do we enable effective change across our Society, through our Conferences, so that we can adapt to changing context and needs?

CONGRESS PRAYER

Lord, we pray for the wisdom of the Holy Spirit as the St Vincent de Paul Society in Australia embarks on a journey together, revitalising 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, especially those chosen as Congress delegates, 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.

CONGRESS FACILITATORS

The people from [ThinkPlace](#) have been engaged to facilitate Congress 2023+.

ThinkPlace is a strategic design consultancy that works on complex public good challenges. Established in Australia in 2005, ThinkPlace has 13 studios across Asia, Africa and the United States. It uses methods and tools from human-centred design, complexity and system thinking, and behavioural science.

ThinkPlace people specialise in codesign and complex facilitation, bringing together diverse perspectives and capabilities for effective design, deliberation and innovation. It is committed to supporting the delivery of the Sustainable Development Goals, and mastering design in complex systems.

ThinkPlace works with government, business, NGO's and communities to support their design efforts, and is honoured to be working with the Society of St Vincent de Paul, as a champion of social justice.



St Vincent de Paul Society

NATIONAL COUNCIL of AUSTRALIA Inc.

good works