

# The Record

WINTER 2024



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



**CELEBRATING THE  
SOCIETY'S FOUNDING**





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

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

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

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



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*Celebrating the Society's 170th anniversary were (l-r) National Council CEO Toby oConnor, National President Mark Gaetani, Victoria State Council President Michael Quinn and CEO of St Vincent de Paul Society Victoria Group, Dr Jennifer Fitzgerald AM.*

## On the cover...

The Society of St Vincent de Paul began in Paris, France in 1833 when six university students, including Blessed Frédéric Ozanam, met to discuss ways they could live their Catholic faith in their community by serving people in need.

They formed the first Conference of Charity, which later became the Society of St Vincent de Paul – named after the Patron Saint of Christian charity.

With the help of Sister Rosalie Rendu, a Daughter of Charity, the group visited poor families in one of the poorer districts of France. They listened to, and answered, the needs of many people living in poverty.

Within a few years, the original group of seven grew to 600 people. Before long they expanded into 15 other cities and towns across France and grew to more than 2,000 members to continue delivering their services.

The first Society Conference in Australia was established just 21 years later, on 5 March 1854 at St Francis' Church, Lonsdale Street, Melbourne, led by Father Gerald Archbold Ward. Fr Ward was born in London in 1806 and migrated to Australia on the 787-ton Digby on 7 September 1850 with Fr Patrick Dunne and 42 other passengers. Fr Ward died on 14 January 1858 at the age of 52.

Today, the Society in Australia consists of 45,000 members and volunteers who operate on the ground through over 1,000 conferences located in individual parishes across every state and territory.

In March 2024, the Society celebrated the 170th anniversary of its founding with a series of events in Melbourne. Our cover photo shows the celebratory Mass held at St Francis' Church, Victoria's oldest Catholic Church, on Lonsdale Street. Other coverage includes the unveiling of the refurbished statue of St Vincent de Paul, and the exhibition of portraits and an interactive presentation of the Society's long history of service.



*National President Mark Gaetani addressing the Midyear meeting of the Society in the USA.*

***‘Adaption to a changing world – Faithful to the spirit of its founders, the Society constantly strives for renewal, adapting to changing world conditions. It seeks to be aware of the changes that occur in human society and the new types of poverty that may be identified or anticipated’.***

*The Rule, Part 1, 1.6.*

The past few weeks have been a busy time for us all as we go about our work delivering upon our Mission. All contributing – Members, Volunteers and Staff. It has been an especially busy time for me. At the invitation of John Berry – National President of the Society in the USA, I attended their National Council Midyear meeting in March and delivered the Keynote Address.

The theme of my presentation was “Journeying together, Revitalising our Mission”. Whilst I focused on the challenges and opportunities that face the USA and Australia in adapting to a changing world, I argued that English speaking countries, including Canada, Ireland, New Zealand, England, Wales and Scotland, are all in the same proverbial boat.

It became apparent during my time in the USA that both countries face similar challenges as we move forward in our efforts to revitalise our mission. In Australia, our latest Census showed that 19.9 per cent of the adult population identified as Catholic, down from 23 per cent. In the USA, the number of Catholics attending Mass has declined from 40 per cent to 23 per cent.

The ethnic profile of conference membership in

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both the USA and Australia is predominantly white Anglo-Saxon, yet Australia, and indeed the USA, arguably have the most multi-cultural societies in the world. Our respective membership demographic is also significantly ageing.

As the Society in Australia moves forward from Congress 2023 with an agreed framework entailing our three agreed Core Pillars of growth and revitalisation, diverse, flexible Conferences and being ready for change, I wish our US Vincentian friends all the best as they commence their journey towards adapting to a changing world.

Readers interested in listening to my address can go to the following link - <https://vimeo.com/925152197/>

The cover story in this edition of *The Record* details the wonderful celebration of our Australian founder – Fr Gerald Ward. Along with others from National Council, I was invited to and participated in the many events to celebrate our 170 years of existence in Australia, held from 4-5 March.

There were many highlights during these days, but two events stand out for me – celebrating Mass at the crypt of Fr. Gerald Ward and the 170th Ozanam Oration.

The theme of the Oration was “Our Founders were people of both foresight and insight. The Society’s mission and purpose are as relevant as they were 170 years ago. Our challenge is to continue that journey.”

This provided our key speaker, Age Discrimination Commissioner (and former State President, St Vincent de Paul Society NSW) Robert Fitzgerald with the opportunity to reflect and comment on the true meaning of these words. Robert dived into the heart of the matter, considering how to honour the past while building a future in the Society, reflecting all possible challenges along the way. We are called to embrace change, have courage and take risks, recalling the fearless spirit of Frédéric Ozanam.

Reflecting on the two days I was amazed at the exhausting amount of work and the achievements of Fr. Gerald Ward over such a short period of time.

Whilst celebrating the 170th milestone achieved by Victoria, I would also like to acknowledge the 130th year of the commencement of the Society in Queensland. A celebratory Mass was held on 5

May at the Red Hills Conference, the home of the first Conference in Queensland. The Conference President of Red Hills is Matt Nunan, our very own National Council Vice-President. I would like to thank all members, staff and volunteers of Queensland for their wonderful support provided to those in need in Queensland over the past 130 years’.

I’m writing this piece in the middle of National Volunteer Week, which celebrates, acknowledges and gives thanks to the many thousands of volunteers who give freely of their time to Australia’s charities and organisations. I would like to take this opportunity to thank the 45,000 Members and Volunteers who contribute their time to the Society.

In September 2023, Pope Francis acknowledged volunteers by saying, “A purely generous and selfless service that people freely choose to offer to those in need, not out of concern for financial remuneration or personal benefit, but out of pure love of their neighbour.”

In acknowledging our volunteers, I would like make mention of Victorian Vincentian – Mrs Margaret O’Donnell. Margaret was awarded the Order of Australia (OAM) in the Australia Day Honours List 2024. The award recognises Margaret’s service to her community on many fronts and we are extremely grateful for her service to the Society as Conference President, Central Council President and Board Member.

Finally, I was saddened to hear of the passing of our beloved Paul Burton, NSW State President, on 12 May, following a long illness. Paul dedicated much of his life to the good works of the St Vincent de Paul Society and even in his term as State President, struggling with health issues, he never forgot the vulnerable, marginalised and disadvantaged.

Often, Paul put the people we assist before his own wellbeing and was selfless in his service of others. We hold Paul’s wife, Jennifer, and his four children – Alicia, Joanne, Rachael and Sean, and his extended family in our thoughts and prayers at this difficult time.

RIP Paul Burton. **R**





## ***The Society has been Catholic from its origins. It remains an international Catholic voluntary organisation of lay people, men and women.***

***– The Rule, Part I, 1.1***

As is mentioned elsewhere in this edition, National Council gathered at the Santa Therese Spirituality Centre outside Brisbane for its first retreat in five years in early May. Many earlier plans had been scuttled by the pandemic.

This was an opportunity to reflect on why we are called to proclaim the Mission of the Society's founders in our contemporary world.

Whilst very little 'business' was touched on, the conversation did explore the challenges the Society faces across the Australian communities in which our Members are present. We also reflected on the different challenges our Vincentian colleagues across the Oceania Region are facing, and how walking side by side to strengthen their in-country presence would be something our founders would have done.

There was an exploration of the meaning of the Society as a 'lay Catholic organisation' and the implications for our leadership, our Members and executive employees. It was agreed that explaining the meaning of the Society as a lay Catholic organisation would be a priority moving forward.

In the near future, there will be information shared about how National, State and Territory Councils and their respective executive employees will work together to promote and to explain the meaning of this foundational tenet with Members, Volunteers and our workforces.

Not long after the retreat, Chris Uhlmann, writing in *The Weekend Australian*, highlighted the advice coming from an Australian Law Reform Commission report containing recommendations that would address religious exemption from anti-discrimination law.

In that article, Mr Uhlmann suggested that a progressive agenda is threatening Australia's multifaith society. It is possible that a revised religious discrimination bill could be tabled during this term of government and there could be amendments to the *Sex Discrimination Act* bringing detrimental impact to the sanctity of how faith-based organisations are permitted to live their faith in a public 'market space'.

The Society's leaders have more than a passing interest in these observations.

We welcome people of all faiths to join with us to address injustice and to serve the poor. Our Members, Volunteers and Employees reflect Australia's multicultural demographics. We look to the many

benefits that accompany the increased diversity that comes from different cultures and generations.

Underlying our *good works* is our Vincentian spirituality that promotes acceptance of diversity in all its forms. *The Society serves those in need regardless of creed, ethnic or social background, health, gender, or political opinions.* (Part I, 1.4)

The daily encounters of our Members, Volunteers and employees bear strong witness to the presence of Christ in all those to whom the Society offers a hand up, whether they seek assistance with the emotional, physical or financial deprivations they experience, or seek the Society's refuge in a world that inflicts hurtful discrimination because of who they are.

We have a history of *giving priority to the poorest of the poor and to those who are most rejected by society* (1.6). The Society honours Catholic Social Teachings in order to advocate justice for all people, especially those with little or no voice in public fora.

Within this context, any proposals that result in legislation limiting how faith-based organisations like the Society may live out their faith, including how the Society operates as a lay Catholic organisation, will require our politicians to provide clear explanation of the reasons underpinning such proposed interference.

Only then can the Society make informed decisions on the impact of any proposed legislative change.

Feedback from numerous sources makes clear that the Australian community continues to struggle with the deleterious and all-pervasive effects of the cost-of-living crisis and that governments' proposed solutions are neither effective nor immediate enough.

It is the not-for profit sector, including the historical foundations of charitable faith-based organisations, that provides the glue that keeps local communities together and offers hope for a brighter future.

The Albanese Government recognises the important role the not-for profit sector pays in the Australian economy. Its commitment to preparing a blueprint to support and enhance the sector over the next 10 years is to be applauded.

It would seem antithetical for our federal Parliament to place restrictions on the way faith-based charities can lend a hand-up to a growing number of Australians in desperate need. **R**

## The Vincentian Visitation — A Spirituality Of Hope

BY LEO TUCKER

A brief reading from the gospel of Luke...

*“For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leapt for joy...”*

The Visitation was a *kairos*<sup>1</sup> moment where Mary, with Child, makes a hard journey into the hill country of Judea to be with her older cousin, Elizabeth, to assist her in the final stage of her pregnancy giving birth to her son John.

Elizabeth’s pregnancy, like Mary’s, was beyond the realms of probability so they had much to share.

In the Society, I have heard it said that the grassroots of our works is home visitations. It is an important time where Vincentians visit the homes of those we serve offering support and assistance. It is a time where Vincentians can understand the environment, culture, social life and situations of those seeking assistance.

Today, home visitations have become challenging and difficult for many reasons. Many Conferences are unable to home visit due to limited numbers, safety and personal wellbeing. On occasions, Vincentians meet people outside of the home, in hubs or parish rooms, on the street, or in Conference rooms adjacent to our retail shops. So, have we lost our grassroots approach to compassionate care?

Two aspects of visitations may assist our reflection, for I sense that Elizabeth offered visitation to Mary as much, if not more so, than Mary did for Elizabeth.

Firstly, is Elizabeth’s joy at seeing face to face her younger cousin. We may not always perceive this joyful moment when we have a visitation moment to offer assistance, but I remember perceiving a sense of joy when simply being listened to during the floods in Lismore NSW a few years ago.

People knew that they could merely come to us, as we were there in “visitation” for them. They could pause and feel a deep sense of dignity given to them, we listened to their story, and we offered our hearts in hospitality.

This spirituality of “visitation” needs to be nurtured as our way of serving divinity or the sacred in the disadvantaged, marginalised and those doing it tough.

The other is that when Mary visited her cousin, she had only just learnt of her own pregnancy outside of a married union. I could only imagine the rumours around this event at home. There would have been disbelief and accusations of infidelity to her betrothed. I am sure she was fearful of being stoned by the elders of the Jewish law and the loss of any shred of dignity.

But in the arms of her cousin, celebrating the gift that each carried, it seemed that she was fully accepted and honoured, without any form of judgement, and fully celebrated, understood and loved.

*The Rule* reminds us that our service is without judgment and that in reverence Vincentians serve, “listening to them, respecting their needs and recover dignity”<sup>2</sup>. Wherever we meet those in need, whether in the homes or on the streets, Vincentians are visiting. We continue this wonderful tradition in our actions, our conversations and our prayers.

Through the insights of the Visitation, I believe the well-known anthem of the Rule of “No work of charity is foreign to the Society”<sup>3</sup>, is given a deeper meaning.

These charitable works are not purely transactions of a duty but a spirituality of visitations of hope. The visitation is not just core to Vincentian action but core to our Vincentian spirit. Being “Visitations of Hope” was also central to the heart of Blessed Pier Giorgio Frassati, whose feast the Catholic faith tradition celebrates on the 4 July. Frassati was a man of rich faith but importantly he embodied this faith into action, deeply understanding the service of “Christ in the poor and the poor in Christ”<sup>4</sup>. Frassati lived the spirit of the beatitudes, and his visitations expressed the spirit of Christ.

Today the Society is challenged to look at our models of care. The Visitation expressed beautifully in the gospels calls us to embrace the ministry of Jesus, like Pier Frassati, advocating radical inclusivity, accompaniment and restoration.

It is pastoral and is embedded in the very fabric of our story, which is lived out through our Catholic Social Teaching principles of dignity of the human person, preferential option for the poor and vulnerable, solidarity and subsidiarity, in striving to transform lives and support communities.

The St Vincent de Paul Society, living in this paradigm, will always be a Society of Visitation. May we be a Visitation of hope and love at all who call, for anyone, at any time time, in any space. **R**

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1. Kairos is an ancient Greek word meaning ‘the right or critical moment’  
2. The Rule 1.8  
3. The Rule 1.3  
4. The Rule 2.5

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



## Reflections on National Council's Retreat

**BY MARK GAETANI**

National President

**Mark Gaetani, National President, says the recent retreat was 'a rare opportunity to put one's daily travails aside and to focus on what really matters in this world.'**

From 3-5 May, National Council held our retreat at the peaceful setting of Santa Terese Spirituality Centre in Ormiston, Queensland. For several of us on National Council, this occasion was the first opportunity to come together to share our spiritual connections by reflecting on the past and seeking a pathway for the future of our work in the Society and the wider community.

The topics that consumed our time were servant leadership and spirituality in the modern world and what that means for a lay Catholic organisation in 2024.

I am pleased to share with you the reflections of recently elected Council President of Western Australia, Danny Cloghan (see article on page 8 of this issue).

In lay terms, the purpose of the retreat was to ensure that the Society grows and blooms in the coming years.

As Danny outlines, two matters dominated the retreat:

- Servant Leadership; and
- What it means to be a Catholic lay organisation.

Like Danny, I came away from our retreat with a renewed faith in the collective leadership of the Society in Australia and our commitment to ensuring we all maintain our focus on the importance of Catholic Social Teachings (see *the inside back cover of this issue*) and the relationship they play in delivering our Mission in accordance with the mission of the Society.

A big thanks to Sr Therese Haywood DC, our Spiritual Adviser, for guiding us over the weekend, as well as to Danny for his contribution to this coverage and the sense of community and fellowship of all retreat participants.

Getting away provided a rare opportunity to put one's daily travails aside and to focus on what really matters in this world and the Society's place in the order of things. We know, and greatly appreciate, that our Members, Volunteers and Employees understand our mission and purpose, and are dedicated, in so many ways, to helping Australians in need.

Their wonderful work may be inspired by the example of Jesus Christ, or by one or more of his faithful followers, such as Blessed Frédéric Ozanam or Sister Rosalie Rendu, but in the spirit of our lay Catholic organisation, they may also be inspired by the inner knowledge that their service – as a Conference Member, food van helper, shop volunteer, and so on – is simply a right thing to do, and more importantly is making a tangible difference in the lives of families and individuals doing it tough.

May God bless the broad St Vincent de Paul Society family, and those we are helping. May God guide those decision makers with the power to provide assistance to people in need, especially through the good works of the Society. As our main story in *The Record* portrays, we are now celebrating our 170 years of service in Australia, and let us reflect on how many lives have been assisted by the generations of service from our Members.

This thought came to mind during our retreat, and I feel sure that Blessed Frédéric and his inspirers and confreres would be proud of how we have carried the light forward from his time to ours.

Yet so much more needs to be done, and recognising this the Society is focused on the revitalisation path that was discussed and mapped out at our Congress in Sydney last September. I encourage all Members to engage with this ongoing process, which will contribute significantly to the Society's growing and blooming in the months and years ahead. **R**



## Retreat focuses on service and healthy growth

BY DANNY CLOGHAN

State President Elect,  
St Vincent de Paul Society WA

The National Council of the Society held a spiritual retreat from 3-5 May 2024 at the Santa Teresa Spirituality Centre, in Brisbane. It was led by Sister Therese Haywood DC, the Society's Spiritual Advisor, and assisted by our National President, Mark Gaetani.

I was privileged to attend as the Western Australian representative.

The purpose of the retreat was to ensure that the Society grows and blooms in the coming years. This focus on 'revitalisation' was central to the deliberations at Congress 2023, held in Sydney last September.

Two matters dominated the retreat:

- Servant Leadership; and
- What it means to be a lay Catholic organisation.

We discussed and reflected on Jesus' leadership which came not from a position of authority, wealth or being a celebrity. His leadership was about giving attention to, and being a voice for, the disadvantaged and marginalised in our society.

To provide leadership, National Council considered Servant Leadership a good model because of its emphasis upon:

- genuinely listening to the views and ideas of others;
- empathising with other people's situations and problems;
- being available for others;

- being aware of what is happening and having a good deal of self-awareness;
- persuading others to come with you;
- having a vision of what could be, rather than, what is;
- taking the long view;
- being a steward of the Society's assets, both tangible and intangible;
- concern for the growth in people and assets; and
- building a strong sense of community.

Jesus (Mark 10:45) said that he had come to serve and not be served.

Frédéric Ozanam used the hub and spoke analogy, wherein various spokes (works and services) of the Society lead to a hub consisting of our vision, mission, aspiration and values.

National Council recognised the value of Servant Leadership and its need to act for the marginalised and not upon them. Similarly, to act for the best interests of the Society and with our Members.

Elsewhere in this issue of *The Record*, Mark Gaetani touches on the topic of what it means for the Society to be a lay Catholic organisation.

Many thanks to the Society for the invitation to attend this valuable spiritual retreat. **R**



# ANNIVERSARY CELEBRATION



## A legacy celebrated: 170 Years of St Vincent de Paul Society Australia

**BY CLAUDIA LOEBER-RAAB**

Media & Content Lead,  
St Vincent de Paul Society Victoria

Celebrating and commemorating 170 years of compassionate service for Victorians in need, the St Vincent de Paul Society Victoria hosted two significant events in March 2024: an inspirational and thought-provoking Frédéric Ozanam Oration at the RACV Club in Melbourne's CBD and a special Commemorative Mass at the historic St Francis' Church, Victoria's oldest Catholic Church and the birthplace of the Society's first conference in Australia.

These gatherings paid homage to the rich history of St Vincent de Paul Society and looked ahead to the challenges and opportunities of the future.

### **Ozanam Oration: Embracing Change and Courage**

The Ozanam Oration on 4 March was themed: "Our Founders were people of both foresight and insight.

The Society's mission and Purpose are as relevant as they were 170 years ago. Our challenge is to continue that journey."

It provided plenty of opportunities for key speaker, Age Discrimination Commissioner and former St Vincent de Paul Society NSW President Robert Fitzgerald AM, and the evening facilitator, renowned journalist Geraldine Doogue AO, to both inspire and challenge the room.

Mr Fitzgerald addressed the heart of the matter, how to honour the past while navigating the uncharted territories of building a future for the Society – pondering all possible challenges along the way. His insights, drawn from his deep connection to the Society, provided ample inspiration and challenges, setting the stage for an evening of profound introspection.

The evening, with Victoria State President Michael Quinn as MC, unfolded with a sense of reverence and reflection on the enduring mission of the Society.

The Society's National President Mark Gaetani also addressed the 150 guests who included National Council CEO Toby O'Connor, Group CEO Dr Jennifer Fitzgerald AM, and long-term supporters of the Society in Victoria such as Vinnies CEO Sleepout participants, generous donors and dedicated members and volunteers. Bishop Martin Ashe said Grace.

The Ozanam Oration's resounding call to embrace change, have courage and take risks echoed the fearless spirit of Frédéric Ozanam, the St Vincent de Paul Society's

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founder. The event sparked meaningful discussions about the Society's identity, the evolving landscape of volunteering, and the indispensable role of members and volunteers. In the spirit of adaptability, guests left inspired, fostering a profound sense of unity and commitment to the enduring mission of the Society.

Mr Fitzgerald's reflections encapsulated the essence of the evening: 'The Society is an example that lay people and religious and clerics working together can achieve something extraordinary. And this 170 years is that celebration ...'

### Mass at St Francis' Church: A Spiritual Commemoration

To further commemorate 170 years of the Society in Australia, a graceful and solemn mass unfolded at St Francis' Church, Victoria's oldest Catholic Church, on Lonsdale Street on the day of our birth – 5 March 1854. The choice of this historic venue added a layer of significance, as St Francis' Church is the birthplace of the first conference of the St Vincent de Paul Society in Australia.

### ***In the grand tapestry of 170 years, the threads of faith, resilience, adaptability and courage are interwoven...***

Archbishop Peter Andrew Comensoli led the well-attended service. The Mass, a heartfelt tribute to Fr Gerald Ward, unfolded the narrative of his devoted efforts to respond to the needs of Australians, leading to the establishment of the first Australian conference of the St Vincent de Paul Society, 170 years ago.

Mark Gaetani, in a poignant sidenote, shared that unbeknown to Father Ward, his efforts would come full circle in 2020 with the establishment of the first UK Mini Vinnies group at St Edwards Catholic Primary School in Father Ward's hometown Runcorn, inspired by Kevin Slattery from the Hawthorn Conference in Melbourne (see story in *The Record*, Autumn 2024).

The Mass was not just a spiritual experience but an opportunity for attendees to reflect on the enduring mission of the Society and on the timeless wisdom of its founder, Frédéric Ozanam: 'The poor person is a unique person, God's fashioning, with an inalienable right to respect.'

A light supper provided a convivial setting for sharing stories, strengthening connections, and celebrating the spirit of compassion and service that defines the Society.



Also present at the Mass were Bishop Greg Bennet, Bishop Terry Curtin, Bishop Tony Ireland, Emeritus Bishop Les Tomlinson, Fr Tony Kerin, and Fr Michael Buck. The event resonated with gratitude for the continued legacy of compassion and charity that defines the Society's mission.

### The legacy of Frédéric Ozanam lives on

The Ozanam Oration and the commemorative Mass stand as symbols of the St Vincent de Paul Society's unwavering commitment to its mission. As the Society reflects on 170 years of service, the events served as a bridge between its storied past and a future filled with challenges and opportunities.

The legacy of Frédéric Ozanam lives on, inspiring generations to come as the Society continues its journey guided by faith, adaptability, and a profound commitment to compassion and service. In the grand tapestry of 170 years, the threads of faith, resilience, adaptability and courage are interwoven, creating a rich legacy that will endure for generations to come.

### Good Works Exhibition celebrates 170 years

To further celebrate the significant milestone, St Vincent de Paul Society Victoria invited members, volunteers and the general public to the "Good Works Exhibition 1854-2024" which took place during National Volunteer Week in May. Located at Melbourne's Xavier College, the birthplace of the first school conference in 1908, the exhibition offered a glimpse of the Society's remarkable 17-decade journey.

Highlights were portraits and stories of the many outstanding and passionate members and volunteers, such as the late Collingwood Conference Member Margaret Oats AO, Ozanam House volunteer and former client Garry Liakoureas, Vinnies Advocate and former client Diana Connell and soup van volunteer of over 40 years, the late Frank Mullins.

An interactive timeline marked the 'good works' that were often intertwined with Australian history highlights, such as the gold rush area, evidencing the ongoing commitment to assisting people in Australia in need regardless of their background or current events. **R**





*Among the group celebrating the unveiling of the restored statue of St Vincent de Paul were (l-r) Victoria's Group CEO, Dr Jennifer Fitzgerald AM, National Council CEO Toby oConnor, National President Mark Gaetani and Victoria State Council President Michael Quinn.*

## Statue revives memory of Society's namesake

As part of the recent commemoration of the 170th anniversary of the St Vincent de Paul Society in Australia, a poignant unveiling of the restored statue of St Vincent de Paul ceremony was held on the grounds of the MacKillop Family Services in South Melbourne.

The site holds deep historic ties to the St Vincent de Paul Society, as Brendan Podbury, Board member and Northern Central Council, said when addressing guests who included National President Mark Gaetani, National Council CEO Toby oConnor, State Council President Michael Quinn and Victoria's Group CEO, Dr Jennifer Fitzgerald AM.

The construction of the building that now hosts the MacKillop Family Services in South Melbourne traces its origins to Father Gerald Ward who arrived in Australia in 1850, having been recruited to work in the Melbourne mission by the pioneer priest Father Patrick Geoghegan.

Fr Ward established the first St Vincent de Paul Society conference on 5 March 1854. Faced with the dire circumstances of children experiencing homelessness and being deserted by parents and carers, Fr Ward's dedication led him to establish the St Vincent de Paul orphanage in South Melbourne. Its foundation stone was laid in 1855, and the first children were accepted in 1857.

Mr Gaetani reflected on the orphanage's historical significance, saying: 'This is the Society's first special works in the country, and to see the footprint around Australia and the services that we are offering is as a result of it.'

In 1861, the Society transitioned the orphanage to the Sisters of Mercy, ensuring ongoing support for boys and girls.

Despite the transfer, the enduring connection with the Society persisted in the name of the institution. A century-old statue of Saint Vincent was also installed as a timeless symbol of compassion and service, standing as a testament to the St Vincent de Paul Society's legacy.

Over the years, as a silent witness to countless acts of kindness, the statue showed signs of wear and tear. In a determined effort to preserve its physical, spiritual and cultural significance, the Society in Victoria had the statue restored.

Brendan Podbury, who led the project, expressed joy at seeing the statue restored to its former glory, adorned with a new plaque commemorating the 170th anniversary, unveiled by Mark Gaetani and Michael Quinn.

State President Michael Quinn remarked that Fr Gerald Ward would undoubtedly be proud to witness the enduring impact and growth of the St Vincent de Paul Society throughout Australia.

The event followed a service to honour Fr Gerald Ward's life and his contribution and was paired with a tour through the MacKillop Family Services site and a brief history provided by staff member Jenny Glares. Dr Robyn Miller, CEO of the MacKillop Family Services, gave a welcoming speech, noting the good works of the St Vincent de Paul Society across the state and the country. **R**





**Clockwise from top left:**

**SVDP Victoria CEO Dr Jennifer Fitzgerald AM, Dr Monique Ryan, Federal MP for Kooyong and Victoria State President, Michael Quinn at the exhibition opening.**

**Long-time soup van volunteer Frank Mullins views his portrait with sons Greg and Gavin.**

**The interactive exhibition featured the timeline of the Society's development in Victoria.**

## 170th Good Works exhibition showcased our legacy

From 21–24 May, the St Vincent de Paul Society Victoria staged an interactive exhibition commemorating the remarkable journey from the Society's inception in 1854 to the present day. Held at Melbourne's Xavier College in Kew, where the Society's first college conference was formed in 1908, the star of the show was an eight-metre-long timeline powered by AR (Artificial Reality).

Through the portraits displayed in the exhibition, attendees could watch and celebrate the individual journeys of our members, volunteers and the people we have assisted.

'This exhibition offers a unique glimpse into the rich tapestry of the Society's history and

the extraordinary contributions of our members and volunteers,' said Victoria State President Michael Quinn.

'It is a testament to the enduring legacy of compassion and solidarity that has defined our charity for more than 170 years. Our members and volunteers' unwavering dedication and compassion empower us to continue our mission of serving those in need, ensuring their human rights are protected and building a more just and compassionate society for all.'

With 70+ attendees, including members and volunteers from various conferences, the event was a time to reconnect, reminisce and celebrate the enduring spirit that binds us together. The exhibition was open to the public for several days. **R**



## In loving memory of Paul Burton

***The St Vincent de Paul Society NSW is deeply saddened by the passing of State Council President Paul Burton. Paul passed on Sunday 12 May, surrounded by his loved ones.***

“A more just and compassionate society will not materialise out of a vacuum of indifference; such a society requires the active work of individuals, willing to apply a particular focus of compassion according to personal circumstances, but, nonetheless, be united in coming together collectively.”

These words from Paul Burton came from an annual report message penned in his capacity as State President.

They speak to his belief in the mission and vision of the St Vincent de Paul Society – a cause he dedicated more than 40 years of his life in service of as a member.

Crediting his grandfather’s legacy as a Vincentian for inspiration to join in the 1980s while living in southwestern Sydney, Paul collaborated with another Vincentian, Eddie Solarz, where the two men established the momentum for the founding of the Conference of St Thomas More at Ruse in Campbelltown.

As a Vincentian, his roles included Regional Centres President in Campbelltown before moving to the Armidale Central Council, where he took on numerous leadership positions, including Central Council President.

In his professional career, Paul specialised in road, rail, sea, and air logistics, providing transport, warehousing and distribution services to the food, agricultural and pharmaceutical sectors.

Paul was elected as State Council President in February 2022 and was immediately thrust into a time of crisis as floods devastated the Northern Rivers. He provided support to members and employees working on the ground in the immediate aftermath and during the ensuing months as the Society responded to thousands of people in need of assistance.

Having served in many different capacities throughout his time as a Vincentian, Paul understood the importance of recognising those who selflessly gave of themselves in the name of the Society’s good works. Under his leadership, he established the Regional President’s Forum to empower members in positions of leadership, who he viewed as taking on roles requiring trust and character, to support members working on the front line of their communities.



He was also the first Vice President of Spirituality for the State Council and urged for the Society to act with increased momentum regarding its Reconciliation Action Plan and Diversity and Inclusion initiatives.

Paul recognised the Society, at its best, as a living, vibrant example of the Commandment to love one another as God has loved us. For Paul, this call was at the heart of Vincentian good works.

It was important to Paul to be conscious of the diligence and consistent commitment displayed every day by members, volunteers and employees as they performed their roles in assisting those they seek to serve. His belief was that a culture of gratitude and appreciation should be constantly evident as part of the Vincentian culture.

The Franciscan priest Richard Rohr, who wrote on matters of theology and spirituality, was a favourite of Paul’s during the latter years of his life.

Leo Tucker, Executive Director of Mission and Spirituality, recalls a quote of Rohr’s that resonated with Paul.

“As I approach death, the best way to describe what’s coming next is not “I’m dying,” but “I’m finally going home.” I don’t know what it’s like yet, but in my older age I can really trust that it is home.”

He served with humility, respect and a true sense of Vincentian spirit. He never forgot the vulnerable, marginalised and disadvantaged. He was selfless in his service of others, often putting the people the Society assists before his own wellbeing.

*Paul will be greatly missed by everyone across the Society, leaving behind a wonderful legacy of prayerfulness, healing, kindness, compassion, and companionship. The Society holds Paul’s wife, Jennifer, and his children, Alicia, Joanne, Rachael and Sean, and extended family in our thoughts and prayers. **R***

## Society celebrates 130-year history in Queensland

***St Vincent de Paul Society in Queensland has a proud 130-year record of service to the community. James Hodge, Director of Mission, provides this reflection.***

On Sunday, 18 February 2024, our Society celebrated our first Conference meeting in Queensland, marking the beginning of a legacy that has changed the lives of countless Companions in need.

This is a remarkable milestone, signifying over a century of dedicated service, compassion, and solidarity with those in need. It is also an occasion to celebrate all of our Conferences across the State as they continue to provide a hand-up to vulnerable Queenslanders.

### Our beginnings

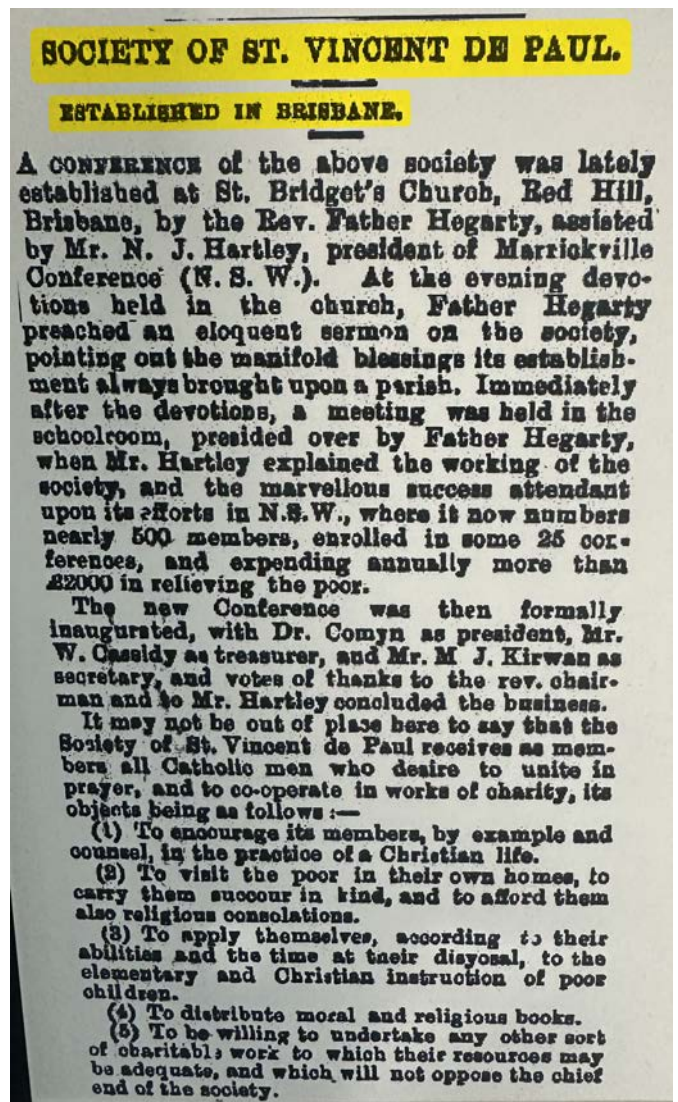
In the summer of 1892–93, Queensland experienced one of the hottest periods recorded in that century. Relief came with an especially wet season in 1893, Brisbane experienced extreme rainfall with 1,026 mm falling in the inner city in February alone.

The 1893 floods remain the benchmark that still determines the city's water supply and flood mitigation strategies. The 1893 floods claimed 35 lives, a significant number in a population of 100,000. An estimated 350 hectares in South Brisbane and 130 hectares in North Brisbane were submerged.

As a result of these floods, people and communities across Brisbane rose to the occasion to support each other in rebuilding the devastation caused by the floods. Part of this remarkable time of change and growth was the emergence of the first St Vincent de Paul Conference, based at St Brigid's Catholic Church, Red Hill.

As reported in the *Freeman's Journal*, a newspaper based in Sydney, in March 1894, this conference was formally inaugurated when interested parishioners gathered on Sunday, 18 February 1894, for evening devotions.

Led by the Parish Priest, Father Hegarty (who would become the Spiritual Adviser to the Conference), and with the support of the Conference President of Marrickville, NSW, Mr. N.J. Hartley, reflections were shared about the workings of the Society and the needs of the communities in Brisbane that the Society could provide a positive contribution.



*News article from 1894 marking the formation of the first Conference in Queensland*

Within a year, this Conference provided financial assistance to over 160 people, provided clothing, medical assistance, and other forms of services to people in need, and importantly, partnered with the local sewing guild which provided the clothing that was distributed by members.

The beginning of this first Conference marks the beginning of the presence of the Society in Queensland.

Over the years, members of the St Vincent de Paul Society in Queensland have exemplified the spirit of charity and selflessness. Their tireless efforts have brought comfort, hope, and relief to our neighbours and Companions across the State, embodying the essence of compassion in action.

As we commemorate this significant anniversary, we honour not only the past achievements but also look forward to the future with renewed vigour and commitment. The challenges of today may be different from those of the past, but the guiding principles of the Society remain as relevant as ever.

May this milestone serve as a reminder of the impact that a group of dedicated individuals can have on the world around them, inspiring us all to continue the legacy of service, love, and compassion for many years to come. **R**





*Delegates at Congress 2023+ in Sydney discussing how the Society can revitalise for a new era.*

## Spotlight on Congress – identifying and encouraging new leaders

Sydney, October 2023: 202 delegates came together to discuss key challenges and to generate ideas for change in identified areas of the Society's membership, mission and spirituality, and to guide the direction of the Society into the future.

Since then, eleven project teams have been formed to progress the Congress initiatives.

Project team 1.4 – themed 'Identifying and encouraging new leaders', is exploring how comfortable newer Members feel about taking on leadership roles, and what the Society can do to make them feel welcome when they do step up.

The first output from this project team is a draft handover document for our National, State and Territory Presidents, which is currently being trialled in two states. The handover template includes content on:

- an overview of responsibilities,
- key activities and initiatives underway,
- important contacts and resources,
- ongoing projects and commitments,
- challenges and opportunities, and
- personal insights and reflections.

The second project output is gathering ideas on how to

identify new leaders, with a range of suggestions that include formal leadership programs (which links to project 1.5 – 'Leadership skills and training'), using networks and partnerships to identify potential leaders, as well as developing succession plans and ensuring nomination and selection processes are transparent.

To support these ideas, the project team suggests that diversity and inclusion be kept front-of-mind, with the adoption of continuous feedback and evaluation loops for potential leaders. This work will result in the development of a framework for how good leaders can be identified.

Members of the Society are invited to provide some thoughts to the project team about the barriers within their Conference that might be preventing people from stepping into leadership roles, and make suggestions for ways to overcome these barriers.

You can share your thoughts via [congress@svdp.org.au](mailto:congress@svdp.org.au).

Other projects are also working hard to generate ideas, gather feedback, trial new approaches, and deliver recommendations. Locally, as they continue to meet and consider ways of Journeying Together, Revitalising our Mission, Members are encouraged to share any good news stories (particularly stories of success), clever ideas, and lessons learned along the way with the project teams. **R**



## MINI VINNIES



*Bubbling with enthusiasm, the Mini Vinnies group at St Michael's Parish School, Deniliquin supports the Society and learn about social justice issues.*

## Deni's Minis make a load of difference

Best known for hosting the 'Deni Ute Muster' (it takes place in early October) the south-western NSW town of Deniliquin is also ground zero for one of the most active Mini Vinnies groups in the land, thanks to the enthusiasm of St Michael's Parish School whose Principal, Nicholas Braybon, says he is thrilled to have both students and staff participating in the program.

'It's wonderful to acknowledge the contribution of our Mini Vinnies volunteers at St Michael's,' Mr Braybon told *The Record*.

'Empathy in action, kindness in motion, and service with a smile - Mini Vinnies embodies the spirit of compassion that makes our St Michael's community shine. By lending a hand to those in need, with unwavering faith and compassion, we not only uplift our community but also enrich our own souls with the profound satisfaction of making a difference.'

Hurrah to that!

St Michael's Parish School, Deniliquin, has had a strong connection to the Society for many years.

Activities include collecting non-perishable food items, toys and Christmas party food for adding to the hampers SVdP distributes locally at Christmas time to households in need.

'Our annual Pyjama Day, held in June, is often the launch for Vinnies Winter Appeal,' Principal Braybon said.

'Children, parents and teachers come to school dressed in pyjamas, and enjoy a hot breakfast, and donations (both monetary and in the form of goods such as bed linen, warm clothing) are collected for SVdP.'

Mini Vinnies began at St Michael's around 2015 but went into recess during the COVID-19 years. They began again in earnest in 2022 with members of staff volunteering to lead the group.

'Children from years 3 to 6 are invited to join - it is totally voluntary. While fundraising for the Society has always been a priority, it has now evolved to include awareness of social justice issues and giving up our own time to assist others,' Nicholas Braybon added.





**Above: The cupcake stall held during Catholic Schools Week as part of the school's Grandparents Day raised \$484 for the Society.**

**Top right: St Michael's Mini Vinnies members visit Orana Residential Aged Care to interact with residents through games and activities.**

**Right: Mini Vinnies members discussed their activities with local pre-schoolers.**

At the beginning of the year, children who wished to be a part of Mini Vinnies attended a commissioning Mass and pledged to take care of themselves, others and God's creation through prayer and good works. Each meeting begins with the Mini Vinnies prayer.

This year around 55 children are members - almost one-third of the students at the school. The children were given SVdP badges as a way of displaying membership of the group. Three teachers who are passionate about making children aware of social justice issues, volunteer their time to run the group, which generally meets once a fortnight, at recess, to come up with ideas/activities, learn about social justice issues, organise activities. The group is inviting guest speakers to talk with the children about social justice issues such as homelessness, global poverty and environmental concerns. **R**





## Budget falls short of helping Australia's battlers

Despite some welcome announcements regarding social and affordable housing, a small increase in Commonwealth Rent Assistance for eligible renters, and capping PBS medicine prices, much of the social support funding in Budget 2024-25 is earmarked for capital works and programs that will not help people most in need or will take considerable time to become operational.

'There is substantial funding in the Budget that should have been allocated to assist Australians doing it tough,' said the Society's National President, Mark Gaetani.

'For example, much-needed increases to JobSeeker and other working age payments could be afforded by means testing the \$300 per household energy rebate, which should be targeted to those who really need it.

'St Vincent de Paul Society commends the Albanese Government for its commitment to social and affordable housing and some other positives. However, a large number of households continue to struggle to get by day to day, and the Budget is unlikely to significantly improve their circumstances.

'Little extra funding has been allocated to helping the many people relying on income support payments or very low wages. They continue to face a national rental crisis as well as the rising cost of essentials, especially food. Requests for the Society's assistance have risen across Australia by between 14 per cent and 40 per cent, with four-in-five people seeking assistance with food.'

Mr Gaetani noted that expert analysts, including the Government's own Economic Inclusion Advisory Committee, say a top priority is for working age payments such as JobSeeker to be substantially increased, and that doing so would not be inflationary.

'Yet this advice has been ignored, despite the level of JobSeeker being more than \$200 per week below the poverty line. We welcome the funding for people with partial capacity to work less than 14 hours a week, but this only accounts for about 4,700 people, while some 892,220 people depend on JobSeeker and Youth Allowance.

'In the past year, 3.7 million households ran out of food, and on any given day, more than half a million households struggle to put food on the table. One-in-five children are going hungry. These are not just statistics but the reality that our members are seeing every day.

'The combination of high costs of living and inadequate



incomes is a perfect storm. Those relying on income support payments like JobSeeker, Youth Allowance, Parenting Payment and Disability Support Pension will see little relief from this Budget. For some time, the Society has been urging an increase in these payments, in the case of JobSeeker to 90 per cent of the Age Pension.'

Mr Gaetani said the Society is deeply disappointed by the \$20M budget cut to the Status Resolution Support Services program that helps support people while resolving their immigration status.

'We had urged increased funding for this program but now we see a cut. There is also no increased provision of work rights, study rights and access to mainstream social support for people seeking asylum.'

Mr Gaetani added that, 'Across the country we are seeing rises in requests for help, including emergency relief, intended as a temporary response to a crisis but now being relied on for regular support. We welcomed a 30 per cent increase earlier this year and while this Budget has increased financial counselling and food relief, an urgent review of emergency relief funding is needed, as many people are going unassisted.

'In NSW alone, attendance at Vinnies food vans has increased by 125 per cent over the past year. Many families and individuals are in a dire situation, and they need help right now. While future initiatives are welcome, promises of social and affordable housing in the years ahead are of little comfort to people living precariously from week to week, who might even be on the verge of becoming homeless.

'We will continue to urge the Government to increase the base rate of working age payments, and to fund the [Better Deal for Renters](#). We also seek appropriate funding of the National Volunteering Strategy, and a response to, and funding of, the Parliament's gambling report, *You win some, you lose more*.

'There is much that Government still needs to do in order to make Australia a fairer society, especially for people struggling to make ends meet,' Mr Gaetani said. **R**



## Meeting Allegra Spender

A quick online search for Allegra Spender MP reveals numerous examples of her engagement with community, her drive for change and her passion to make Australia a better country, especially for our young people.

On 1 May, CEO Toby oConnor and I met with Ms Spender at her electorate office in Sydney's eastern suburb of Edgecliff to discuss the Society's work and identify areas of common interest. We were warmly welcomed by the first term MP who was well briefed, engaging and interested in sharing views on the changes needed to address inequity.

We started by providing an overview of what our members are seeing in New South Wales.

Total assistance provided to people from 2022 to 2023 is up 32 per cent, from \$10.6M to \$14.0M. One-in-three people seeking our help are new, with the majority reporting a fortnightly income of between \$1,000-\$2,000. (The average annual household income in Wentworth is \$64,477, with many earning well above the mean), Previously, most people contacting us fell in the \$500-\$1,000 income bracket. Alarming, the number of people receiving a meal through our vans is up 125 per cent, from 32,484 to 73,276.

Against this stark backdrop it is hard to step back and take a 'big picture' approach to social justice, but it must be done otherwise nothing will change. And so, our discussion turned to young people, business, climate change and tax reform.

Allegra Spender is driven by making sure that young people have the same opportunities as their parents. We too support policies that provide young Australians with the social mobility enjoyed by those before them. This means access to quality and affordable education and training, adequate student and youth allowances, safe and affordable housing, and secure work.

A few days later, the Government's announcement to overhaul HECS-HELP indexation was welcome. But more needs to be done, especially when it comes to adequate income support payments and housing.

Ms Spender is keen to support business by simplifying compliance and regulation. We too support policies that increase productivity and reduce red tape but also protects workers' dignity and rights.

She is a strong campaigner for more Government action on climate change. We also continue to advocate to ensure that low-income households (especially renters) are not left behind in the push towards net zero emissions by 2030.

The fact is that the cost of energy remains a recurring cause of hardship for many of our companions. We referred Ms Spender to the Society's [electricity and gas](#)



**Rose Beynon, National Director, Policy and Research for St Vincent de Paul Society's National Council, joins CEO Toby oConnor in meeting the MP for one of Australia's richest federal electorates. Allegra Spender, who successfully contested the seat of Wentworth as an independent in 2022, has been working hard to cement a reputation at both the local and national level.**

[tariff tracker reports](#) and worksheets that help people track cost changes as they occur.

Finally, she showed that she is one of the few politicians willing to take on the 'poisoned chalice' of tax reform.

We spoke of the paper commissioned by the Society and authored by the Australian National University's Associate Professor Ben Phillips, a member of the Government's Economic Inclusion Advisory Committee. The paper, [A Fairer Tax and Welfare System](#), outlines three options for tax reform that would generate enough revenue to lift between 193,000 and 834,000 people out of poverty.

This includes increasing the tax-free threshold, reducing the Capital Gains Tax Discount from 50 per cent to 37.5 per cent and removing the tax-free status for retiree superannuation income over the age of 60.

We wrapped up by outlining key principles for tax reform that both encourage growth and productivity and leave no one behind namely

- reducing inequity and poverty
- improving housing accessibility
- fostering productivity, and
- simplifying the system.

We spoke of our concerns about any proposed increases to the GST and that we see it as a regressive tax, a blunt instrument that exacerbates rather than addresses inequity. We have commissioned the ANU to further research this issue.

We look forward to the release of Allegra Spender's forthcoming green paper on tax reform and to further public discussion, and no doubt debate, on this important and much-needed social reform to help bring about a fairer Australia. **R**



PHOTO: JOHAN MOUCHET ON UNSPLASH

## First Nations equality now more urgent than ever

Failures in meeting some of the Government's key Closing the Gap targets and in advancing the goals of the Uluru Statement from the Heart highlight that the need for First Nations people to achieve equality is now more urgent than ever.

'Now More Than Ever' was the theme for National Reconciliation Week 2024 (27 May-3 June).

'St Vincent de Paul Society has a long history of both assisting and advocating on behalf of First Nations Australians,' said the Society's President, Mark Gaetani.

'A disproportionate number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people seek the Society's assistance with essentials such as food, accommodation and other support. In the Northern Territory, this can exceed 90 per cent of those seeking help, while 50 per cent or more is not uncommon in many rural and regional areas.

'Our members are seeing how First Nations people are falling behind the rest of the population because of the inter-generational impacts of discrimination, social and economic exclusion and other factors.

'First Nations people continue to die prematurely at alarming rates, with suicides and other self-harming at disturbing and unacceptable levels. Early childhood development is well below the national average, while incarceration rates for both adults and juveniles are through the roof. Yet as the Uluru Statement says, "We're not an innately criminal people".

Mr Gaetani noted that the Federal Budget confirmed \$2.4 billion over five years is allocated as part of the Closing the Gap Implementation Plan, along with a \$4 billion partnership with the NT Government to address conditions and overcrowding in remote housing.

'However, much of the Closing the Gap data shows the problems are on a deeper and greater scale and that more decisive action needs to be taken, and urgently. St Vincent de Paul Society continues to call on all governments to properly fund and commit to achieving the Closing the Gap targets.

'We also call for the age of criminal responsibility to be raised to 14 years and for increased funding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Services and community-led programs that keep children safe.

'We believe real progress will not be made without significant joint investment by all parties, and coordinated effort from all jurisdictions, in partnership with First Nations peoples. It is vital that Aboriginal-led solutions drive the changes needed to improve outcomes.

'As the theme for this National Reconciliation Week says, Now More Than Ever is the time for everyone, not just governments, to take both practical and heartfelt steps towards creating a fairer Australia for First Nations peoples.

'This is indeed the time for all Australians to learn about our shared histories, cultures, and achievements, and to explore how each of us can contribute to achieving reconciliation in Australia. Around Australia, the Society's people will be marking National Reconciliation Week with various gatherings and events fostering discussion and reflection on Australia's history and on the many contributions made by First Nations people in all fields of our national life.

'The Uluru Statement concludes by inviting us to walk together in a movement of all Australian people for a better future. Let us accept that offer in the generous spirit with which it was made.' **R**



# National Reconciliation Week 2024 at Ozanam House

A moving Welcome to Country led by Yorta Yorta/ Wurundjeri/Been Wurrung Elder Uncle Shane Charles (pictured, doing smoking ceremony) brought together clients and staff of Ozanam House in North Melbourne to honour and celebrate National Reconciliation Week 2024.

During his presentation, Uncle Shane passionately spoke about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' connection to the land they have maintained for tens of thousands of years - a connection that is integral to their identity and well-being.

'We have no story of migration, but stories of creation,' he said, reminding everyone that his culture is older than the pyramids or places such as Stonehenge, yet Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are still fighting the fight for sovereignty and to be accepted as Australia's first peoples.

At the same time, he said that reconciliation is not only about First Nations People but for all Australians: 'You are on my country, and it is my responsibility to look after you. It is my responsibility to teach you, to give you that understanding that you belong here, and have the opportunity to share the beautiful morals and values of all the cultures we share.'



'We are in a place that cares,' he said, referring to Ozanam House and VincentCare as part of the St Vincent de Paul Society Victoria Group.

'I know what this organisation does, they care for you - that is why you are here. That care is always there. This is how it works with my family, my extended family,' Uncle Shane said before lighting the fire and inviting everyone to walk through the smoke and participate in the ceremony. **R**

# Elder discusses Reconciliation in Canberra

Mr Yates has had a career of over 20 years working in Indigenous Affairs, firstly as Deputy Secretary in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission and then the Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs.

He has also made a significant contribution to the community-controlled sector, serving in voluntary roles on the boards of Miwatj Health and Qld South Native Title Services. He also provided considerable support to the Coalition of Peaks and is highly regarded across the sector for his many contributions. **R**



(l-r) The Society's Canberra/Goulburn Council President, Brian Stacey, CEO Lucy Hohnen and Elder Bernie Yates who was guest speaker at a National Reconciliation event at the Society's main office in Canberra.

## 'Essential report' on child social exclusion is launched

Child Social Exclusion (CSE), as the report explains, 'Extends the concept of child poverty by reflecting the extent to which children lack the opportunities and resources to participate fully in their communities and feel connected'.

The latest CSE Index was produced by the University of Canberra for Uniting Care Australia and launched at Parliament House, Canberra. Along with noting that one-in-six Australian children live in poverty, it says many more face disadvantage on multiple fronts, with 880,000 children under the age of 15 experiencing social exclusion.

To offer a more complete picture of the barriers to child wellbeing, and the changes between 2016 and 2021, the Index also considers factors such as housing, health, education, connectedness and environment. Findings include that 48 per cent of children living in regional communities are facing a high or very high risk of social exclusion, with children in Tasmania being the most socially excluded.

The Index notes that 'while poverty and low-income are significant contributors to disadvantage and exclusion, they aren't the only drivers.'

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### "Reports like this one are essential..."

- Andrew Leigh MP, Assistant Minister for Competition, Charities and Treasury

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Along with socioeconomic status (e.g. sole parent family, no parent in work), contributing factors to social exclusion include family education levels, community connectedness (e.g. lack of English language skills, no motor vehicle), physical/cultural environment (e.g. parks, pools, museums), housing (e.g. high rent and low income) and health (e.g. access to GPs and dentists, children with diagnosed chronic conditions).

'Early experiences of social exclusion can carry life-long impacts of disadvantage – which is why we need to take a close look at how to give our kids the best chance to thrive,' explains the Index, which can be downloaded at <https://lnkd.in/gGgU3rhu>

The *Child Social Exclusion Index – Nurturing Inclusion: Paving the Way to Improved Child Wellbeing* was launched



**Attendees at the launch of the Child Exclusion Index included St Vincent de Paul Society's National Council CEO Toby oConnor and National Director, Policy and Research Rose Beynon, The Salvation Army's National Government Relations Coordinator, Liz Dowd, and General Manager Policy and Advocacy, Jennifer Kirkaldy, and Anna Page, Director, Communications and Public Affairs, UnitingCare Australia**

on 27 March by Andrew Leigh MP, the Federal Assistant Minister for Competition, Charities and Treasury, who called it an essential work whose insights will help to provide an evidence base for change.

'Lessons from the history of social surveys and cartography show that empirical studies like yours can create the foundations for social change. They can pinpoint need and show where our efforts should be targeted to make a positive difference'.

Praising the report as a valuable contribution to a 'long and rich tradition in the social sciences', the Minister said, 'Data-driven indices and maps can create significant social change... [the report] extends the concept of poverty to measure social and material disadvantage and understand the risk of social exclusion, specifically for Australian children. The findings show where child social exclusion is highly prevalent, providing an important contribution and starting point for developing solutions.'

The Albanese Government shares the same commitment to quality statistics and analysis to shift the dial on disadvantage, Minister Leigh said.

'We have invested \$16.4 million over 4 years in the Australian Bureau of Statistics to lead the Life Course Data Initiative. This four-year pilot program is part of the Targeting Entrenched Disadvantage package, which was announced in the 2023-24 Budget. The package has a strong focus on intergenerational disadvantage and improving child and family wellbeing.

'Tackling child social exclusion and disadvantage is a challenge that we face together. A shared understanding of its nature is a vital foundation for collaboration. Thank you for your contribution.' **R**



## Housing crisis is a 'national emergency'

The recently elected President of the St Vincent de Paul Society Canberra/Goulburn, Brian Stacey PSM (*pictured*), has described the rise in Australia's cost of living and housing unaffordability as both a crisis and a national emergency.

Mr Stacey, who originally trained in anthropology at the Australian National University (ANU), said one of his main priorities is raising awareness about the extent of the housing crisis across the ACT and NSW.

Housing unaffordability is no longer an individual problem for the poor or disadvantaged, Mr Stacey said. The problem is now widespread across our population affecting those who would not have been impacted in the past.

'It's been described as a crisis, but I think it's a national emergency. Particularly in NSW but also in the ACT, many can't afford to pay for the highest ever rentals combined with the impact of inflation,' he said.

Even Companions in Brian Stacey's own Conference of South Woden, Canberra who have jobs are finding it impossible to make ends meet.

'We hear reports from the media about high housing prices in Canberra as if it is a good thing and most have this idea that Canberra is full of public servants on high salaries. In fact, this is not true and Canberra is experiencing the housing crisis like everywhere else, even if the impact is still often unseen and not thought of as a big problem by its own residents,' he added.

Brian Stacey says the Commonwealth and ACT Governments are not building enough affordable and social housing in Canberra and the latest Report on Government Services prepared by the Productivity Commission demonstrates this.

The Society in Canberra/Goulburn has a total of 50 conferences serving people from Tumut in the Snowy Mountains, the far south coast of NSW down to Eden, and West to Lake Cargelligo, as well as the national capital.

Having dedicated his professional career to working with Indigenous people, Mr Stacey recently concluded his role as a Professor in Practice with the First Nations portfolio at the ANU in order to commit more time and energy to his new role in the Society.



***'Faith is integrally linked with taking practical action to support the poor'***

Mr Stacey was the First Assistant Secretary in Indigenous Affairs and was the Commonwealth's State Manager for Indigenous Affairs in the Northern Territory. It is in this role that he was awarded the Public Service Medal.

Brian Stacey, who became a Catholic well into adulthood, is encouraging more people to think about joining Conferences, saying that one of the main reasons he joined was a realisation that faith is integrally linked with taking practical action to support the poor, and you can't have one without the other. He was previously the president of a conference in Cairns.

'I think Vinnies is an excellent instrument, a perfect vehicle for taking practical action on a day-to-day basis. Also, it's just been a great opportunity for me. It's been the best decision I've made in my life – the wonderful people I've met, and being involved has deepened my faith,' he said. **R**

# Sufficient social housing can benefit everyone

**BY ROBIN OSBORNE**

National Director, Communications & Media

Coming in at just 34 pages – modest for a report on such a major issue – the research done by [The McKell Institute](#) for St Vincent de Paul Society NSW packs a series of powerful punches, not least the overall conclusion that everyone in the state, and by inference in Australia more widely, can benefit from investments in social housing.

The journey to reach this key recommendation is a sombre one, including the overview that, ‘The housing crisis in NSW has reached critical levels, with soaring rental prices, dwindling affordability, and a severe shortage of social housing exacerbating the challenges faced by individuals and families who are experiencing social and economic disadvantage’.

It continues, ‘The housing crisis is arguably the greatest policy challenge facing contemporary Australia... Despite the widely held belief that price growth would slow in a period of high interest rates, prices have rebounded strongly – surpassing all-time price highs seen during the pandemic.

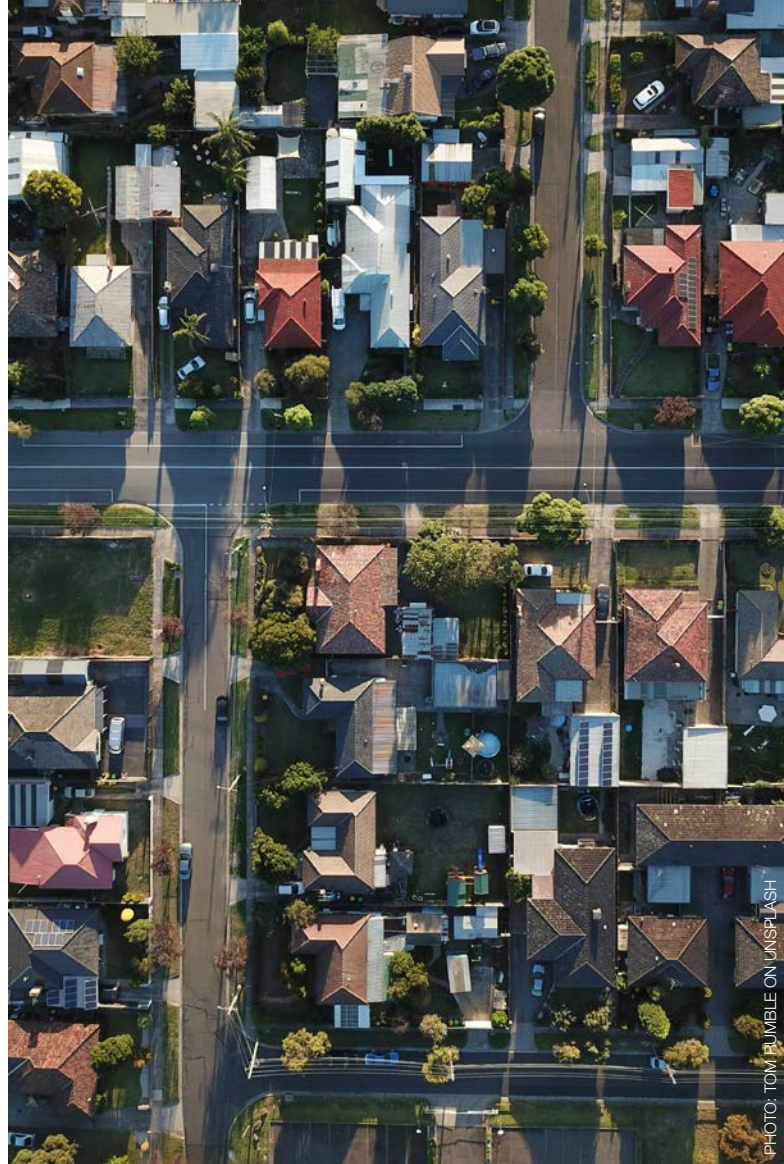
‘Yet even those who are lucky enough to purchase a home are confronted with eye-watering mortgage repayments which are now simply unachievable for the median worker, particularly in the Sydney area. The reality of the private dwelling market means many Australians are now renting for longer, or even renting for life.

‘But the rental market provides no respite for workers and families. Vacancy rates are at their lowest levels in years, and capital city rents are surging at double digit speeds. NSW simply no longer has enough homes to house its population, and through no fault of their own, individuals and families are condemned to homelessness by a housing system in disrepair.’

There’s no disguising the generally gloomy picture: in NSW alone, over 57,600 households (125,000 individuals) await social housing, with a 5 to 10-year wait.

In such a climate it is not surprising that demand for the Society’s services in NSW increased by around 70 per cent from 2017–18 to 2022–23. Lack of available accommodation was the primary reason, constituting 60 per cent of cases, while rough sleeper numbers rose by 34 per cent in 2023.

Regarding social housing, the main focus, supply dwindled



to 4.5 per cent of total dwellings, down from 5.1 per cent in 2001. Further concern was that only 60 per cent of NSW public housing were found to meet minimum standards, with many dwellings lacking functioning facilities and having structural issues and mould.

The report’s bright light was the firm belief that investing in social housing ‘not only provides stable shelter but also delivers substantial economic, health, and community benefits’.

It added that, ‘With homelessness projected to cost \$445 million annually by 2036, every \$1 invested in social housing yields \$2 in benefits, underscoring the potential for significant returns. Strong and stable social housing strengthens community resilience, promotes social cohesion, and reduces reliance on emergency services and healthcare interventions.

‘A well-funded social housing system in NSW is crucial for addressing the housing crisis, promoting economic resilience, and fostering inclusive communities. By investing in social housing initiatives, we can create a brighter and more equitable future for all residents’.

For these reasons, The McKell Institute and the St Vincent de Paul Society NSW urged the NSW Government to make a “generational investment” in public and community housing in NSW, at a scale that reflects the challenge the system is facing.



Along with this “surge” in public and community housing, they recommended wrap-around support for clients in a synergy between social housing provisions and ongoing support services. Other priorities were significantly expanding routine maintenance expenditure on properties, a concessional loans facility for community housing providers, and ensuring that social housing goes where it is needed, ‘not just where it is easy’.

This last priority involves conducting thorough assessments of housing demand and demographic trends across different regions of NSW. As the report notes, ‘The NSW Government has committed to a target of 30 per cent development on public land being oriented to social and affordable housing. This policy is welcome but should not override the need to develop social housing in the right areas.’

The report is an impressive and convincing study that deserves close consideration by policy makers and Treasury planners, not just in NSW but in all Australian jurisdictions, given that the unaffordability and shortage of housing is now at crisis levels.

For example, in the ACT, the amount of public housing stock actually fell from 11,846 properties to 11,612 between 2021 and 2024, despite significant population growth. To keep pace, it should have grown by around 1,900 homes.

In April, The Canberra Times wrote that, ‘To be fair the ACT is not the only jurisdiction that has failed in this area... During the 1970s and 1980s, Australia was building more than 1,000 units of public housing a month’. This was said to represent 10 per cent of all residential dwellings. The figure is now around three per cent.

Yet today’s targets remain unambitious, a situation not helped by limitations in the national construction industry. The Australian Government’s recently launched Housing Australia Future Fund has a five-year timeframe for delivering 20,000 new affordable dwellings, with an additional 10,000 pledged by state and territory governments. Welcome news, but unlikely to make sufficient inroads into the housing wait lists. **R**

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*Security Through Social Housing - The Need for a Generational Investment in NSW’s Public Housing System.*  
Report by The McKell Institute in consultation with St Vincent de Paul Society NSW, submitted to the NSW Treasury in advance of the NSW 2024/25 State Budget.



**Stanthorpe Conference President Ros Day (right) with fellow Member Carmel Mahoney**

## The town with no vacancy

It might be located in sunny Queensland – “Beautiful one day, perfect the next” – but Stanthorpe is the state’s coldest town and many residents are getting frozen out of the housing market as the region hits a rental vacancy rate of zero.

The Southern Downs town saw a 24 per cent increase in rental costs in the last 12 months – the second highest in the country behind Riverwood in NSW, according to the [Suburbtrends Rental Pain Index](#) report.

The Society’s St Joseph’s Stanthorpe Conference President Ros Day said local Members have been seeing an incredible increase in calls for help around town.

‘Since October last year we’ve seen a huge increase in Companions asking for help,’ she said.

‘The average amount of funds we use to help people with groceries has more than doubled. People are living in tents and we cannot find accommodation for them – there are no affordable options left.’

According to the Rental Pain Index report, Stanthorpe currently has a rental vacancy rate of zero, making it the lowest in Queensland.

‘We can’t even find spaces at caravan parks anymore; I’ve never seen it this bad,’ Ms Day said

‘A big problem is that we have homes here sitting empty – I know of 300+ dwellings in the area that are AirBNBs that just sit empty most of the time. We’ve been supporting Companions to find options out of town but not all of them have transport.

‘The best we can do most of the time is to sustain people with food, clothing, bedding and sometimes tents.’

Ms Day said that despite the struggles, Conference Members are still working to help locals as much as they could.

‘There was a family of six living in a tent I was supporting that have finally managed to find a home.’ **R**

## A casino in everyone's pocket

***In April 2024, the National Council of St Vincent de Paul Society endorsed advocacy work plans for the Society's Social Justice Advisory Committee and the Vincentian Refugee Network. In addition, National Council agreed to add gambling reform to the Society's federal advocacy efforts and to become a supporting organisation of the [Alliance for Gambling Reform](#).***

***MARK GAETANI, National President of St Vincent de Paul Society, looks at the harms caused by the widespread promotion of the fastest growing form of gambling in Australia today – [online gambling](#).***

Australia is a nation of gamblers who are more likely to lose than win. Statistics show losing bets total \$25 billion each year, the highest per capita spend in the world. In the latest disturbing development, Australians now outspend the citizens of every other country on online gambling, often with the simple use of their phone, the casino in everyone's pocket.

St Vincent de Paul Society members, who volunteer at the community's frontlines, are well acquainted with the impacts of problem gambling – broken families, kids left hungry, households struggling to pay rent or mortgages, homelessness a real threat.

We understand that a flutter can be enjoyable and don't oppose gambling *per se*. Wins are exciting, losses unfortunate, but life goes on... except for those who become addicted to gambling's dopamine 'high' and find it difficult to stop, regardless of the impacts on the individual, their family life, work and finances.

The feelings of guilt and desperation after major losses can have a significant impact on mental health. Statistics from the Victorian Coroner show that from 2009-2016 at least 184 suicides were directly related to gambling and 17 other suicides were by 'affected others' such as family members. The true numbers could be much higher.

Whatever the game, the house always wins. The NSW Government's GambleAware says you can never predict a win on the pokies, whether you play a machine straight after someone else has a big payout or one that has not had a jackpot in ages. Days of the week or times of the day make no difference.

The Queensland Government rates the chances of winning top prize on a poker machine at around 1 in 7,000,000.



While most who gamble don't have a problem, too many people are coming to grief, and we welcome recent comments by the ACT's Gambling and Racing Commission that 'bet and load-up limits' on poker machines could reduce the risk of problem gamblers having large losses and consequent harmful impacts. We support the Alliance for Gambling Reform, a registered health promotion charity and the only national peak body working to reduce gambling harm.

The Society urges an end to the widespread advertising of online gambling, which conflates betting and sports events, exposes and normalises audiences of all ages to gambling culture, and pulls in individuals who are at risk of, or who are already, experiencing gambling harm.

Some 44 per cent of all Australian adults report gambling on sports and/or racing, with most placing their bets using a smart phone or computer. Online gambling has taken Australia and a good deal of the world by storm. The diversity of betting options is mind boggling, all just a few clicks away.

In 2022, the Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS) found 68 per cent of online gamblers who regularly bet online on sports/races were at risk of gambling harm, with younger age groups (18–34 years) at the highest risk. A recent financial story about a merger of major wagering groups said the combined new entity aimed at tripling the number of under-35 customers on the platform.

The AIFS research said 1-in-4 online gamblers used credit cards to gamble, more than half had multiple online accounts, many of those at risk gambled in the late-night hours of midnight to 8 am and only six per cent had sought help, with embarrassment being the commonest reason for not doing so.



To explore this latest phenomenon, the Australian Parliament's House of Representatives Standing Committee on Social Policy and Legal Affairs held an inquiry that in mid-2023 reported that online gambling is 'wreaking havoc in our communities'.

The report, *You win some, you lose more - Online gambling and its impacts on those experiencing gambling harm*, added that around two-thirds of all participants who gambled on sports, racing and electronic gaming machines were at risk of harm.

'Online gambling is unlike other forms of entertainment because of its potential to cause psychological, health, relationship, legal and financial harm to individuals and those around them, and tragically, gambling is a key risk factor for suicide,' it said.

'A person's gambling can progress to the behavioural

addiction of gambling disorder, which is like addictions to substances. There are currently few safeguards to protect people with gambling disorder from online gambling harm...'

The inquiry's chair was Labor MP the late Peta Murphy, admired across the parliamentary aisle, yet none of her committee's 31 recommendations, which include 'a comprehensive national strategy on online gambling harm reduction', has yet received a response from the Albanese Government or the Opposition. Independent MPs Zoe Daniel and Kate Chaney have pushed for an end to online gambling ads, to no avail.

St Vincent de Paul Society believes the report offers a sound foundation for addressing the exposure to harmful gambling by vulnerable people whose losses are having devastating consequences for individuals, families and the community in general. **R**

## VOLUNTEERING

# Govt backing is vital for volunteering's future

'Volunteering is vital for community wellbeing and is personally rewarding', said St Vincent de Paul Society National President, Mark Gaetani, 'and in National Volunteer Week (20-26 May), as throughout the year, I honour the efforts of the Society's 45,000 members and volunteers around Australia.

'Our conference members provide assistance to thousands of families and individuals in need, while our shop volunteers are essential for the running of our much-loved Vinnies op shops.

'Our volunteers range in age from their teens to their eighties. Many are retired and have every right to take it easy, but they still put in countless hours helping others in a variety of ways.

'Yet volunteering depends on co-investment from Government in many areas,' Mr Gaetani said.

'In recent years and on the back of the pandemic, volunteering has been on a downwards trajectory and if prompt action is not taken to reverse this trend the future of volunteering is in jeopardy.

'We note that the Federal Budget included funding for the Australian Bureau of Statistics to collect key national data on volunteering. More comprehensive and frequent data is indeed vital to support the implementation of the [National Strategy for Volunteering](#) (2023-2033).

'However, the main responsibility for taking effective action rests with the Australian Government. The Society is seeking

a commitment for the implementation of the National Strategy, which requires the allocation of resources for its success.'

The National Strategy is a 10 year blueprint for a reimagined future for volunteering in Australia. It provides a clear and compelling case, underpinned by robust data and evidence, for targeted and sufficient investment in volunteering and the celebration of the role it plays in creating thriving communities.

Mr Gaetani added, 'As the theme for National Volunteer Week says, volunteering indeed offers "something for everyone", both those who volunteer and the communities that benefit from the effort the volunteers put in.

'Volunteers are vital in so many areas, from assisting aged care and health services to responding during emergencies and improving disaster readiness, and supporting sporting activities.

'We agree with the peak body Volunteering Australia who have advised the Minister for Social Services, Amanda Rishworth, that investing in the implementation of the National Strategy for Volunteering is a wise and fiscally responsible decision. It is a moral imperative to foster greater cohesion in our local communities at a time when a growing range of challenges are threatening to pull us apart.

'It is an investment in supporting the wellbeing of our communities, the strength of our social fabric, and the resilience of our nation,' the National President said. **R**

## The impact of social justice touches most aspects of life

**Margaret Gearon, recently appointed leader of the society's social justice arm, discusses this vital aspect of our work.**

For me, as Chairperson of the National and the Victorian Social Justice and Advocacy Committee, Social Justice embodies the principle that everyone deserves equal economic, political and social rights and opportunities, no matter what circumstances they were born into.

A person's circumstances should not prevent them from having the best life possible or from achieving their full potential.

Social Justice is about fairness and making sure that everyone has choices about how they live and have the means to make those choices.

The impact of social justice touches most aspects of life. It covers the standards of education, healthcare, housing and income sources, as well as access to such elements as transport options, communication sources and food.

My interest in and commitment to the St Vincent de Paul Society's social justice and advocacy platform are firmly grounded in Frédéric Ozanam's principles and vision of establishing a network of charity and social justice across the world.

The Society was born and formed during a revolutionary time, not an evolutionary one. In the 1830s, Frédéric Ozanam faced social, economic and political challenges. His response to the needs of those in Paris who were badly affected by these economic and social changes was a revolutionary one, a practical way of demonstrating how he and his companions were living their faith by their actions.

We could think of St Vincent de Paul, in whose memory the Society is named, as one of Ozanam's mentors, together with Blessed Rosalie Rendu, a Daughter of Charity, following in the footsteps of St Vincent de Paul and St Louise de Marillac, and Emmanuel Bailly, the first President of the Society.

All of these people guided Frédéric in establishing the works of the Society through visiting those in need in their homes and providing not just material aid but



**Margaret Gearon**

also a social contact for those feeling isolated by their economic conditions.

Frédéric Ozanam and the members of the first conference were young, radical in their approach to living their faith in action, spurred by the challenges thrown at them.

For our Vincentian members today, social justice means:

*A continued commitment to understanding the causes of disadvantage and poverty and to working to alleviate/eliminate these.*

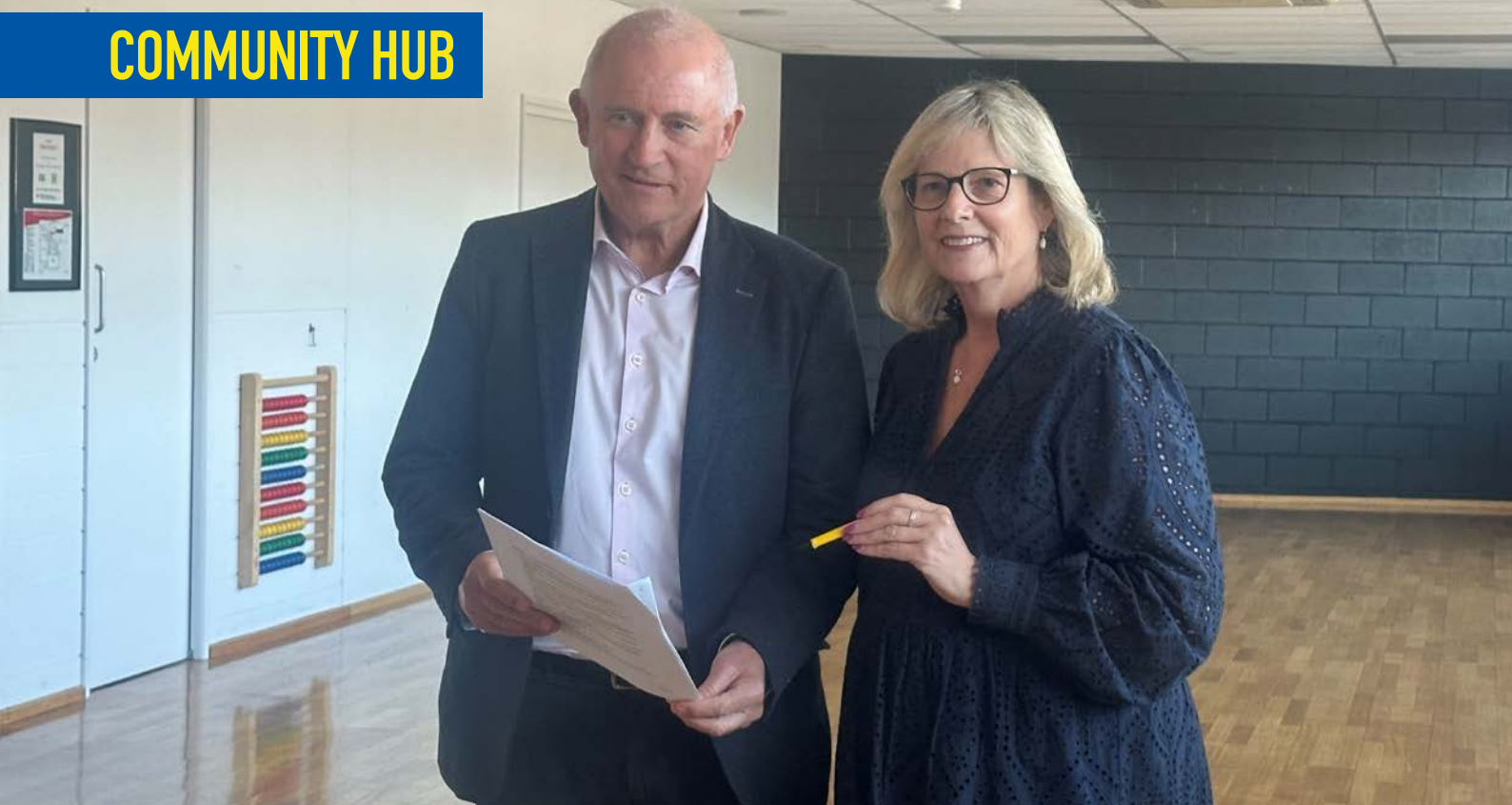
Collaboration with the community and local groups in the search for justice, the creation of a more equitable and compassionate society, and the development of advocacy.

Conference members today assist people less fortunate by helping them to have a voice and speak for themselves or speak for them. Vincentians envisage a more just society in which the rights, responsibilities and development of all people are promoted and they are able to have their own voice heard.

For the Society's members: No work of charity is foreign to the Society.

The Society's work continues to be giving assistance to the poorest of the poor, the most vulnerable and those rejected by society, whilst anticipating and working out ways to respond to new forms of disadvantage and need. Social Justice and Advocacy committee members play an important role in supporting these actions. **R**





*City of Launceston Acting Mayor Hugh McKenzie and St Vincent de Paul Society CEO Heather Kent announcing the transformation of the YMCA's former Launceston site on 7 May.*

## Society wins vote to develop community hub in Launceston

The City of Launceston and St Vincent de Paul Society Tasmania have signed a Memorandum of Understanding for the use of the former YMCA site in Kings Meadows as a community hub.

Following the YMCA closure in June 2022, the Society has been providing showers and a laundry service for the homeless community each weekday morning. The Council engaged with 11 community organisations to gauge their interest in operating from the site as a community focused facility.

Michelle Ogulin, Council's Manager of Liveable Communities, Community and Place, said, 'These interviews were important to help us understand how each organisation's proposed use for the site might fit with the overall direction Council is seeking, which is to maintain the site as a community focused facility.'

'We gave particular consideration to how the services of those organisations interviewed might interact with the current users, including the community shower and laundry service for Launceston's homeless community... SVdP has provided us with a proposal that will see the current sporting activities continue while also providing opportunity for other

organisations... to potentially incorporate additional services into a community-focused centre.'

A formal lease will be considered by Councillors at a future meeting. The City's Acting Mayor Hugh McKenzie said he was pleased the Society is eager to transition the site into a thriving community hub.

'The St Vincent de Paul Society is well recognised in Tasmania, throughout Australia and across the world for its dedication to making a positive difference in local communities,' Mr McKenzie said.

St Vincent de Paul Society Tasmania Chief Executive Heather Kent said, 'The media pick up around utilisation of the site in the Launceston area has been outstanding – this was a much-loved facility that has been idle for too long. I'm pleased to see the next chapter taking shape for the future operation of this important community facility.'

'It's an ideal location to connect with community groups from all ages in offering a range of activities. The Society will be eager to work with other community organisations from across the region to enable the City of Launceston's vision to maximise this site come to life once more.' **R**



## A warm Irish start for the Tasmania appeal

Former disability support worker, 'Irish' (pictured with the Society's Tasmania CEO Heather Kent) credits the St Vincent de Paul Society with saving his life – twice.

After losing his job, dealing with the breakdown of his marriage, and suffering from a serious brain injury, Irish lived in his car for several months before walking straight up to the front door of Vinnies Bethlehem House.

As it had done for many other Hobart men, Bethlehem House provided the support and shelter Irish desperately needed to get his life back on track.

'Being here, I feel safe and cared for,' Irish said.

'Bethlehem House took me in when I was at my darkest point and I am so grateful to the care and support they have shown me. My hope is that Tasmanians can get behind the Vinnies Winter Appeal this year so they can continue to assist people like me.'

Funds raised through the 2024 Vinnies Winter Appeal will address the rising cost-of-living pressures and affordable housing shortages affecting vulnerable Tasmanian communities.

CEO Heather Kent said she was concerned about the current crisis in Tasmania and in particular the number of people not able to find appropriate housing.

'A staggering 2,350 Tasmanians were reported as homeless in the 2021 census,' she said.

'We know the number has grown since then. In February of this year there were 4,705 people on the waiting list for social housing with the average time to house priority applicants being 92.6 weeks.

'With the cost of housing continuing to rise amidst supply shortages, a record number of people are experiencing housing stress.'

Funds raised through the nationwide Vinnies Winter Appeal will go towards providing emergency accommodation, food vouchers, funding for prescription medication, warm blankets and clothing for people experiencing homelessness, and much more.

Donations to the Vinnies Winter Appeal can be made by calling 13 18 12 or online at [donate.vinnies.org.au/winter-appeal](https://donate.vinnies.org.au/winter-appeal) **R**





## A journey of reflection, reconciliation and discovery

### ***The Pilgrims finished their journey at St Brigid's in Red Hill, the site of Queensland's first-ever State Conference 130 years ago.***

Pilgrims from around Queensland, aged from 20 to 76, put on their best walking shoes for the return of the de Paul Reconciliation Pilgrimage.

The 72km journey took the group across North Stradbroke Island (or Minjerribah) to learn more about First Nations culture and history, as well as the opportunity to reflect on their own spiritual journey.

A Pilgrimage entails a journey to a sacred place, often with the aim of seeking spiritual growth, healing or enlightenment, while the de Paul Pilgrimage delved into how spirituality and Indigenous reconciliation intersect, offering a pathway towards healing and mutual understanding.

State Youth Manager Benjamin Knight said the pilgrimage family was composed entirely of Society Members, Volunteers and Staff from as far as Mackay, Bundaberg, the Sunshine Coast and Brisbane/Western.

'The intergenerational makeup of the group was an incredible delight. We saw a senior Vincentian and a younger Member laugh and cry together, despite having only met a few days earlier,' he said.

'The Pilgrimage is designed to explore the intersection

of Vincentian Faith and Reconciliation, and also saw our pilgrims share their own struggles and joys with each other in an environment fertile for deep conversation.'

General Manager – Mission and Membership, Sam Hill said the journey provided a chance to disconnect from the distractions of daily life and reconnect with one's spiritual essence, while engaging in truth-telling and cultural activities.

'The pilgrims created a strong bond quickly through shared experiences – community meals, walking in torrential rain and gale-force winds, sharing conversations and learnings, the odd sing-along and empowering each other to get through each day,' she said.

'One of the highlights was seeing the intergenerational dynamics of the group, creating a wonderful sharing-of-life experience with shared wisdom and joy between the pilgrims.'

Benjamin said even the rain couldn't dampen the spirits of the group, although it certainly left many shoes soaked at the end of each day's journey.

One pilgrim said they finished 'feeling more connected to my faith than ever, with a sense of appreciation for country and deeper knowledge of First Nations People about their experiences, challenges and motivations.'

The pilgrims returned after five days of pilgrimage, tired in body but strengthened in mind and spirit as they concluded their journey at Red Hill for SVdP Queensland's 130-Year Celebration Mass at St Brigid's Church. **R**



## Get smart (metering)

*Maxwell Smart, the super sleuth from the television series Get Smart (1965-1970), loved his gadgets but never dreamed of the technologies that would become the norm for households in the 2020s.*

*The ‘catch’ is that all these devices are powered by electricity, a resource whose current (pardon the pun) cost impacts disproportionately on less well-off families and individuals. Many of them rely on assistance from St Vincent de Paul Society and are exposed to Australia’s punitive renting market.*

*Few rental properties have solar power generation – despite this being a negative gearing deduction – and few have ‘smart meters’, although this monitoring device can be installed free of charge at all homes and provides valuable information to help manage power bills.*

*St Vincent de Paul Society energy sector analyst **Gavin Dufty** explains how the national electricity market is changing and how all homes – owned or rented – will one day have smart meters, automated control of appliances and an increasing role for artificial intelligence (AI). Don’t be scared – costs will come down and the so-called ‘internet of things’ will make life less, not more, complicated.*

*Secret Agent 86 may not have foreseen such technological changes, but while urging us to ‘get smart’ and enjoy the benefits of this new era he would likely caution about the need to be vigilant for flaws, even booby traps, in the system that might impact on the energy transition of low income and disadvantaged households.*

In March this year the Australian energy regulator and Victoria’s [Essential Services Commission](#) released the draft decisions for the default market offer (DMO) and the Victorian default offer (VDO). These decisions will affect future electricity prices for Victoria, Southeast Queensland, New South Wales and South Australia. The other Australian jurisdictions have their own electricity pricing mechanisms and are yet to release their default prices.

The draft DMO that sets the maximum price retailers can charge for SE Qld, NSW and SA will basically remain as it currently is (0 - 2.7 per cent change), while the VDO, which is a “reasonable price” that has to be offered (an electricity tariff), will fall by about 6.5 per cent.

The underlying reason for both these price decisions is while there have been falls in wholesale energy prices, this has been offset by increases in other costs in the supply chain, such as the cost of “poles and wires” and green schemes.

However, post-July 2024 there will be more than changes to the VDO and DMO, including a suite of new tariffs being introduced by the distribution companies in NSW and SA, which will make up part of some electricity retail bills. How these price changes are reflected in the bills people pay will be up to the retailer. Similar changes will be coming to other states and territories in the following two years.

These new pricing arrangements will see the introduction of “Sun soaker” or daytime saver type tariffs. That is pricing where use of the electricity network will be significantly



lower than it is now. In fact, in some cases the cost will be zero for use of the networks between the hours of 10.00 am and 3.00 pm. Conversely, there will be a peak time between 4.00 pm and 9.00 pm.

This changing cost profile is to reflect the significant increase in the “spill” of electricity into the system from solar panels. As solar uptakers have skyrocketed, households are now flooding the local electricity system with energy in daytime hours.

These tariff changes are design to encourage households and businesses to use energy at the times when energy production is abundant. This type of pricing is not new. They were comments about it in a coal-based electricity system when off peak pricing was between 11.00 pm and 7.00 am, in order to encourage consumption while the coal plants were running.

These new tariffs create opportunities for households that currently use energy during the daytime hours or those that can shift consumption to these times. Doing so not only reduces their current cost of electricity but also supports the energy system more generally so there is less waste of energy production, helping to keep the system more stable and reliable. Storage batteries is also an important adjunct here although the up-front purchase cost is still high, with relatively low prospect that investors will instal them in their rental properties.

At the same time as these sun soaker-type tariffs are being introduced, we will see the introduction of two-way pricing, that is pricing incentives that encourage households that export energy (generated by solar, stored by batteries and in future, EVs) into the system at times when the system most needs it.

These two-way prices provide a small penalty for grid export (or feed-back) above a certain level during peak production times and much larger rewards for households that can export into the system at peak times, typically between 4.00 pm and 9 pm, that is, during the afternoon and evening.

These export pricing changes were as a result of a rule change advocated by St Vincent de Paul Society that will make the electricity system fairer because non-solar households were increasingly subsidising those with solar installed.

These changes are all designed to reflect the changing nature of our electricity system, as we move from traditional coal and gas electricity production to new renewable energy production, such as wind and solar.

You might ask, how do I get access to these new tariffs... the answer is you will need a smart meter.

Smart meters automatically come when you install a solar system, however if you are a non-solar household, which many low income and disadvantage households are, you would previously miss out. No longer, however, the Australian Energy Market Commission has recently ruled that energy retailers must speed up their installation of smart meters so that all households in the national energy market will have this meter and type by 2030.

If households wish to access these new tariffs – and who would not? – they can request their retailer to install one, at no cost to the householder. While installation times may vary, the response is usually prompt. Having a smart meter means that a meter-reader will no longer have to access your property. The consumption reading can be done remotely.

These new electronic meters and tariff designs are all part of the foundational platforms for the new energy market. This market will underpin the transition to the 100 per cent renewable energy system, targeted by the Australian Government, that is required to meet our targets.

This future electricity system will require more flexibility of both consumption and production. It will see much more automation of appliances – the so-called internet of things – and new products and services.

Companies are currently developing service and pricing options that cover the automated control of appliances. This includes devices that consume electricity as well as those that produce it. Not too far into the future, these developments will underpin the platform for artificial intelligence, the much talked-about AI, and other technologies.

This new energy system has the potential to offer opportunities for all households. However, it also bears the significant risk that some households, particularly the most vulnerable and disadvantaged, may not have the access to solar and other technologies that they rightly deserve in our democracy.

It would be a tragedy if they were left behind, unable to have appropriate access to innovative pricing designs, products and services that others will enjoy.

This is why the Society will continue to pay close attention to these technological trends, and will speak out when we believe the pathway to a brighter future risks becoming an obstacle strewn road to Australians who are less privileged and powerful. **R**



## 'My prayer is for a new life and purpose for those seeking permanent visas'

BY MONSIGNOR JOHN WOODS

Last month I visited the Hyde Park Barracks, Sydney. Some 50,000 of the 80,000 convicts transported to the Colony of New South Wales passed through there. In many cases their crimes were trifling. They had endured an arduous sea voyage, followed by hard labour, poor food and poor health in cramped living conditions, with severe punishment if they stepped out of line, all in the hope of obtaining a 'ticket of leave' so as to get on with their life. The barracks were later used to house poor women and the mentally ill.

Going to school here in Canberra in the 1960s I cannot recall anyone being proud of their convict forebears. Come the Bicentenary, many Australians proudly claimed their convict origins. I look to the day when most Australians will proudly say they are friends with an asylum seeker or a refugee.

They are not a problem to be scapegoated, they are brothers and sisters in need. They are family. We move forward together or we slowly die. To quote the great American prophet and civil rights leader, Martin Luther King, "Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter". We gather and speak for those with a muted voice.

In 2017 Government eligibility criteria reduced financial support and benefits to asylum seekers such that many could not work and their future was uncertain. We gather today as we believe that good law does not leave you betwixt and between.

Good law affords you status and standing in a timely manner. It does not consign you to an interminable limbo. As many of our forebears awaited their ticket of leave, so today many await the permanent status to get on with their lives. Across Australia they number in their thousands, here in Canberra hundreds.

On a television documentary, I heard a man say he was nervous and quick-tempered. He wanted to be reunited with his family. He said the hardest thing was not knowing when his current situation would end. He was not an asylum seeker in Canberra but a Russian soldier on the front line in Ukraine. Yet his hopes and fears would be that of many seeking permanent visas. We are not made to live in fear and uncertainty.

I was privileged to attend the ACT Legislative Assembly launch of the framework for the work being undertaken by Companion House. For those who may not know,





Companion House is a place engaging all manner of Canberrans in providing assistance to asylum seekers.

***“Our neighbour is anyone in need, not just my mob...”***

What did the late Canadian singer songwriter Leonard Cohen say about in everything there is a crack and that is how the light gets in? The consciences of Canberrans have been stirred and health, counselling, trauma support, practical advice, educational and social supports are offered to those longing for a place to call home.

I was struck by the title, ‘Companion House’. The word ‘companion’ means ‘to share bread’ or to offer hospitality. In the darkness of those in our community who are denied what you and me take for granted - standing and stability at law - there is a beacon. Hats off to this and other initiatives, and to the ACT Government for their support of asylum seekers which goes beyond that of their federal and state counterparts.

Fear fosters division. To encounter people is to hear stories. To hear the stories of asylum seekers is to ask what would I have done in their circumstance and what would I want now? No more than a ‘fair go’, surely?

I draw inspiration from the Old Testament prophet Micah. He exhorted us to *“Act justly, love tenderly and walk humbly with your God”* (Micah 6:8). Beautiful yet challenging words. Believe in God or not, we all need one another. **R**

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Monsignor John Woods, pictured at top left, is the Parish Priest of Transfiguration Parish in Canberra and the Archdiocesan Vicar for Social Services and Welfare. He delivered this address at the Palm Sunday rally for refugees in Canberra on 24 March 2024.



**Sister Jane Keogh AM with the chair of the Vincentian Refugee Network, Tim McKenna at the site of Sr Keogh’s February vigil at Parliament House to highlight the ongoing detention of refugees moved at Australia’s behest to Port Moresby, PNG.**

## Advocate honoured for refugee work

The Society congratulates Canberra-based Brigidine Sister Jane Keogh for being honoured as a Member of the Order of Australia (AM) in the 2024 King’s Birthday Honours list.

Sr Keogh became a nun at the age of 16 and went on to serve for more than 30 years as a teacher and school principal. A turning point in her life came in 2001 when the Government refused to allow the freighter MV Tampa, carrying more than 400 rescued asylum seekers, to enter Australian waters.

‘I couldn’t understand how Australia would take that attitude to refugees,’ she told *The Canberra Times* after receiving news that she was to be recognised for her advocacy and support work for refugees in the ensuing decades.

Working voluntarily with the Canberra Refugee Action Campaign, Sr Keogh has assisted asylum seekers detained in various locations, including Port Moresby, PNG where around fifty people, moved from Manus Island by Australia authorities, have been held for over a decade.

As well as lobbying parliamentarians and staging a solo protest vigil in February at Australian Parliament House, she has helped raise money to buy food and pay ongoing expenses for these asylum seekers, many of them ill, who are Australia’s responsibility to assist. **R**

## Our Lady of the Way offers refuge for women seeking safety

St Vincent de Paul Society NSW has opened a purpose-built facility, Our Lady of the Way, in Western Sydney offering crisis accommodation for women over the age of 45 seeking refuge from domestic and family violence (DFV).

Funding from the NSW Government enabled the redevelopment of the existing refuge, which provides trauma-informed, wrap-around services for women, coordinated by caseworkers. The new building features independent living for five women in self-contained accommodation, along with access to on-site support services to help rebuild their lives.

Individual support plans coordinated by a caseworker will aim to meet specific health, education, employment, social and legal needs.

The upgraded facility has communal areas for social activities, a garden, BBQ area and a common room with a kitchen. The pet friendly accommodation enables residents to bring their companion animals, which can often be a barrier to securing emergency accommodation.

The Society's NSW CEO, Yolanda Saiz, said demand for domestic and family violence services has nearly doubled over the last five years. In 2023, DFV was the main reason for people seeking assistance from the Society's housing and homelessness services. The Society supported 2,311 people experiencing DFV, with three women seeking assistance from DFV services every 8 hours.

'We believe that there is a need for specialised, tailored services for victim-survivors of domestic and family violence,' Ms Saiz said.

'For older women, the experience is often coupled with extreme social isolation and disconnection from friends, family and the broader community. Often the women are from a culturally and linguistically diverse background and because of their age, limited English, minimal family support networks and past trauma, they can find it extremely difficult to re-establish themselves in the community.'

Ms Saiz thanked the NSW Government and Cumberland City and Parramatta City Councils for their support in making the project happen.

NSW Minister for Housing and Homelessness, Rose Jackson said, 'The connection between domestic violence and homelessness is undeniable, with domestic and family violence being the main reason for women seeking support from refuges and other specialist homelessness services.'



**Top: CEO Yolanda Saiz and Suzy Pace, both from St Vincent de Paul Society NSW, with NSW Minister for Housing and Homelessness, Rose Jackson.**

**Bottom: Lisa Lake, Cumberland City Council Mayor.**

'Women escaping domestic and family violence often have very few housing options, especially if they have children or pets. We know that thousands of women become homeless or return to violent homes because they are unable to find alternative places to stay.'

'Secure and stable housing is critical to promoting the safety and wellbeing of women experiencing violence. Having best-practice refuge models ensures Specialist Homelessness Services like St Vincent de Paul Society can respond to the needs of victim-survivors, so they can leave unsafe relationships and rebuild their lives financially, socially and emotionally.'

The State Member for Granville, Julia Finn added, 'This is an important service for our local community and will make a huge impact on the lives of women who are in need of a safe haven. By delivering more emergency, transitional and long-term housing for victim-survivors, they can feel more confident to leave unsafe relationships.'

The new service is assisted by key organisations that include RSPCA, Ozharvest, Bunnings and Thread Together. The Society will work closely with other Specialist Homelessness Services who refer and support women in the Western Suburbs, including Cumberland Women's Health and the DV Line. **R**



## Taking pride in the future

Dr Jennifer Fitzgerald AM, CEO of St Vincent de Paul Society Victoria Group, and Paul Turton, Executive General Manager Client Services Victoria, welcomed Harriet Shing, Victorian Minister for Equality, to Ozanam House in Melbourne in late March. Ms Shing saw firsthand the impactful work of the Pride in Place (PiP) program, met with program participants and inspected the supported crisis accommodation and Homelessness Resource Centre.

Led by VincentCare Victoria and Drummond Street Queerspace Services in collaboration with Family Access Network and Uniting.Vic.Tas, PiP represents an initiative aimed at addressing the unique challenges faced by the LGBTQIA+ community in accessing homelessness support services across the state.

It is supported by funding from the Victorian Government's 10-year "Pride in our Future strategy", striving for the state's services to be equitable, inclusive and accessible for LGBTQIA+ communities. PiP has been instrumental in providing crucial support, including crisis accommodation, flexible rent funds, and access to accommodation packages at Ozanam House.

Briefly stopping at Ozanam House O'Café to get a strong brew, the Minister chatted with client-volunteers Peter and Mario, and was pleased to hear how Ozanam House embodies Pride in Place with services tailored to the community's diverse needs. Ms Shing learnt about Anna's Place, a dedicated space designed to provide a safe refuge for the LGBTQIA+ community in Melbourne, fostering a sense of belonging and empowerment.

Being part of the LGBTQIA+ community, Minister Shing addressed the harsh realities faced by it and acknowledged that LGBTQIA+ people suffer, endure, and live with a range of often very layered elements of discrimination, including the likelihood of twice the risk of homelessness and a range of life challenges, from finding and maintaining employment, access to education, connection with community or critical health care and whole-person support.



**(l-r) Minister Harriet Shing, Matthew Parsons, Manager-LGBTQIA+ Inclusion, Jemma Mead, Drummond Street Services, Dr Jennifer Fitzgerald AM, Paul Turton, Client Services SVDP Victoria and Family Access Network's Michelle Thompson.**

She expressed her gratitude and respect for the dedication of frontline workers and everyone working in the social and community services sector.

'Your visit sends a strong message to everyone here that the work that they do is vital and important and that it is driving justice and equality and pushing aside barrier to inclusion,' said St Vincent de Paul Society Group CEO Dr Jennifer Fitzgerald AM.

'It is up to us to drive this change and to make social inclusion, human rights, and equality real,' she continued. We all make up the ecosystem that is going to drive that change, and the time for it is now; in fact, it was some time ago.'

She also acknowledged the genuine partnership with the collaborating organisations, looking forward to continuing to work with them.

Karen Field, CEO of Drummond Street Services, echoed this sentiment: 'This partnership is a blueprint for a whole range of services and fundamental. I am delighted and can see the fruits of the government funding,' she said, before adding cheekily, that 'More funding would be great.'

Paul Turton, EGM Client Services, who led the tour, highlighted that although all were expert in their fields, everyone was also learning from each other on an exciting and vibrant journey towards making all services accessible, inclusive and culturally safe. **R**

## P&N Bank helps Society WA to alleviate financial hardship

**BY CALLAN DURLIK**

Media, Marketing and Events Lead,  
St Vincent de Paul Society WA

Western Australia's P&N Bank (the customer-owned bank was originally 'Police & Nurses') has teamed up with St Vincent de Paul Society WA to help customers tackle financial stress and boost financial wellbeing.

As well as boosting support for the WA community in general, the new partnership will see P&N customers having exclusive access to a financial coaching service through the Society, which provides independent financial education by qualified professionals for people in financial difficulty.

Financial Capability Coaches will help P&N customers review their current financial situation, set objectives, reduce stress, and develop a plan to achieve their money goals. Customers will also have access to group financial wellbeing workshops, which include mental health content delivered by Lifeline WA.

P&N Bank's support will also enable the Society in WA to provide an additional part-time financial counsellor in their existing team to help the WA community. Conversations are confidential and can be in person, over the phone or online.

Demand for the financial counselling service has soared in the past 12 months, with the Society in WA supporting more than 4,120 people, offering over 35,600 sessions in person and on the phone, and managing to waive almost \$3 million of debt.

Andrew York, St Vincent de Paul Society WA Executive Manager, Community Engagement Services, said, 'The rising cost of living is placing immense pressure on WA families struggling to make ends meet.

'In our Emergency Assistance and Support program and our Financial Counselling services, we are



**(l-r) P&N Bank General Manager, Angela Newland, Tiffany van Halen (see breakout story) and Manager, Financial Counselling Services SVdP WA, Suzanne Long.**

seeing an increase in demand, with up to 350 calls a day for emergency assistance from across WA.

'People are finding it incredibly hard to keep food on the table and a roof over their heads, with many finding themselves on the edge of losing their home. The slide into homelessness can come suddenly - in the form of a rent increase, the loss of a job or a family breakdown. Equipping vulnerable people with the skills to manage these financial pressures is one of Vinnies' most critical tasks.

'We are grateful to team up with P&N Bank to provide customers who have experienced financial difficulty with the skills and tools to deal with financial pressures they may encounter. It's an important way of ensuring customers can navigate these difficult times with confidence.'

P&N Bank General Manager, Angela Newland said, 'With cost of living at the forefront of everyone's mind, providing financial support for our customers





as well as the wider WA community is just one of the ways we're helping to remove barriers and make accessing financial services easier.'

Under the partnership, P&N customers will also have access to an exclusive one-on-one financial coaching service, as well as group financial wellbeing workshops which include mental health content delivered by Lifeline WA.

Since the partnership launched, 76 West Australians have participated in the P&N-funded financial coaching and counselling programs with the Society conducting a total of 769 sessions so far. The top two assistance requests have been for budgeting advice and negotiating with essential service providers. **R**

**Tiffany van Halen**, who lives in Busselton with her husband and two young children, has been receiving financial counselling from Vinnies for two years after the couple found themselves in significant debt following postnatal depression and struggling with seasonal incomes.

'We weren't able to pay bills, we had rent debt, it was so bad I went and joined a support group and found out about Vinnies and their financial counsellors,' Tiffany said.

'When we first spoke to our financial counsellor, Nyssa, we both got overwhelmed by the budget. It was painful to see it in numbers. All the shame, the judgement, all those things were there and it was really hard to have those conversations.

'Nyssa was so supportive. For the first time, we've actually got a plan in place about where we want to be in a couple of years' time and how we can achieve that. I hadn't been able to see for years. It's been really unmanageable with all of the debt that had been building up.' **R**

## New Ballarat shop is Victoria's 115th

**STORY & PHOTOS BY  
CLAUDIA LOEBER-RAAB**

Media & Content Lead,  
St Vincent de Paul Society Victoria

'It's great to be back,' said volunteer Graham Watson, brimming with excitement as he wandered around the brand-new Vinnies Shop at 75 Bridge Mall in the regional Victorian city of Ballarat, on day one, Tuesday 19 March, an event that attracted considerable attention from both guests and customers.

Graham is one of the twenty dedicated St Vincent de Paul Society Victoria (SVDP Vic) volunteers who – alongside shop manager Kate Davis – welcomed the keen, the curious and the budget- and environmentally conscious customers. The line in front of the shop was long even before the state's 115th Vinnies shop officially opened its doors.

Having volunteered at and witnessed the closure of the old Vinnies Shop in the city's centre four years ago, Graham, like many fellow citizens, was delighted that the Society was able to find a new location in the heart of the city where, coincidentally, SVDP Vic Group CEO Dr Jennifer Fitzgerald AM grew up.

'It's just fantastic to be able to serve the people of Ballarat and the Eastern suburbs again, making it easier for them to find a bargain and have access to the services we provide,' Graham said.

'There is definitely a big need for Vinnies here.'

Graham is right. Beyond every Vinnies shop in Victoria lies a deeper mission – a commitment to serving the community by the well-known charity.

The reopening of the latest Vinnies Shop couldn't come at a more critical time. In an alarming surge of demand, the Society's Wendouree Assistance Centre is fully booked during its operating hours, reflecting a staggering 300 per cent increase in individuals seeking assistance since the start of this year.

Similarly, the Ballarat Assistance Centre, grappling with a 25 per cent rise in demand, is accommodating the maximum capacity of approximately 50 people on the three days per week it opens its doors for just two hours.

'This underscores the urgent and growing need for support in the community,' according to Dr. Jennifer Fitzgerald AM, the proud Ballarat local for whom this venture is deeply personal.



Inspired by her mother's devotion to St Vincent de Paul Society, Dr Fitzgerald sees the shop as 'a beacon of hope, where every dollar spent reverberates back into the community, offering a lifeline to people in need.'

'That's why I hold a deep appreciation for the Vinnies Shop model, where every dollar spent goes back into our community, offering vital assistance and support. It's a commitment we make to both our loyal customers and the vulnerable individuals who turn to us, often in their darkest hours,' Dr Fitzgerald told *The Record*.

This new chapter promises an elevated shopping experience, merging value, sustainability, and community spirit. Neil Harvey, General Manager Retail, shares his anticipation, highlighting how the Vinnies VIP shopping experience is designed to delight budget-conscious customers.

'The shop's expansive layout, flooded with natural light, offers easy access to its diverse range of 6,000+ items across 17 categories, catering to all lifestyles and budgets,' Neil says. 'There's something for everyone, from quality fashion to homewares, including Vinnies' own line of essentials like tea towels, blankets, and books.'





**Volunteer Graham Watson... 'great to be back'**

The new shop's opening hours are from 9:30am to 5:00pm, Mondays to Saturdays, and 10:00 am to 5:00 pm on Sundays, and donations are invited to be dropped in during those hours. Volunteers are always welcome, as are inquiries from potential Conference Members.

During the opening ceremony, Michael Ryan, Ballarat Regional Council President, highlighted the profound impact of community contributions.

'With funds directly supporting Vinnies' initiatives, including food vouchers, crisis accommodation, and utility bill assistance, the new shop is poised to make a tangible difference in the lives of many,' he said.

SVDP Victoria State President Michael Quinn thanked everyone for their contributions in making the new shop a reality, adding, cheekily, he was glad that Rev Father Jim McKay also blessed the new shop's register, hoping for lots of funds to support the Members' and other Volunteers' support for the people of Ballarat in need. **R**

For more information on how to become involved with the Society please go to [Vinnies Volunteering Opportunities in Victoria](#).

## CEO highlights the contributors to loneliness and isolation



On Tuesday 21 May, St Vincent de Paul Society Canberra/Goulburn CEO, Lucy Hohnen attended the ACT Legislative Assembly to provide evidence to the Standing Committee on Education and Community Inclusion. The public hearing was organised as part of the Inquiry into Loneliness and Social Isolation in the ACT.

Studies have shown that almost 1-in-3 Australians feel lonely, and 1-in-6 are experiencing severe loneliness.

Ms Hohnen highlighted the isolating effects that homelessness, mental health, disability, carer responsibilities and domestic violence have on people assisted by programs operated by St Vincent de Paul Society Canberra/Goulburn, which has 50 Conferences made up of approximately 630 members.

In its written submission, the Society Canberra/ Goulburn listed a number of key recommendations – Incentivising Volunteering, More Funding for Demographic Specific Programming, Improved Access to Public Transport, Centralised Referral System or Helpline ('Our emergency helpline often receives calls from individuals who reach out not for support but a conversation'), and Investment in community safe spaces.

The submission can be read here: [https://www.parliament.act.gov.au/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0004/2404759/Submission-08-St-Vincent-de-Paul-Society-Canberra-Goulburn.pdf](https://www.parliament.act.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0004/2404759/Submission-08-St-Vincent-de-Paul-Society-Canberra-Goulburn.pdf) **R**



## Society projects help address Victoria's housing needs



St Vincent de Paul Society Victoria is making significant strides in addressing the affordable housing crisis in the state with three building projects in two Melbourne's suburbs and in regional Bendigo. The projects, in partnership with Homes Victoria as part of the \$5.3 billion Big Housing Build, aim to provide safe, secure, and affordable homes for vulnerable families.

The initiative is a collective effort by the Society Victoria, VincentCare Community Housing and the Victorian Government. With \$58 million secured across three projects via the Homes Victoria-led Social Housing Growth Fund and an additional \$20 million contribution from VincentCare Community Housing, these projects represent a tangible step towards addressing the housing crisis gripping our communities.

The Epping/Wollert project, comprising four two-bedroom and five three-bedroom townhouses, will provide a much-needed safe place for Victorian families, particularly single parents and their children. In Footscray, the construction of 92 social housing dwellings in a multilevel building located in Footscray is well under way, with completion expected in the second half of this year.

Dr. Jennifer Fitzgerald AM, Group CEO of St Vincent de Paul Society Victoria, emphasised the importance of these initiatives: 'The housing crisis disproportionately affects single-parent families, and we are honoured to contribute to a collaborative effort that is quite literally building dreams. Partnering with both government and building contractors amplifies our impact, ensuring families have stable housing'.

In Greater Bendigo, the first steps are under way in VincentCare Community Housing's development of 84 new social dwellings. VincentCare Community Housing,

**Top: Impression of VincentCare Community Housing's development of 84 new social dwellings in Bendigo, designed by local firm e+ architecture.**

**Above: The Epping/Wollert project was kick-started by (l-r) Tom Quinn, Chairperson, VincentCare Community Housing, Dr Jennifer Fitzgerald AM, CEO of St Vincent de Paul Society Victoria Group, Harriet Shing, Victorian Minister for Housing, Water and Equality, and Michael Quinn, State President St Vincent de Paul Society Victoria.**

in partnership with the Victorian State Government, will build 84 new social dwellings (64 one-bedroom and 20 two-bedroom homes) on a 18,211 sqm site owned by St Vincent de Paul Society in the Kennington district.

This project is also part of the Victorian Governments Big Housing Build. The project will offer housing for low-income seniors aged 55+ who are in need of social and affordable housing in the fast growing regional centre. They will include people experiencing homelessness or living in inadequate rental accommodation, and offer a safe and welcoming rental opportunity for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander tenants.

It is designed with the assistance of Bendigo-based architectural firm "e+ architecture." The project will feature a mix of townhouses and apartments across four buildings, with a fifth building designed as a community hub. This will include communal areas such as a kitchen, workstations and meeting rooms. There will also be a covered outdoor area for the residents.

These initiatives are about building communities as well as homes offering hope to those in need. The St Vincent de Paul Society Victoria, through its dedicated members and volunteers, continues to work tirelessly to uplift and empower people in need, ushering in a brighter future for all Victorians. **R**





## Leaders taking action on homelessness

With the continued impact of the housing and homelessness crisis being felt across the country, the annual [Vinnies CEO Sleepout](#) called on leaders from across industries to come together to raise awareness and funds for homelessness support.

According to the latest census, more than 122,000 people are reported to be homeless. Recent data from the Australian Institute for Health and Welfare shows there has been a significant increase in requests for charity assistance over the last three years.

Meanwhile, hundreds of Australians experiencing homelessness are dying prematurely in what is now a nationwide crisis.

### ***'One night sleeping rough helps those who do it every night'***

'The annual Vinnies CEO Sleepout is the largest fundraiser held by the St Vincent de Paul Society each year and plays an integral role in ensuring our services have the capacity to meet the growing need that exists in the community,' said Yolanda Saiz, the Society's NSW CEO.

This is the 19th year the Vinnies CEO Sleepout has taken place, with more than \$91 million having been raised nationally to support the vital work performed by the Society's homelessness services.

As well as spending the longest and coldest night of the

year sleeping outdoors, each CEO Sleepout participant commits to raising funds to help provide essential services to the people who need them.

Catholic Education Canberra Goulburn's General Manager for Early Learning, Leah Taylor said, 'There are women and children that are possibly couch surfing, staying in cheap motels or in their cars. Thinking about them makes me want to keep raising more money and awareness every year.

'Every year, there are speeches by plenty of different people talking about what it means to 'sleep rough', and I swear, there is never a dry eye in the house'.

Funds raised from the Vinnies CEO Sleepout enables the Society to operate a range of services including crisis accommodation, domestic and family violence refuges, GPs for people with complex needs, alcohol and other drug facilities, social housing, case management and more.

'No one should endure homelessness, everyone deserves a home. The impact the event is able to make extends well beyond the night as participants are challenged to use their connections and influence to make a difference in addressing homelessness,' Ms Saiz added.

The 2024 Vinnies CEO Sleepout was held on Thursday 20 June across Australia. Donations can still be made at [www.ceosleepout.org.au](http://www.ceosleepout.org.au) **R**

## Chef's journey of giving back

'I was happy with my achievements in hospitality and the restaurants I worked in, but I always felt the need to do more for the community, to give something back,' says Chef Francis Flood, reflecting on his professional journey while sitting at table at Ozanam House, where he volunteers to run free cooking classes using minimal equipment and basic ingredients.

Francis' journey has evolved from environmental science (he holds a science degree) to fostering human connection through food. Among his many achievements, Francis worked with celebrity chef Jamie Oliver at the renowned London restaurant "Fifteen," training vulnerable young people to become flourishing chefs.

At Ozanam House, he empowers individuals facing disadvantages by opening their minds, hearts and taste buds to nutritious food, while equipping them with minimalist yet effective cooking techniques.

Coming from near Dublin, Francis' adventures took him across the globe but it was in Australia where he found his true calling: using his culinary skills to support people in need.

Today, Francis combines his love for cooking with a mission to empower individuals experiencing homelessness or living in accommodations with minimal cooking facilities.

Francis' journey into volunteering began with VincentCare, part of the St Vincent de Paul Society Victoria Group, in 2017.

A hospitality agency had placed him as a "temp" at the old Ozanam House kitchen, planning and preparing meals for residents and "drop-in" clients. Here, he met VincentCare volunteer coordinator Louise Augustinus who introduced him to the world of volunteer work.

After his temporary work stint, Louise suggested teaching practical, nutritious cooking skills, the Irish chef didn't hesitate: 'I am very passionate about people being able to cook their own nutritious food. It's empowering,' he says.

His main goal, with his free classes for Ozanam House residents and visitors, is to demonstrate that nutritious meals can be made quickly and affordably, enabling people to take control of their diets and food budgets.



'All of our food is cooked with just one electric frying pan and simple utensils – a whisk, a single knife, a spatula, some bowls and one source of heat,' Francis explains.

As a professional manager of a food bank in one of Melbourne's suburbs, Francis observes the increasing demand for these cooking styles.

'Some people can get very emotional when they turn up asking for food. You can hear the fear in their voices and know they need help,' he explains.

He has also noticed that people seeking food relief want groceries and ingredients rather than prepared meals.

Francis' dedication to volunteering stems from deep empathy and gratitude: 'I come from a really big family, a proper Irish Catholic stereotype,' he laughs.

Francis is particularly passionate about passing on his knowledge to the next generation: 'We're coming into second generations of people who have lost food knowledge. A lot of family-style food that we were taught at home was cheap and nutritious. If you don't have that knowledge, food ends up being more expensive, relying more on prepared food. So the more knowledge you have, the more economically you can cook for yourself.' **R**



## Found it at Vinnies

**Introducing a column for readers to share a special or unusual find from one of the 650-plus Vinnies shops in Australia. To kick off, The Record's editor Robin Osborne shares the tagine he found at his local Vinnies in Phillip, ACT.**

It's a long way from Canberra to Morocco, as multicultural as our capital may be, but the culinary delights of north Africa can easily be created with the right ingredients and the distinctive cooking set known as the tagine.

Its name comes from the [Arabic](#) نيجظ (*tažin*), derived from the Ancient Greek τᾱγηνον (*tágēnon*) meaning frying-pan or saucepan, but this is an understatement of both its appearance and mode of operation.

A better description would be to call it a stove-top slow cooker with a unique upper section, which resembles a chimney, although it has no outlet hole, because the aim is to retain and circulate the juices. For this reason it does not require much added liquid.

Its colour is also distinctive, especially the orange one, which is the most striking of the available palette and probably the commonest, although blue and black are also attractive and might well match your kitchen or other cooking pots.

The tagine's lower section is where the food is placed for cooking. Here, one fries onions, garlic and spices prior to the addition of meat, or fish, or vegetables, and perhaps a little stock.

Cooking will preferably be done on top of an electric element, or a gas jet, rather than baked in the oven, à la casserole. The latter is perfectly acceptable except it's harder to monitor the process, give the ingredients a stir or have a tantalising taste.

There is, however, a potential problem and it's a classical example of new meeting old, as a ceramic tagine will not work on an induction cooktop, even if, as is sometimes the case, the base has a metal inlay marked as 'induction compatible'. At least in my experience - I lost serious money buying one of these.

As the years passed I dismissed the thought of tagine cooking until

I chanced across this beauty in my local Vinnies, priced at \$14.00. Naturally, given past experience, I wondered if it would work on an induction cooktop.

'Grab one of those fridge magnets and see if it sticks to the base,' advised the shop volunteer, not fazed by my query.

It did, confirming my belief that the base was cast iron, and back in my kitchen I was delighted to see the induction stovetop light stay on, not beeping in alarm to show that the intruder was incompatible.

We have already had many enjoyable meals... slow cooked Moroccan lamb, a specialty in the souks of Marrakesh and Casablanca, chicken, chickpeas, eggplant and other goodies to please our vegetarian visitors. I still bless the day when I walked into Vinnies Phillip and saw that *tagine* on the shelf, in all its orange glory, singing out for me to pounce on it.

Even when sitting idle, it is an eye-catcher and a talking point. Money well spent, I feel.

*Bon appetit!* **R**







*The Sacred Heart Cathedral in Tarawa Atoll, Kiribati.*

PHOTO: TRICIA WILDEN

## Kiribati elects new SVdP National President, welcomes visitors

It may seem like a speck in the vast Pacific Ocean, but the Republic of Kiribati (pron. 'Kiri-bas') is the only country in the world to fall into all four hemispheres - the northern, southern, eastern, and western. It's not so small, either, measuring 4,000 km (about the width of the USA) from east to west and more than 2,000 km from north to south.

Comprised of a string of atolls and coral islands, located about halfway between Australia and Hawaii, it was once part of a British colony that included the Ellice Islands (today's Tuvalu), becoming independent in 1976. Only 21 of the 33 islands are inhabited, with a population of just over 115,000 people. The capital is Tarawa, an atoll whose name became famous in WW2 when it was the scene of the bloodiest battle of the Pacific theatre.

Banaba (Ocean Island), the westernmost point of Kiribati, is one of the three great phosphate rock islands in the Pacific Ocean - the others are Makatea in French Polynesia, and Nauru. The strip mining of phosphate ceased in 1979, but the island still faces the legacy of the destruction caused by decades of extraction. The island's Elders are working to restore traditional methods of capturing and collecting water from sacred underground caves that were destroyed by the mining operations.

Kiribati is one of the countries in the Asia-Pacific region where St Vincent de Paul Society of Australia is working to assist through its Overseas Partnerships Program (OPP), which encompasses Twinning, Project Support, the Assist A Student (AAS) Program and when needed, in response to Emergencies.

The Society in Kiribati has a small number of conferences with aggregation approvals in process. The partnerships with the Society in Australia currently comprises one twinned conference with new Twinning planned, projects (including support to establish a National Council office and meeting space and Assist A Student).

As the Overseas Partnership Program looks to expand its good works in Kiribati, National Twinning Coordinator Mike Reynolds and ITVP Zone Coordinator Keith Norton visited the island nation in February 2024, engaging in a series of productive and insightful meetings and activities.

'The purpose of the visit was to facilitate discussions on various programs and initiatives of the St Vincent de Paul Society, as well as to provide support and guidance to the local conferences in Kiribati,' their report said.

During the visit, Mike and Keith Norton met with outgoing National President Rabaere Rikare, and supervised elections for the new National President, with Kaumi Taneua being elected unanimously.

The visit was deemed to be productive, with a focus on program discussions, elections, the Twinning program, and community engagements. Continued support and follow-up on various programs and initiatives are planned.

Conference activities in Kiribati include visits to homes, the homeless, prisoners, the sick and elderly and hospital patients. Members also visited and assisted disabled school students, and helped clean well water for older citizens. When heavy rainfall threatened homes, they





**Newly elected National President, Kaumi Taneua.**  
PHOTO: MIKE REYNOLDS



**Outgoing National President and newly elected National Twinning Coordinator, Rabaere Rikare.**  
PHOTO: MIKE REYNOLDS

helped line paths with sandbags, and created benches from raised tables and stools to protect valuables.

'I was very encouraged to see the great work they were doing, and the effort they made to share the projects with us,' Mike Reynolds told *The Record*.

'Members were enthusiastic and active, and keen to engage with Conferences in Australia.'

During their visit, Mike and Keith Norton visited a range of institutions, including a high school for special needs students and two Catholic high schools, one having a Young Vincentians group, and the other hoping to form a group soon. They were lucky enough to attend a Sunday Mass at the cathedral, reveling in the inspiring voices of both the choir and the congregation who sang in Gilbertese, the language of Kiribati.

Learn more about our Overseas Partnerships Program by visiting our website [International impact | St Vincent de Paul Society R](#)



## Assist A Student

The AAS program continues to provide assistance to students across the Pacific and Oceania. Originally only run in Australia, AAS has now expanded to New Zealand who will commence support of students in Sri Lanka, Tonga and Samoa.

In 2024, Assist A Student aims to support 1,970 students in Cambodia (300), Indonesia (380), Kiribati (100), Myanmar (430) Philippines (360), Sri Lanka (100) and Thailand (300).

We recently received feedback from some students who have benefited from AAS funds in the Philippines, and we look forward to sharing more with you in the near future.

Maria\* is a 20-year-old female in her first year of college. She lives with her aunt, and AAS funds are used to cover her school fees: 'I truly appreciate the chance to learn and experience new things at school. The amount of knowledge and information available is astounding, and school offers a structured setting where I can learn more and broaden my horizons.'

Raphael\* is 12 and in Grade 7. He lives with his family, and his favourite subject is English. The thing that he loved most about school is that 'It was a place where I could meet people from different backgrounds and learn from them, I also loved the variety of subjects we got to study... I love how literature can transport us to different places, times and perspectives.'

To learn more about Assist A Student, visit our [website](#).

You can donate online at: [St Vincent de Paul Society - Assist a Student](#)

If you'd prefer to donate off-line you can [download a donation slip](#).

\*names have been changed to protect the privacy of students



## St Vincent de Paul Society

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