

the Record

Summer
2018-19



St Vincent de Paul Society
good works



'WE ARE ALL IN THIS
TOGETHER' - VINNIES
DROUGHT APPEAL

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St Vincent de Paul Society
good works

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

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

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The ‘courageous hope’ that drives us

BY GRAHAM WEST

I wish to extend an invitation of solidarity to everyone . . . this means caring for the dignity of the person, but above all I would say do not lose hope.

– Pope Francis

The enduring message of Christmas is one of hope and renewal. Crossing the threshold of each New Year is also a time when many of us reflect on the year that has passed and look with anticipation and hope toward the year ahead.

Yet maintaining hope can sometimes seem difficult when poverty and exclusion persist in our midst, and when so many people are unable to share the prosperity and abundance that others take for granted during Christmas and New Year celebrations.

Frédéric Ozanam was passionate and steadfast in his commitment to social reform, but he too experienced moments of despondency, when the sheer depth of injustice seemed insurmountable. Writing in 1835 to his lifelong friend Léonce Curnier, he expressed despair at his own feelings of exhaustion and powerlessness in the face of the grinding poverty and unjust economic conditions that surrounded him. Yet he also wrote of the inspiration and hope he drew from others who stood in solidarity with the poor and who, through their numerous everyday actions, demonstrated the unconquerable power of ‘that luminous faith, that overflowing charity, that courageous hope which beats in souls’.

As we reach the end of 2018, that ‘courageous hope’ that Ozanam wrote of continues to animate the work of our members. As the Australian Catholic Social Justice Council has observed:



To act is to hope. Despite the presence of much personal and communal suffering in the world, and despite frequent feelings of doubt and powerlessness, most people continue to act in loving, courageous and compassionate ways.

Such loving, courageous and compassionate acts are apparent in the everyday work of the Society—through the material assistance our Conference members provide to people in their homes with Home Visitation, and the support our volunteers offer to our companions living on the streets through our night patrol and food vans. Every day we are privileged to meet people who are deeply loving, courageous against the odds, determined and often ingenious in working out how to make ends meet in their daily battle to survive below the poverty line.

The St Vincent de Paul Society is a global network of love joined in the effort to prevent the conditions that cause poverty and homelessness on a massive scale across the world. The movement to eliminate modern slavery, which is featured in this edition, highlights the importance of looking both at home and beyond our shores to transform the structures leading to exploitation and injustice.

As many of us take a moment to reflect during Christmas and the New Year, may I take this opportunity to thank all our members, volunteers, staff and supporters across Australia for putting love and hope at the heart of your work as Vincentians.

Graham West is National President of the St Vincent de Paul Society National Council of Australia.

'We are all in this together'

NSW Vinnies Drought Appeal
raises more than \$800,000

Winter 2018 was the driest in New South Wales history with 100 per cent of the state declared in drought. While spring brought some rain to parts of the state, it hasn't been enough to end the drought or ease the worry for farmers as they head towards an unusually hot, dry summer.

With the drought causing hardship across regional communities, the St Vincent de Paul Society of NSW decided to step in and help, launching a significant fundraising appeal in early August. More than \$800,000 has been raised so far, with more coming in from government support.

The Vinnies Drought Appeal is helping individuals and communities across NSW in three key ways:

- Providing immediate relief through food assistance and household bill payments
- Funding the delivery of water and animal feed by partner organisations
- Organising social events for rural communities to come together and find support.

Different Vinnies Central Councils have been offering assistance in a variety of ways, depending on local needs.

Bathurst

Bathurst Central Council has held a number of community barbecues for farmers throughout Central West NSW. These events are a great opportunity for farmers to spend some time together, get support from their peers, share a meal and reinforce the community spirit and resilience during this difficult time.

The Society has made drought assistance forms available and provided farmers with vouchers to purchase goods from their local stores to support local businesses that are also affected.

Farmers have been incredibly grateful for the support, sending their appreciation for our efforts and the amazing donations that have been made to the Vinnies Drought Appeal.

One Bathurst barbecue event participant offered this feedback:

‘We have not had a get together of that size since 2014. I think it has been the first time since then that some have even spoken to each other. So, it really did bring us together and I saw so many talking through and sharing their struggles. We are all in it together.’

Wilcannia/Forbes

By October, the Wilcannia/Forbes Central Council had taken 180 calls for assistance since the Drought Appeal was launched. We have responded by providing almost \$125,000 in financial assistance, as well as \$70,000 in Energy Accounts Payment Assistance and Telstra

vouchers. Our members have also travelled extensively, conducting almost 700 farm visits. This has involved dropping off flyers in letterboxes and talking to farmers about what they are going through and how we may be able to assist.

Wilcannia/Forbes have been involved in community events that bring farmers together. Vinnies provided financial support to run these events and have been present to further spread the word about how we can assist. These events have been held in towns such as Tibooburra, Nundooka, Dareton, Pooncarie and Cobar.

At the Cobar event, the Society contributed towards the catering, covered the entertainment costs and, due to a Drought Appeal donation specifically for Cobar, we were able to distribute IGA vouchers. The event saw 380 farmers come together to enjoy a night off with lots of gifts, fun for the children, a lovely meal, motivating guest speakers, entertainment and the opportunity for agencies such as ours to offer support. We are continuing to make arrangements to support future events.

Maitland/Newcastle

A large donation of nearly \$79,000 from the Estate of the late Thomas Casey was added to the local Vinnies drought relief efforts in the Hunter region.

Mr Casey was a grazier of Kayuga, via Muswellbrook. A bachelor, he passed away at the age of 88 in 1975, leaving the bulk of his estate to the St Vincent de Paul Society to relieve distress wherever it was identified.

At the time, Mr Casey’s estate was valued at \$280,000 and he directed that the funds be left with trustees to administer in perpetuity. He also requested that consideration be given, at times, to people in need in the Maitland Diocese and, in particular, in the Muswellbrook area.

The St Vincent de Paul Society receives a quarterly dividend from the trust, and over the last 42 years has received more than \$2 million. The income has been used in the Vinnies’ Maitland/Newcastle Central Council area to assist those who are disadvantaged or at risk of homelessness.

The money from the Drought Appeal has helped with payments such as household bills and education expenses; food assistance; household water; residential and water rates; fuel; health and wellbeing requirements; vehicle repairs and expenses; and transport costs not covered by government subsidies.

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◀ continued from page 5



Canberra/Goulburn

More than \$65,000 was raised for the drought appeal thanks to generous donors and supporters. Special mention must be made to Boorowa churches, local schools and radio station 2CC for endorsing and supporting the appeal.

One of our companions from Yass approached the Society seeking assistance with bills that were starting to cause significant strain. During the interview process, it became evident that he had around \$3,000 worth of household bills that were already on payment plans and starting to accumulate. These bills were in addition to the feed/fodder and transport costs that we were unable to consider for assistance within our current emergency relief guidelines. Property rates were also a concern for him, and so the Society suggested he contact his local council and ask to be placed on a hardship payment.

He insisted throughout the interview that he only wanted support if the money was coming from drought-specific assistance, as he didn't want to take away from a person experiencing homelessness. He maintained that although things were tough, he would

rather the homeless receive financial help if it was from the same pot of funds.

The Society helped the man by paying his pharmacy bill, providing Energy Accounts Payment Assistance vouchers, making a financial contribution towards a \$1,600 electricity bill, and offering Telstra vouchers. Vinnies also provided food vouchers to the companion and supported him to connect with the Rural Financial Counselling service.

Other fundraising efforts

The Institute of Modern Taekwondo made a cracking effort for the Vinnies Drought Appeal, hosting a break-a-tile fundraiser. Taekwondo enthusiasts and community members were able to take part, donate \$2 and break one of the 1000 tiles at Empower Fitness Brookvale. The event saw great support from the local community with spectators, businesses, students and instructors coming along to support the team, who raised nearly \$2000.

Donate online at: <https://www.vinnies.org.au/donate#lstate=nsw&appeal=159>

Wages too low to alleviate childhood poverty

Australia has made little progress in recent decades to alleviate childhood poverty, according to Australian Catholic Council of Employment chair Brian Lawrence.

Speaking at an Anti-Poverty Week event sponsored by Catholic Social Services Victoria in October, Mr Lawrence said wages for many people were too low to lift children out of poverty (measured as 60 percent of the median income poverty line).

Mr Lawrence has drafted submissions and appeared at national annual wage reviews since 2003 on behalf of the Australian Catholic Council for Employment Relations (ACCER), an agency of the Catholic Bishops Conference.

Mr Lawrence quoted the Fair Work Commission (FWC) decision of June 2017 that Australia had ‘a legacy of relatively high inequality in earnings and in household disposable income, and disturbing levels of poverty especially among families with children’.

In its March 2018 submission, ACCER pointed out that the FWC for two decades or so failed to adjust minimum wage rates to reflect rising community-wide incomes. The FWC knew that the government’s strategy was to reduce financial support for families, not to increase it, resulting in a stand-off between the government and FWC, despite its statutory obligations to set fair safety net wages.

ACCER argued for an increase in the minimum wage by \$32 a week up to the C10 wage rate (for trade-qualified workers, then \$809.10 per week). It sought a further increase in the National Minimum Wage (NMW) of \$8.10 per week, to progressively move the NMW to the lowest minimum wage for cleaners,



PHOTO: STEVE DEBENPORT/ISTOCK

currently \$768.10 per week, which is \$48.90 per week more than the NMW of \$719.20 per week.

Instead of granting significant wage increases for the lowest paid, the FWC in June 2018 awarded a uniform 3.5 per cent increase to all minimum wage rates, consistent with its decisions since 2011. Mr Lawrence commented that maintaining ‘existing award relativities will always trump the interests of the low paid. When confronted by poverty in working families, the FWC effectively resorts to the view that the wages it sets need only be sufficient for the single person’.

Mr Lawrence pointed to recent research by UnitingCare and the Australian Council of Social Service on the extent of child poverty, that one child in six aged 0-14 years was living in poverty. All Australians shared responsibility for this. Mr Lawrence said that the Catholic Church also, with about 220,000 employees, should be advocating much more vigorously about the extent of child poverty and exposing the reasons for it.

‘If the general public knew that the

FWC was putting wage relativities ahead of support for the working poor, which means preferring higher paid employees over lower paid employees, there would be profound discontent and, I expect, a change. The Church’s social justice groups, for example, could take this up as a campaign. We haven’t done enough.’

Mr Lawrence said that even the Australian Council of Trade Unions has passively accepted the single person criterion for wage setting. ‘The ACTU seems incapable of formulating a wages policy that addresses family living standards.’ The loss of relativity to median wages over two decades has cost NMW-dependent workers more than \$50 a week.

While the FWC maintains the primacy of wage relativities, the lowest paid will fall further behind, with single income parents unable to lift their children out of poverty.

This article first appeared as ‘Why are hundreds of thousands of Australian children struggling in poverty, even with a parent working full-time?’ in *Social Policy Connections*, 1 November. It is reprinted with permission.

Addressing the scourge of modern slavery

Australian Catholic Religious Against Trafficking in Humans (ACRATH) is a leading voice in the fight against modern slavery in this country. Endorsed by Catholic Religious Australia, the organisation works to eliminate human trafficking globally, in the Asia Pacific region and here in Australia, as ACRATH Executive Officer Christine Carolan writes.

Yes, slavery does occur in Australia and around the world today and it takes many forms.

Girls are forced to marry; women come to Australia seeking employment and become bonded to work in brothels or are sexually exploited in domestic settings; workers come here with the hope of employment on a farm or in construction and end up exploited for little money.

Globally, we contribute to the slave trade by purchasing products, such as clothes, food and technology, that have been made using forced labour, often forced child labour. Vulnerable people worldwide are trafficked.

The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) in its 2016 Global Report on Trafficking in Persons says: *the movement of refugees and migrants, the largest seen since World War II, has arguably intensified since 2014. As this crisis has unfolded and climbed up the global agenda, there has been a corresponding recognition that, within these massive migratory movements are vulnerable children, women and men who can be easily exploited by smugglers and traffickers.*

We can stop human trafficking and we are changing things here in

Australia through a local, grassroots response and through policies and law. The more people demand change, advocate for change and purchase justly, the sooner slavery will end.

Buying power is a weapon against modern slavery

It is estimated that Australians spend up to \$3 billion on chocolate a year, with sales peaking at Easter. Cocoa is a key ingredient of chocolate. Much of the chocolate sold in Australia is made using cocoa beans picked by children, many of whom have been enslaved or forced to work in exploitative conditions.

The International Labor Rights Forum estimates that there are more than one million children working in the cocoa sector in West Africa. These children have no, or limited, access to education and other human rights. Most of these children have never tasted chocolate and they never will.

To ensure your chocolate, tea and coffee are slavery-free, only buy products that feature one of these three certification labels: FAIRTRADE, Rainforest Alliance or UTZ.

ACRATH works closely with schools, parishes and communities on the slavery-free Easter chocolate campaign. If you are interested in finding out where you can buy slavery-free chocolate during Lent please go to www.acrath.org.au/take-action/slavery-free-easter-chocolate.

Many school staff rooms are also now transitioning to slavery-free tea and coffee, which is readily available in many major supermarkets and through OXFAM.

A maths class at Aquinas College in Ringwood, Victoria, did research that convinced the

school's business manager and executive board that transitioning to FAIRTRADE tea and coffee was competitive in cost.

According to the Aquinas students: 'It is important for Aquinas College to implement Fair Trade tea and coffee so that the College can rise to the challenge from Pope Francis to do something about suffering, to shun indifference and avoid becoming an accomplice. Fair trade products are free from exploitation, assuring just wages and safe working conditions, to combat poverty.'

Clothing is another industry where people, including young children, in developing countries often work in unsafe conditions for little money, making clothes that are sold in Australia.

Baptist World Aid Australia produces the *Ethical Fashion Guide* that gives a grading to many popular clothes brands. Brands that have not signed the Building and Fire Safety Accord or do not have transparent supply chain information are graded poorly. The *Ethical Fashion Guide* is available at www.baptistworldaid.org.au.

Businesses and charities address supply chain issues

Slavery-proofing supply chains is a challenge that many companies, charities and businesses are now tackling. This means looking at where goods and services come from, who produces them and ensuring they are slavery-free.

In a ground-breaking project, ACRATH is working closely with St Vincent's Health Australia (SVHA) across its 28 sites to ensure they procure goods and services that are slavery-free. This means SVHA will look at all goods and services and ask questions like:

- Who made the rubber gloves used across the healthcare sector in Australia?
- Who picked the tomatoes for the SVHA food services?
- Are people employed in the contracted cleaning company being exploited?

Parliament tackles modern slavery through legislation

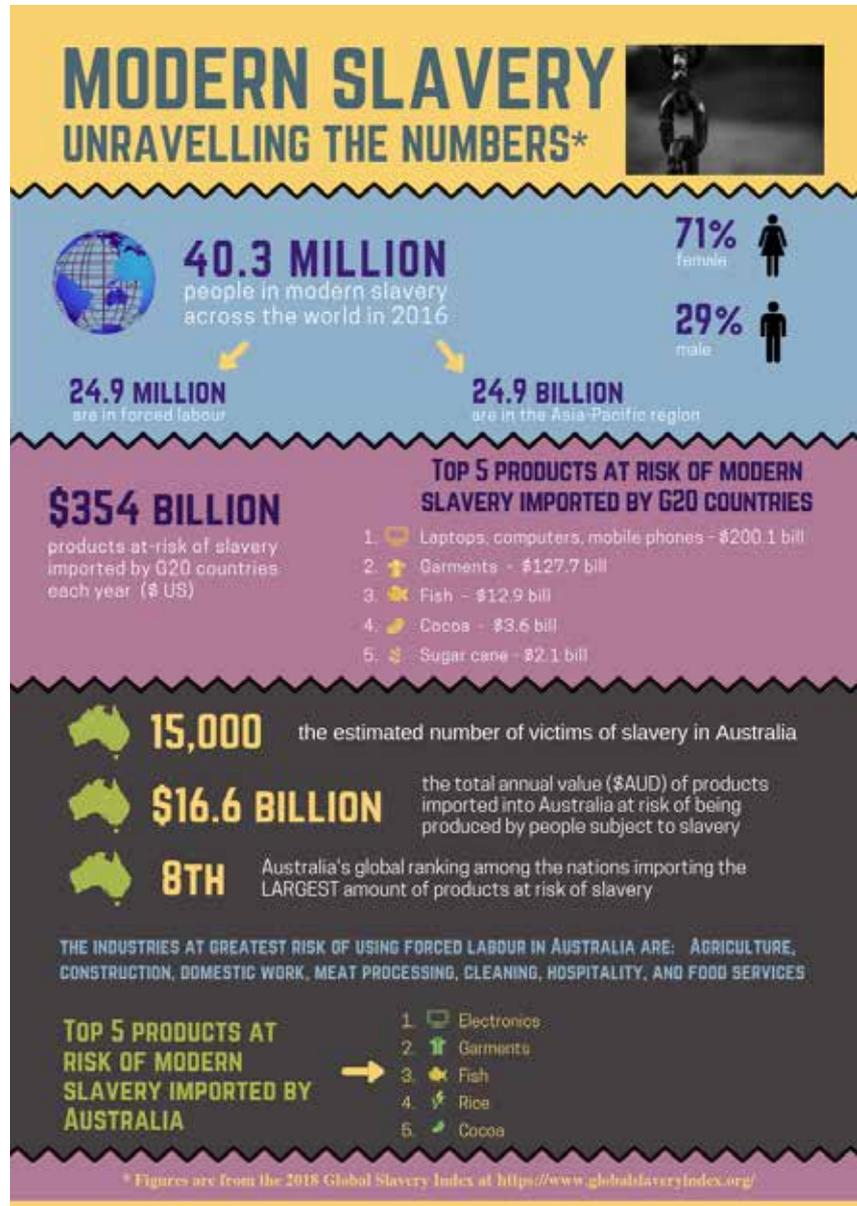
While many large companies are slavery-proofing their goods and services because they want to do the right thing, the Modern Slavery Act 2018, which was passed by Federal Parliament in November, will put pressure on businesses to comply.

The legislation requires large companies (with a turnover of \$100 million or more) to report to the Australian Government, outlining their efforts to search for slavery in their supply chains, and then show what they are doing to eradicate this slavery.

The Act comes after years of collaborative work by ACRATH and other NGOs working to combat human trafficking.

For several years ACRATH has worked on the Federal Government's national roundtable on human trafficking and slavery to explore slavery-free procurement of goods and services. We have worked with government, big business and civil society on a supply chains working party for two years to identify the need for this new legislation on modern slavery and to shape the legislation.

The Modern Slavery Act is the



result of work by the roundtable, but the community has also made an enormous contribution through letter writing and visiting politicians. We have pushed hard and had several important elements included in the legislation, including that the government is required to report about its own procurement.

While much has been achieved,

the eradication of modern day slavery is a long way off and will require people making changes to what they buy and use.

We need the average consumer and big business to play their part in making the world slavery-free.

To join a campaign, or for more information, contact rap@acrath.org.au or visit www.acrath.org.au.

Modern slavery is a crime against humanity: Pope Francis

Pope Francis has made human slavery—this ‘plague on the body of contemporary humanity’—a priority since the beginning of his pontificate. The Holy Father has been a leading figure in collaborative efforts between international law enforcement organisations, politicians and religious leaders to fight modern-day slavery. Under his leadership, the Vatican committed to take action against human trafficking by slavery-proofing its own supply chains.

The Holy See also played a critical role in lobbying behind closed doors at the United Nations to have the eradication of human slavery added to the Sustainable Development Goals. And, in December 2014, Pope Francis brought together 63 ecumenical and interreligious leaders at the Vatican to sign up to a joint declaration committing themselves to ending modern slavery.

The following is the opening address Pope Francis made at this event.

Inspired by our confessions of faith, today we are gathered for a historic initiative and concrete action: to declare that we will work together to eradicate the terrible scourge of modern slavery in all its forms. The physical, economic, sexual and psychological exploitation of men and women, boys and girls, currently holds tens of millions in inhumane and humiliating bondage.

Every human being—man, woman, boy and girl—is the image of God; God, who is love and freedom, gives himself through interpersonal relations; therefore every human being is a free person, destined to live for the good of others in equality and brotherhood. Every person and all people are equal and their freedom and dignity must be recognised. Any discriminating relationship that does not respect the fundamental conviction that the ‘other is like me myself’ constitutes a crime, and very often an abhorrent crime.

That is why we declare in the name of all people and of every one of our own Creed that modern slavery—in the form of human trafficking, forced labour, prostitution or the trafficking of organs—is a crime against humanity. The victims of this are from every walk of life, but most are found among the poorest and the most vulnerable of our brothers and sisters.

We declare on behalf of those who are calling our communities to action, that every systematic deprivation of individual freedom for the purpose of personal and commercial exploitation be rejected entirely and without exception.

Despite the great efforts of many, modern slavery continues to be an atrocious scourge that is present throughout the world on a broad scale, even as tourism. This crime of ‘lèse-humanity’ masquerades behind seemingly acceptable customs, but in reality claims its victims through prostitution, human trafficking, forced labour, slave labour, mutilation, the sale of organs, the consumption of drugs and child labour. It hides behind closed doors, in particular places, in the streets, automobiles, factories, the countryside, in fishing boats and many other places. And this happens both in towns and



Pope Francis meets with people rescued from human traffickers in February

PHOTO: CNS/Osservatore Romano

villages, in the reception centres of the wealthiest nations as well as in those of the poorest. And the worst thing is that this situation, unfortunately, grows more serious every day.

We call to action all people of faith, leaders, governments, businesses, all men and women of good will, to give their strong support and join in the action against modern slavery in all its forms. Sustained by the ideals of our confessions of faith and by our shared human values, we all can and must raise the standard of spiritual values, common effort and the vision of freedom to eradicate slavery from our planet.

I ask the Lord to grant us today the face to convert ourselves in the proximity of every person, without exception, offering active and constant help to those we encounter on our path—whether it be an elderly person who has been abandoned by everyone, a worker unjustly enslaved or unappreciated, a refugee caught in the snares of the underworld, a young man or woman who walks the streets of the world as a victim of the sex trade, a man or a woman driven to prostitution by the deception of people who have no fear of God, a boy or a girl mutilated for their organs—and who call to our conscience, echoing the voice of the Lord: I say to you, whatever you do to the least of my brothers, you do to me.

Vincentians for life – What is your purpose?

BY KEENAN KLASSEN

When I began my Vincentian journey, I was barely 14 and by far one of the youngest members in WA. Those who mentored me and brought me into the Society were in their early 20s with about a 30-plus year age gap between them and our core membership. I've literally grown up in the Society, alongside countless members and staff many of whom I have been privileged to call a mentor and friend.

The passing of beloved life-long WA member Br Geoff Seaman in August encouraged me to pause and reflect on just how many Vincentians have been called home to the Lord along the way. It's only now as I (reluctantly) approach my 30s I begin to realise that perhaps with greater age also comes a greater and more frequent understanding of loss. In mourning our departed brothers and sisters, we often seek to celebrate their life, yet all too often it seems that these celebrations don't take place until after they're no longer with us.

It occurs to me that if you want to celebrate someone, congratulate them on their achievements and thank them for a lifetime of service, why not do it while they're here with us and able to enjoy the celebration? If today and every day is truly the day that the Lord has made, why should we not be present in it and give thanks with and for our brothers and sisters in Christ at every opportunity?

To that end, I have often come to ask myself and reflect upon exactly what it is that keeps me a part of the Society.

As a teenager I was unconvinced that this 'ageing' organisation could relate to me at all. Yet, 14 years on, I have countless treasured memories of friends, mentors,



Keenan Klassen

The warm, fuzzy feeling we get from helping those in need is important—it tells us that we truly care about the least of our brothers and sisters. But these things are superficial, for 'Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word

experiences and lessons learned. It saddens me to think that the majority of those with whom I was privileged to create those memories have all but departed the Society.

We rationalise that people have other priorities throughout their lives, be it pursuing a career, starting a family, travel or otherwise. We accept this as an inevitability, hoping that one day, most likely when they have retired, they will return to the Society. But I can't help thinking there is an underlying, more distressing truth—a lack of purpose or, more specifically, a lack of faith.

So, what is it that keeps you a part of the Society?

For a time, my answer to this question was increasingly difficult to find. Moreover, the answers I did find often lacked a sense of conviction. And so I asked myself: If I lack conviction in understanding the purpose of my work with the Society, can I ever really fulfil our Vincentian mission?

Fond memories are important—these are a product of the relationships we build with our Vincentian brothers and sisters.

that comes from the mouth of God' (Matthew 4:4).

Fundraising, social justice advocacy, emergency relief, youth support, mental health and homelessness services are important but they are not the purpose of the Society. These Good Works are but a product of our Mission as a lay-Catholic organisation to bring Christ and his Church's message of love to the world, unified in a journey together towards holiness, because true holiness is a perfect union with Christ.

We have no other form of spirituality than that of the example Christ gave us. We have no other service to those in need than that which Christ alone can provide through his presence in us. The Catholic beliefs and ethos of the Society must be preserved in placing Christ at the centre of all that we do.

Instil this true purpose in every Vincentian and in everything we do and I guarantee that, just like Br Geoff, each and every Vincentian will be a Vincentian for life.

Keenan Klassen is President of the Swan Region, St Vincent de Paul Society WA.



Fashionable bargains flaunted on first 'Dressed by Vinnies' Day

The National Centres Committee organised its inaugural 'Dressed by Vinnies' Day on Friday 26 October. The national event encouraged all Australians who love a fashionable bargain to visit their local Vinnies Shop, find something they love, wear it on the day and share a photo on social media by using the hashtag #DressedbyVinnies.

Jacqui Dropulic, Retail Development Manager for NSW, explained: 'Being dressed by Vinnies is easy, as thousands of people already know. This year we are encouraging our loyal customers, and people who may never have shopped at their local Vinnies, to uncover a fantastic fashion item—a dress, shoes, or even a whole outfit—and show everyone what they found through social media.'

The national event was promoted in store, by media release and on

social media. The media coverage was impressive, with more than 50 mentions across television, radio and in print media. On the day, we saw more than 200 posts on social media with people showing and sharing their Vinnies finds and almost 1000 people following the Vinnies Instagram page. The popular opinion and lifestyle website Mamamia supported the event with a photoshoot and posting on the day. High profile media personalities Joe Hildebrand and Tracy Vo also promoted their Dressed by Vinnies outfits on television to mark the day.

The Dressed by Vinnies Day website provided visitors with a styling guide and tips on how to host a Dressed by Vinnies Day event. There were approximately 300 downloads of the Dressed by Vinnies Style Guide and Host Guide, indicating high public interest in the event.

Several corporate organisations took up the opportunity to organise a

morning tea or fashion parade. The Commonwealth Bank of Australia made a serious effort with a photo shoot of their staff in the lead-up to the event which ensured great reach on social media and enthusiastic participation in their branches across the country. In the bank's Sydney head office, 150 staff participated on the day.

Other organisations joined in by matching the purchase amounts of their staff as a donation to Vinnies. Grant Thornton donated funds that were used to purchase Vinnies clothing for staff who did not have time to shop at Vinnies—these clothes were donated back to Vinnies at the end of the campaign.

The National Centres Committee was very pleased with the success of the event and looks forward to bigger and better things in 2019 when Dressed by Vinnies Day will take place on Friday 25 October.



‘Angels with scissors’ a cut above the rest

There’s nothing like a fresh haircut to instil happiness and confidence in a person, and people in need experienced this for free thanks to a community hairdressing program at Vinnies Inala Family Support Centre.

Qualified hairdressers from Hair Aid Australia’s Community Cuts program visited the Inala centre in October. The program provides free hairdressing services to people in need.

Vinnies Centre Coordinator Liza Dykstra said the visits were an extension of the support the facility provided to the local community, having already assisted more than 8000 people in 2018.

‘We thought it would be really great to have at our centre because it’s so hard for people to find money for food and to pay

bills and to get a haircut can be really expensive these days,’ Ms Dykstra said.

‘They just can’t afford it, so it was great we could give them a bit more confidence and a hand up.’

Ms Dykstra said the program had been well received by visitors to the centre.

‘It’s been a great success—there’s a lot of happy people. They were even mingling and making friends. I saw two in the hallway give each other a cuddle; one of them was struggling with bus fare to get home and the other lady gave her two dollars to get her bus—it was so sweet.’

Patron Violet Ksiezopolski, who had not had a professional hair cut in over two years, said getting a free hair cut was a joyous experience.

‘I was in here today asking for some help with groceries and a lady pointed to a notice on the wall and I thought, oh, what a great idea. I normally cut my own hair because I can’t afford to get it done professionally,’ Ms Ksiezopolski said.

‘When you are cutting your own hair, you can’t see what you are doing and it doesn’t always turn out as you’d like it to. So, the fact that someone professional is doing it is going to uplift me and make me feel like I am somebody.’

‘Services like this make for a happy day for me. They are angels, angels with scissors.’

‘I’m going to go out with a smile on my dial today. It means the world, it really does.’

Hair Aid Community Cuts is planning to return to the Inala Family Support Centre in December.

Manus has taught us patience

BY REBECCA LIM

In recent months, mounting political pressure has compelled the Australian Government to remove most refugee children and their families from Nauru. While the transfer of children to Australia is encouraging, the plight of those still stranded on Nauru and in Papua New Guinea remains bleak and uncertain.

This latest update from Rebecca Lim underscores the need for urgent action to protect the health of the men on Manus and resettle them in safety as soon as possible. The people of Australia have shown action can be taken for the children in Nauru. The same must now happen for the men of Manus, and we must make sure they are not abandoned and forgotten.

Over 600 men remain indefinitely trapped on Manus Island. Many have been stuck on the island for years in deteriorating conditions. Seven have died and, in recent months, there have been numerous attempted suicides. Since January, our own members who have visited the Island have witnessed the toll on the men as the number of mental health professionals has halved, torture and trauma counselling has been withdrawn, and access to medical care and medicines has been reduced.

This year, I have made five visits to Manus Island.

As a migration practitioner and community engagement/educator, I have been on the ground to



assist and engage with refugees on a variety of issues. It could be problems with banking, talking through their needs (health, future aspirations, day-to-day struggles), or questions of resettlement: Where will I go if the United States denies me resettlement? Why won't Australia negotiate with New Zealand? What will happen to me? I have already been here for more than five years—will Australia abandon me and condemn me to death here in PNG? What crime have I committed in seeking to protect my life?

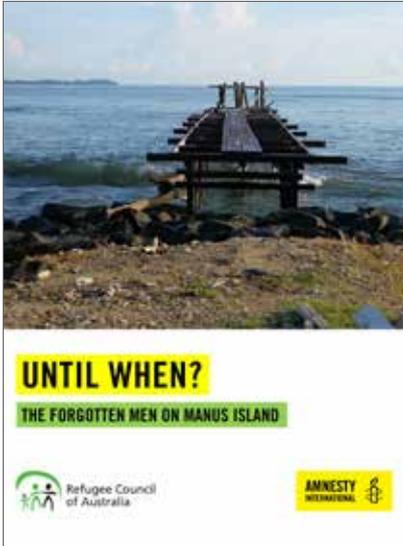
These are just some of the questions the refugees have asked me and, no doubt, many of their Australian friends. As at 22 October 2018, only 146 men from Manus had been offered resettlement in the United States, and for the remainder the future remains clouded with uncertainty.

I have many Manusian friends. This year, I delivered training in food safety to 25 Manusians and to a number of refugees who were keen to undertake this course. We provided resources to a St Vincent de Paul conference that supports two boys with a disability, and modest livelihood initiatives to a number of villages.

While having lunch with two refugee friends on my most recent visit, I asked them what Manus has taught them. Both replied at the same time: *patience*.

I asked them what they meant: *Everything takes time and sometimes we cannot control certain things. It is frustrating when we try to talk with our families and the phone connections are at best woeful. We say hello, hello ... can you hear me ... then we talk and talk ... suddenly our phone rings and we realise our conversation has been cut off and the person on the other side is trying to ring back.* I burst out laughing because that is also my experience when the men and I are trying to talk on the phone.

On a lighter note, one of the men kindly offered to apply hair colour to cover my greys. So we did that and while he and his friend were chatting away, I went to wash off the hair colour. When I towel dried my hair, both the men checked my hair thoroughly to see if I had any more visible greys. So there I was with my head down and both men going through each strand of hair...we all cracked up—such precious moments are not to be forgotten.



Back to the serious stuff: I urge you to read the recently released report by Amnesty International Australia and the Refugee Council of Australia *Until when? The forgotten men on Manus Island*¹. The report highlights how Australia's offshore detention policy is breaking the minds and bodies of the men stranded in PNG. It is sobering and documents the harms of this policy: the growing mental health crisis; the despair and loss of hope; the lack of appropriate health care. It is a policy designed to break even the most resilient of men. Everyone is sick. Everyone is tired. We are

starting to see the strong men who have been supporting the weaker ones now break down themselves. I am tired. My Australian friends who have been supporting the men are tired.

The Manus people themselves are tired. They feel sorry for the men and are wondering why their government is not doing anything to pressure Australia to resettle the men quickly. They say the prices of basic food items have increased in the market. Their hospital cannot cope with their health needs, let alone the complex health needs of the refugees. They want to restore the reputational damage caused by Australia's policies.

A local Manus resident quoted in the *Until When* report said, *They [Australia] did not respect the sovereignty of PNG and operating here on Manus under the veil of secrecy. The Manusians are getting the brunt of everything. Everyone comes to dump our friends here and forget about them and they think we, Manusians, can come with a magic wand and solve everything. The refugees are never certain of their future ... they are in a hole, put a lid to a little hole to breathe some air.*

What will happen to the children

born to refugee fathers? There are 37 registered births and no doubt many more unregistered ones. The Manusians I have come to know and respect don't blame the refugees or the girls. They blame Australia's policies. What was the Australian Government thinking when it dumped more than 1000 men onto Manus Island? Did it not consider the consequences?

Dealing with the consequences of Australia's policy was one of the issues discussed at a forum held in Port Moresby on 1 November, co-hosted by the PNG Bishops Conference and the Catholic Professionals Society PNG. As my friend, Fr Clement Taulam, remarked at this forum, 'We now have to deal with the fifth group of refugees. These are the children of the refugees'. Fr Clement, who is Dean of Manus Province and has on-the-ground experience with the refugees, has 'dealt with many issues, pastorally, morally and culturally'.

Participants at the forum agreed on the statement below which will be presented to the PNG government.

1. https://www.refugeecouncil.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/Until_When_AIA_RCOA_FINAL.pdf

Statement from the Manus Refugee Panel Discussion

Participants at the Manus Refugee Panel Discussion hosted by the PNG Catholic Bishops Conference and Catholic Professionals Society today voted overwhelmingly to support the following statement:

Australia has a moral obligation to look after ALL refugees and asylum seekers.

Australia MUST take ALL refugees and asylum seekers to Australia by 25 December 2018. This is our Christmas present from Papua New Guineans and Manusians to the refugees and asylum seekers.

Papua New Guineans, including Manusians, have said we no longer support the 'chequebook diplomacy'.

We are deeply concerned that the

human rights of the refugees and asylum seekers have been breached as they were forcibly sent to PNG; and Australia's policies have caused us reputational damage.

We, the participants, are speaking on behalf of the women and children on Manus who are the victims of Australia's policies.

The men have suffered enough from prolonged detention. Enough is enough. The time has come to let them go.

Highlighting the plight of the Manus refugees

BY ABIGAIL SETA

The Catholic Bishops Conference and the Catholic Professionals Society PNG hosted a forum in Port Moresby on 1 November to discuss the refugees' plight and the effects of their detention in PNG.

The forum panellists included: Benham Satah, a Kurdish asylum seeker; Fr Clement Taulam, Kavieng Lorengau Diocese; Powes Parkop, the Governor of National Capital District; Esther Gaegaming, Deputy Chief Migration Officer; Alithia Barampataz, United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights; and Paul Harricknen, Human Rights Lawyer and President of Catholic Professionals Society of PNG.

Nearly 100 people attended the event, including students, teachers, professionals, lay people, government representatives and Church personnel.

After a prayer by Bougainville Bishop Bernard Unabali, a video was screened to show the situation of refugees all over the world.

Kurdish refugee Benham Satah, living in PNG for five years as a refugee on Manus island and currently in Port Moresby for the last seven months, spoke on the health problems and medical care the refugees needed.

'We had several people who lost their minds. Seven have died. All their deaths were preventable by proper mental and physical health care, which hasn't been provided in the past five years,' he said.

Fr Clement Taulam, a priest from the Kavieng Lorengau

diocese, has been in contact with the refugees and has dealt with many issues pastorally, morally and culturally.

'We now have to deal with the fifth group of refugees', he said. 'These are the children of the refugees,' he continued.

Ms Alithia Barampataz, United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, spoke on standard human rights and the understanding of what a refugee is.

Ms Esther Gaegaming, Deputy Chief Migration Officer, then spoke on her role as an immigration officer.

Paul Harricknen, Human Rights Lawyer and President of Catholic Professionals Society of PNG, challenged the present arrangement for the refugees. He spoke on his involvement with the asylum seekers issue on Manus as a lawyer and his concern for the rights of every human person.

'We have always maintained that the detention of the asylum seekers was and is unconstitutional, unlawful and inhumane and to this day, that argument stands,' Mr Harricknen said. He added that this is the stand of the Catholic Church as well.

Governor of NCD, Hon. Powes Parkop, shared his personal conviction on the arrangement of refugees from the perspective of the PNG and Australian governments and the possible way forward. He stated that he was trying to understand the government's decision to accept the arrangement.

'From the side of the government, it's probably based on compassion in terms of trying to have a process in which people don't get onto risky boats to get to Australia.

But perhaps there can be a proper way by which they can be processed'.

'It is based on respect for one's neighbour, Australia. Being close neighbours and having a history with Australia, the government looked at the bigger picture in terms of a relationship with Australia. Our Constitution and our own value system accommodates our friend, Australia.'

'Everyone can agree that we helped Australia but Australia took us for granted and left the problem with us, now it seems like they are washing their hands and they're saying that it is our problem. Australia needs a more ethical outcome that is good for everyone. It is good for Australia, it is good for PNG and most importantly, it is good for the asylum seekers,' said Hon. Powes Parkop.

Question Time gave the audience the opportunity to ask questions about the many issues concerning the refugees on Manus and the effect on the social fabric of the people on Manus and Port Moresby. An outcome of the Panel Discussion was the 'Christmas present', a statement issued and voted upon by the participants.

The program was coordinated by Fr Ambrose Pereira sdb and Paul Harricknen, with the assistance of many at various levels. Special thanks to Rebecca Lim for her passion to highlight the plight of the refugees. Several participants expressed their thanks for a very inspiring and thought-provoking program.

Abigail Seta is the assistant to the secretary for communication and youth at the Catholic Bishops Conference of Papua New Guinea and Solomon Islands.

Metaphorical marbles

Nauru, 1896, a cargo ship arrives.
 Strange rock mystifies the captain;
 he picks it up, turns it over and over.
 Finally thinking it petrified wood,
 wondering what with this new
 substance
 he might do if put to a good purpose.
 So homeward bound for Australia
 with the rock he sails.

Marbles, wooden, with which a
 child might play
 he pondered, but as the days and
 weeks went by,
 procrastination led that rock-like
 wood
 a door-stop to become.
 Did it keep the door open?
 Or did it close the door tight
 ne'er to open wide?

Who knows?
 Some say the story of the marbles is
 but a myth.
 Perhaps it's the child who holds
 the truth so many would deny,
 so many cognitive distortions
 to blind us to the truth.

Today a small refugee child
 sits among the tailings of rock;
 tailings left over from the mining
 of the phosphate, the guano;
 droppings long ago left by birds
 to harden in the sun
 there for a small child to turn over in
 his hands.

She sits, a toddler refugee, on hard
 pebbly tailings
 sorting those pebbles into a plastic
 disposable cup.
 No toys.
 No colour.
 No softness.
 Alone in the dusty greyness
 of our metaphorical tailings!

A child
 stands alone,
 so close to the cyclone wire.
 Her left eye is framed by wire.
 Her eyes pleading, 'Am I too,
 disposable?'
 Piercing eyes
 begging, frame the viewer on the
 TV set.



The faces of the Kids Off Nauru campaign

So close but so far.
 We the people of Australia
 said the words, 'We are sorry' this
 past month
 to countless children victimised in
 childhood.
 I am sorry, we are sorry. But are we
 really sorry?
 I don't believe it! We don't believe it
 as long as cognitive distortions
 abound.

As long as we distort
 the keeping of children bound
 on the people smugglers who may
 or may not be waiting.
 As long as we point the finger at the
 other,
 that other party or country!
 As long as we rely on the votes of
 people,
 of votes gained or lost.

Like a shake of the dice,
 the tossing of a marble in a diver's
 den,
 we place the fate,
 the life of an incarcerated child.
 A child sits in the phosphate tailings,
 begging us
 through cyclone wire.

This is no game,
 this is a matter of life and death!
 Life is running out for these children.
 The life spark drains from their eyes.
 When I say sorry, when you say
 sorry,
 it will be too late.
 Act now and let life be life!

A child's game a mirror for us.
 Marbles of phosphate tossed in a
 cup.
 Children tossed on a dung heap.
 Disposable children like plastic cups
 abandoned behind cyclone wire.
 Will we use the mystifying rock to
 shut tight our borders?
 Or will we toss our marble, our one
 vote, and let them in?

'By Christmas,' they said,
 'we will let them in.'
 In stealth, in the dark of night,
 by the boats of the sky, they fly.
 One by one, by one
 they come.
 The last marble falls.

Bargaining chips
 establish the doorstep to throw
 open the border.
 The dire plight of a critically ill child
 becomes a ticket of entry!
 How could we leave it so long?
 A donkey plods towards Egypt.
 A small child flees in the dead of
 night.

How could we forget,
 we who dare to celebrate
 the feast of Christmas,
 a wee child wrapped tightly
 in his mother's arms?
 Refugee children on Nauruan shores
 cup individual marbles in disposable
 cups.

Families gather,
 families sing,
 they say this is Christmas.
 A marble drops, sorry
 so very, very sorry
 are we, the people of Australia?
 They say this is Christmas!

Marie Casamento SGS

This poem was first published in the
 November 2018 edition of *The Good Oil*, the
 e-magazine of the Good Samaritan Sisters.

Animated learnings

A visit to the Animation Project in Campbelltown, New South Wales, proved insightful for Mario Trinidad

When I was asked by the South Australian State Council to explore how to address poverty and hardship in Elizabeth—South Australia's most disadvantaged metropolitan suburb—one of my first actions was to find out what has happened in Vinnies nationally and internationally. When I heard about the Society's Animation Project in the Wollongong Diocese, I got excited because I sensed I was on the right track.

The Animation Project draws inspiration from the writings of Brazilian educator and philosopher Paulo Freire, so I felt it would resonate with my experiences of community organisation and development in my native Philippines, as well as Guatemala and Mexico. I was not disappointed!

My visit, which was a combination of discussions, meetings, reflections, video-watching and observation, was hosted by the animation team, composed of Project Coordinator Ella Hogan and Community Animator Irenka Bell. The project, inspired by an Indian animation project introduced in Australia by Caritas, was started in the early 1990s when the Campbelltown region identified the need for a special program to support residents of the large public housing estate of Claymore. Today it has spread to other nearby suburbs of Minto, Airs, Bradbury, Macquarie Fields and Rosemeadow.

When hearing the word *animation*, most people think of cartoons, but the verb 'to animate' has the following meanings: to give natural life to; to endow with spirit and vigour; to enliven; to



Mario with Edna and Waqa of the Claymore Community Laundromat

move to action. Animation is part of a broad tradition of community development, education and action whose principal goal is social and personal transformation. Animation is based on the belief that the poor and vulnerable maintain within and among themselves, often despite seemingly insurmountable odds, aspirations for a better life and the capacity to make their dreams come true.

Animation privileges the involvement and participation of the poor and vulnerable in all stages of a project. Action will arise out of the people's self-understanding, their experience of community and society, and their aspirations for a better future. Therefore, animation does not provide a detailed blueprint

for action. It is in the course of working together for social change that individuals rediscover their voice and their strengths and capabilities, as individuals and as a community. There is a strong emphasis on process and relationships.

Perhaps from an outsider's point of view, what the Claymore residents have achieved—for example, fortnightly residents' lunches organised and prepared by them, campaigning for an extension of public transport routes, and a community-run laundromat—may seem insignificant. But taken in the context of what poverty does to individuals, families and communities, these are giant strides. Poverty silences the poor into voicelessness. It invisibilises

them into absence. It infantilises them into defencelessness. It takes time, courage and trust to cast off the stereotypes and judgmental attitudes and policies of wider society, which reduce the poor and the vulnerable to passive recipients of hand-outs. But it can never obliterate their resilience and sense of hope. As Ella said to me, 'Residents working with residents is a movement from hand-out to hand-up to eventually hand-in-hand'.

With Ella, I visited the Claymore Community Laundromat and Coffee Shop, which opened in 2001. It was identified as a need by community members through a 'learning circle' facilitated by the Kalon House of Welcome (the host of the community lunches) and the Animation Project. Today it is still staffed by volunteer residents and is also the site of resident interaction.

I accompanied Ella in contacting other agencies regarding 'community brainstorming' sessions to be held at Claymore and Rosemeadow. The sessions were for residents—not for service providers, as Ella delicately insisted—at which residents share with each other ideas about a sustainable community project. Once they identify a few projects, training is offered in order to move from idea to implementation.

I attended two meetings: one with the Society's Campbelltown staff members who shared the range of services they offer aside from the Animation Project, emergency relief, counselling and meals; the other with the Animation Project training committee, composed of residents and staff.

I left with some lessons that I hope we can put into action in our Elizabeth project:

- The centrality of people's voices and actions in any community

initiative. The role of the community development worker is like that of the grit in the oyster that facilitates the creation of the pearl. Leadership arises from among the people.

- The importance of process and deep listening. The effective animator first and foremost listens to people's pain, giftedness, chains, potentialities and crucial concerns.
- The importance of structural analysis that identifies systemic barriers instead of locating the roots of poverty in an individual's moral situation.
- Being clear to the people about what the project can and cannot deliver so that false expectations are not created.

Thank you, Ella and Irenka!

Mario Trinidad is a Community Capacity Builder for the St Vincent de Paul Society South Australia.

Poetry

Last Letter

From Paul: 2; Timothy 4:1-22

Come before winter

don't wait

for the peacock to birth-cry spring
or fallen grapes to raisin on the
sand

when another will have been
lowered

into dirt-damp through the hole
in this ceiling
you won't find me.

Bring my coat

of brine snow and yellow dust
with books quill and parchment
for my faith has scratched praise
on every liberty these walls yield;
a little bread to dip in the wind scent
when it hosts thrush-breast swine-
roast

and truffles that down-drift cooling
from the tables of the wreathed
to where this falling sparrow
might be tempted to peck
a last crumb feast.

Before storms

step from the sea
to travel the Appian Way;
passing my memory
of cypress and random elm
walk prayerfully over catacombs.
On arrival here denarius the
guard

this will busy him for one day.
Don't sympathy my tatters
but look to my eyes –
see them shine like a father's
at return of a son.

Yes come. Come before winter.

Jan Price

A step towards freedom



BY MRIGAKSHI YADAV
AND SHIKSHYA THAPA

Mrigakshi Yadav and Shikshya Thapa are studying social work at Western Sydney University. Their 2018 placement was at The Animation Project, Campbelltown. Neither were familiar with the term 'animation' nor the impact the project has on the people it serves. Here, they share their story.

Education is the practice of freedom, the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world.

– Paulo Freire

We assumed that our first field placement at the Animation Project of the St Vincent de Paul Society would be some sort of fun and games—perhaps illuminating inanimate objects on a computer screen.

Not until the induction day did we truly understand the spirit of the word 'animation', which means liveliness, energy, high-spiritedness, vibrancy—nothing less than life itself.

Understanding the meaning of animation in a community development context, we could sense a lot of grassroots social work coming our way over the next few months.

The Animation Team, though but two workers, was full of vigour and in perfect alignment with the mission of animation. Our initial days with the team would prove inspirational for our 400-hour placements and for a lifetime of this type of social work practice.

Early days were spent in learning the basics of animation as a community development approach and how it is used, both locally and internationally. Community animation is a route to the liberation of the whole community by which the community can create a new reality for themselves, separate from the judgemental and presumptuous social order of society.

After a brief introduction to the approach, we felt starved for more information, as online journals and web libraries did not prove to be adequate platforms for such a gem. We were encouraged to read Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, a philosophical masterpiece about adult education and its relevance to community development. His inspirational work made sense of society's structure of discrimination and oppression of the less affluent, and animation's response of creating a climate for communities to flourish.

Following Freire's ideologies, animation does not make 'dreams come true' for the people but instils confidence in them to set their own goals and to realise their collective dreams. Our interest in animation expanded the more we saw and read about its successful implementation in Campbelltown and in our homeland, South-East Asia.

The kind of community animation we witnessed reminded us of the roots of a collectivist approach to building communities. We could see a lot of social action happening during community lunches, volunteer outings and in the 'Residents for Positive Social Change' training course, which is based on Freire's action-reflection approach to adult education.

At the fortnightly community lunches at Kalon House of Welcome in Claymore, we saw the community come together in solidarity with enthusiasm and good humour to cook, serve and share meals with each other—a rare event in a fast-paced society like Australia. This is the kind of resilience and hope the animation approach fosters in Claymore, cited as the most disadvantaged suburb of New South Wales by the 2015 *Dropping off the Edge* report.

Paulo Freire rightfully said: 'The great task of the oppressed is to liberate themselves and their oppressors.' Wider society could stand to learn how to build such long-lasting social connections from their less-privileged counterparts.

The Animation Project's 'Residents for Social Change' training is just one door through which individuals are offered support to start to transform their communities. By boosting motivation, confidence and knowledge, participants are empowered to make positive social changes in and around their communities. It is a tool giving rise to collective voices in the community, encouraging the leaders who have come forward to create an example of a community as they feel it should be. Moreover, it is the animators Ella Hogan and Irenka Bell who are serving as catalysts for the humanisation of this society.

It is important to measure the impact of such a powerful tool of social change. Conducting an evaluation of the training program was the focus of our placement. Our main role as students was to design and implement the evaluation research independently from the Animation Team. It was fun and challenging for both of us, as we had never conducted independent research before. Literature review and designing the evaluation was effortless, as we have been well trained to do this at university. The hard, yet more enriching experience was the implementation and data collection through interviews and face-to-face interaction. We gained confidence in this with time, with the support received from Ella and Irenka

and particularly through the approachability and generosity of the course participants. Our genuine involvement with participants and personal zest for humanity was the real ice-breaker in this process, which would not have been possible without understanding Paulo Freire's pedagogy of adult education. We were part of the weekly sessions as researchers, but the best moments we had were as mentors to the participants, who exuded passion every time they talked about their projects.

Unfortunately, our placement finished before we were able to complete the evaluation. This does not limit the range of experience we have gained as researchers, mentors and learners. We were fortunate to have witnessed the process of transformation of the course participants at micro-levels during the feedback sessions, at luncheon tables and through informal discussions. The initial phase of this evaluation might not be able to highlight the full impact of the training program, but it definitely begins to document the changes in knowledge, skills and confidence already in evidence as we leave the training program.

As we approach the end of our placement, our consciousness has been raised through stories of animation and we acknowledge the urgency to move to an equal, just and non-oppressive society.

Latest tariff-tracking report shows energy bills continue to rise

BY GAVIN DUFTY

Against a backdrop of persistently high household energy bills and intense political debate about Australia's energy policy, Vinnies' latest tariff-tracking report reveals energy prices are continuing to rise, but the extent of the latest increase varies in different states and territories.

The St Vincent de Paul Society, in conjunction with Alvis Consulting, has been tracking energy tariffs across the national energy market for almost ten years. Initially this project only covered electricity and gas prices in Victoria. It has since expanded, with the help of funding from Energy Consumers Australia, to include other states and territories. An online interactive map¹ has also been developed, which allows viewers to select postcodes of interest and explore price changes in that area.

Findings from the most recent national summary report show that, since July 2009, electricity prices have risen on average by 75 per cent for standing offers (a 'standing offer' is the default energy pricing arrangement for households that have not shopped around and negotiated a more competitive pricing arrangement). For Victoria and South Australia, the price has risen by more than 100 per cent. In the past year alone, the average price increase was more modest at 5 per cent.

While the rates for standing offers have increased across all jurisdictions over the past year, the averages don't really paint a detailed picture of what is going on in each state or territory. In Tasmania, we found price rises were restricted to the consumer prices index (CPI) due to the Tasmanian government policy of price capping. In New South Wales,



PHOTO: TANER ARDALI/UNSPLASH

there were no changes in standing offer prices from the big three providers: Origin, Energy Australia and AGL. In South Australia we found overall prices fell by 0.5 per cent compared to July 2017. South-east Queensland also had modest falls in electricity prices of 0.5 per cent (which equates to around \$40). Victoria, on the other hand, had a slight increase of \$35. The standout in terms of price increases was the ACT, which experienced an average increase in energy bills of \$275 to \$330.

A similar story exists for gas prices, with a modest 3.4 per cent average price increase this year, and an average increase of 65 per cent since 2009. For Victoria, however, the average price increase since 2009 is over 90 per cent. Such a large increase is particularly difficult to sustain for low-income households, given that approximately 80 per cent of Victorian households use gas.

We also found that households with solar have significantly lower bills than non-solar households. However, in some jurisdictions, local solar policy can result in solar households pushing costs onto non-solar households—a policy outcome we are particularly concerned about.

The report also examined proposed policy changes by the federal and Victorian governments and found that these interventions would have an impact on about one million households. The proposed policy interventions, however, would take time to enact. In the meantime, we encourage households to shop around for a better deal, as the longer they wait, the more money will go into the coffers of energy companies rather than household pockets.

We intend to continue the tariff-tracking project next year. Hopefully—through continuing advocacy by Vinnies and others, positive action by the energy industry, and thoughtful government policy changes including concession reform and strong regulatory oversight—we will see prices fall for all households and, in particular, the most disadvantaged.

1. https://www.vinnies.org.au/page/Our_Impact/Incomes_Support_Cost_of_Living/Energy/Map/

Read the full report here https://www.vinnies.org.au/icms_docs/298264_2018_NEM_-_No_guarantee_for_consumers.pdf

Gavin Dufty is Manager Policy and Research, St Vincent de Paul Society of Victoria



Vinnies – Saviour of the lost and forsaken

A Christmas reflection by Fr Troy Bobbin, Spiritual Advisor to the National Council

Vincentians, you are the visual image of an invisible God. You are the saviour to the lost and forsaken, just as Jesus became flesh and lives among us and is saviour of us all.

The Gospel reading we will hear at Christmas services this year will be from the Gospel of John: 'The word of God became flesh and dwelt among us.'

For those we have served and cared for this year in many different ways, they see you as their saviour. I know you may be embarrassed by that, but for the lost and forsaken you are.

At Christmas, we see God at work; we see God breaking into a much-troubled world to reach out to those who have been left behind to struggle on their own. God has chosen each of us who believe in him to be part of his plan to bring light and hope back to a people who have been forgotten and left on the side of the road to fend for themselves.

As Spiritual Advisor to the National Council I am in a privileged position. I get to talk to many people we care for and serve throughout the year through the many different services we provide them, and the one constant remark I hear is 'Those

Vinnies members have been my saviour'.

It is in the way you carry out the work you do as Vincentians that people see someone cares for them and is concerned for their welfare. That is why God reached down and broke into our world and gave each of us the opportunity to reach out as he has done for all.

May each of you and your families, together with our Vincentian brothers and sisters and those we serve, be blessed with that creative hand that has reached down to enlighten and care for us all.

Merry Christmas.

