

the Record

Spring 2017



St Vincent de Paul Society

good works

A time for
renewal

NATIONAL 2017
CONGRESS

ONE SOCIETY A UNITED VOICE



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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Commissioning Mass for new South Australian State President

A Commissioning Mass for the new State President of the Society in South Australia, Cathy Beaton, was held at St Francis Xavier's Cathedral in Adelaide on 5 August.

Adelaide Archbishop Most Reverend Philip Wilson DD JCL was chief celebrant and was assisted by Rev. Fr Charles Gauci from the Adelaide Cathedral Parish.

The Commissioning Mass was well attended, including by National Deputy President Claire Victory and several other members of the St Vincent de Paul Society National Council of Australia. Cathy's husband David, her three children, two of her sisters, and extended family members and friends were also in attendance.

Cathy took over the presidency from outgoing State President Brian Spencer, who made a significant contribution to National Council over four years and chaired the National Marketing and Fundraising Committee. Cathy's work



with the St Vincent de Paul Society to date has been focussed mainly in the Riverland area and in 2016 she was elected as Regional President for the Riverland/Yorke region. Cathy has a strong business background and vast professional experience in business development that will see her continue to provide leadership, direction and a shared vision to the Society.

'I'm looking forward to continuing to improve our business practices and sound governance for the St Vincent de Paul Society in South Australia and importantly to provide ongoing love, support, companionship and practical



assistance to the companions we serve in our work,' Ms Beaton said. ♦

Photos: *Left:* L-R: St Vincent de Paul Society South Australia's outgoing President Brian Spencer; new South Australia State President Cathy Beaton; Adelaide Archbishop Most Reverend Philip Wilson DD JCL; and Rev. Fr Charles Gauci, Administrator of Adelaide Cathedral Parish, in the background.

Right: L-R: Bernard Meadley, St Vincent de Paul Society Territory Council of Canberra and Goulburn Deputy President; Michael Liddy, St Vincent de Paul Society Victoria State President; Cathy Beaton, St Vincent de Paul Society South Australia State President; Claire Victory, St Vincent de Paul Society National Council of Australia Deputy President; and Toni Muir, St Vincent de Paul Society Tasmania State President.

National Congress 2017 Questions & Answers

With our National Congress 2017 being held in Adelaide from 6 to 8 October, we took the opportunity to ask Cathy Beaton, the new State President of the Society in South Australia, a few questions about the upcoming event. See Cathy's responses below. This issue of *The Record* also features Questions & Answers from several people who are attending the congress. We have asked participants for their thoughts and reflections on what they think the congress will involve and lighter questions on the logistics of getting to the congress. Read their responses on page 8.

How did you come to take on a leadership role in the Society?

As a conference member of the Berri

conference in South Australia for five years, and after State Council split a very expansive region, I was asked whether I would be interested in nominating as a Regional President for the newly formed region of Riverland/Yorke. I was elected as Regional President in 2016 and shortly after becoming a participant in the Vincentian Mission and Values Centred Leadership Program, which I began in 2015. This was a life-changing experience for me in terms of my Vincentian experience and gave me the confidence and realisation that leadership is something we all carry. It also confirmed and heightened my belief and alignment with the Vinnies mission and philosophy. I have had leadership roles within the corporate sector but I wasn't sure how

this would translate, although I felt it would be an asset if that was the wish of the State Council.

South Australia is hosting the National Congress 2017 in October. Are you proud to be hosting this event, and what do you hope it achieves?

Along with all members and staff of the Society in South Australia, we are extremely proud to be hosting the 2017 Congress. This is not only an opportunity to showcase beautiful Adelaide but more importantly an opportunity to visualise the future of the Society. The congress will create opportunities for those of us inside the Society, but I am most looking forward to how we will take those discussions to help support our companions. ♦

Welcome to Congress 2017

BY GRAHAM WEST

Whether you are here in person in South Australia or at home, the National Congress is about all of us having a voice regarding the future of the Society, the way we work and how we carry out our Mission, which began in France with Frederic Ozanam and his companions.

Over the last few months we have shared some of the information,

concerns, hopes and reflections that people have shared with us since we began this journey together.

It is surprising that it is the first time in 60 years we have gathered to reflect, pray and plan for our shared future.

Updates from the National Congress will be shared on the web and social media and in the next edition of *The Record*.

At the heart of our congress is the call from the Spirit to renew the face of the earth and enkindle the fire of our love.

As Vincentians we serve in hope.

It is the hope of all who have helped organise the congress that the Spirit may be amongst us and that we will leave energised and challenged to carry out the work of the Society throughout our communities and wherever we are needed.

To all of those who are on the ground in Adelaide, thank you for taking time from your families, friends, work and all the other tasks that call for our attention, to be fully present and focussed on the Society and our companions. ♦

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

Your chance to be heard and involved

The St Vincent de Paul Society's National Congress 2017 will be the first event of its kind in over 60 years. It is being held from Friday evening 6 October to Sunday 8 October 2017. The theme for the National Congress is One Society, A United Voice.

Congress 2017 is being held at St Aloysius College at 53 Wakefield St, Adelaide SA 5000. Congress 2017 participants are encouraged to enter via the Angas Street entrance.

Approximately 175 people will attend Congress 2017, including Regional Council Presidents, National Council members, other targeted members, especially young people, and some staff.

Whether you're a delegate or not, the renewal process that National Congress represents is not a spectator sport. This is your chance to be heard and involved! See page 17 for more information on how you can answer the latest reflection questions. ♦



Top: St Aloysius College, Adelaide.
Right: Map of the venue.

The story is everything

BY DR JOHN FALZON

The story is everything. Each of us has one. Each of us is in the midst of living in one. Actually each of us is living in many stories and, like our lives, our stories rub shoulders with each other and intersect. Sometimes they collide. Or collude. Our stories barge past each other and melt into each other's arms. Our stories partake of both communion and conflict, celebration and sadness, pleasure and lament.

When we tell our stories to each other, including the stories people have entrusted to us, we enter into a powerful sacramental space of healing. Stories create solidarity and therefore tenderness and strength.

John Berger, the great poet and art critic who died earlier this year, once wrote:

'Never again shall a single story be told as though it were the only one.'

This is beautiful. Its meaning is only too apparent to us if we are engaged in the struggle for a better society, the most sacred struggle there is. When people experience oppression, they are deliberately made to feel that their pain is theirs alone.

The structure and history of oppression and injustice is steeped with this intent: to isolate and atomise. The woman experiencing domestic violence is made to feel that she is to blame for the patriarchal violence and degradation she is forced to suffer. She is further made to feel that she is alone, that her story is so shamefully hers alone that somehow she is deserving of this cruelty and inhumanity; that in



fact she should be grateful, because she deserves even worse!

The young worker who is exploited in the workplace is similarly instructed that they are lucky to have a job and should be grateful even though they are being deliberately underpaid, or harassed, effectively having their wages stolen and their rights suppressed.

Wherever we look, people are systematically made to feel that their story is 'the only one'.

In one sense, this is, of course, true. Every story is utterly unique. No two stories are completely identical. Each story is an unrepeatable intersection between history and socio-economic structure; between the personal and the collective.

The point of Berger's utterance though is that, unique as our stories may be, there is more that unites us than divides. Our stories have more in common than we dare hope or imagine. This is why sharing our stories establishes common ground and a sense of our common cause.

It is also why the suppression of stories is the most powerful means of keeping us apart. This is classically exemplified right across the stories of child sexual abuse. Children were, and

are, consistently told that they must not tell anyone what is happening to them; that they or those they love will be punished if they do; that no one will believe them; that they are to blame for what is happening to them. We know, from the incredibly powerful and courageous evidence presented to the Royal Commission, that this has literally killed people.

When people tell us their stories we have a sacred obligation to carry these stories carefully in our hands as we journey towards the creation of a better society. This is at the heart of good advocacy and activism. It is also about honouring the sacred humanity of our companions, and acting as real companions to them in solidarity and deep respect.

Our story as members of the St Vincent de Paul Society is made of these stories. Our founding story, our story of the gospel calling to justice and compassion, our story as a movement of love, all of this, like any story, is constantly and joyously changing and growing.

Our collective story is a source of hope. It is like a home to us. The Indian writer Joydeep Roy-Bhattacharya, in *The Storyteller of*

continued on page 6 ►

◀ continued from page 5

Marrakesh, a novel dealing with oral storytelling traditions, wrote:

'It is certainly safe inside a house...
but safer inside a story where
everything connects.'

We have good reason to feel safe inside our collective story. Everything does, in sometimes strange and unexpected ways, connect. We should not feel threatened by the stories that come through our door, seeking to make a home with our story.

But our story suffers a real sense of

disjuncture when we falsely imagine that it stopped developing a hundred years ago, or fifty years ago, or even five years ago. Similarly, it suffers disjuncture when we impose artificial restrictions on what (or who!) we think is connected and what is not.

The truth is that our sense of safety in the story can be both an inhibitor to inclusion and change as much it can be a place of security in the face of the challenging, the uncomfortable and the new.

Congress 2017 is going to be a space

in which we explore and celebrate our story and ask what we are going to do with it; how we might write the next paragraphs and chapters, who is going to appear in them, and how our collective action to create a better world will unfold!

The Italian writer, Elena Ferrante, says that 'literature is made out of tangles'. Let us take our tales and tangles and together make something beautiful from them! ♦

Dr John Falzon is CEO of the St Vincent de Paul Society National Council of Australia.

Hearing the voices of our members

BY JODIE CONDUIT

Associate Professor Jodie Conduit, from the University of Adelaide, recently conducted a survey of members of the St Vincent de Paul Society. The purpose of this survey was to understand the views and concerns of the members around Australia prior to the congress in October.

Nearly 900 members replied, either via an online survey or posting a response, showing the enthusiasm and desire of the members to shape the future of the Society.

The survey showed what a dedicated and loyal group of members the Society is lucky to have, but it also demonstrated some areas for future improvement. The current profile of members is reasonably split between males and females (51 per cent and 49 per cent), with 70 per cent of members retired, 86 per cent aged over 55 years, and 94 per cent affiliated with the

Catholic faith. Many of our members (35 per cent) have been volunteering with us for over 10 years. This highlights the loyalty of our current members, but also raises the question of whether we need to consider recruiting future members from a broader range of diverse backgrounds.

Members perceive the St Vincent de Paul Society as having strong brand values of compassion, empathy, respect, integrity and trust. They have a very strong emotional connection with the Society and are largely satisfied with their experience (65 per cent said they were 'highly satisfied' and 96 per cent were at least 'somewhat satisfied'). However, there were a range of suggestions for how the National Congress and the leadership in general could better support the members and, in turn, help members to assist those in need in our Society—our companions.

While most members spoke very highly of the Society, we were able to identify some key areas in which members would like more support and/or focus. These areas (and others) will form part of the discussion at the National Congress in October. Some of

the key themes identified in the report included:

- how to recruit new members, possibly from more a diverse member base
- how to continue to grow while maintaining the Vincentian values and spiritual foundation of the Society
- how to ensure that members continue to feel supported and empowered at the conference level
- how to ensure members can provide regular feedback and become more involved in planning the direction of the Society
- how to support members to make a difference in the lives of the companions, when their needs are often becoming more complex and difficult.

Overall, the survey highlighted that we have a great Society with dedicated members, but that we can continue to strive to make it even better. It has given us much to consider leading into the National Congress. ♦

Jodie Conduit is an Associate Professor in Marketing and Associate Head, Research at the University of Adelaide Business School.

Congress 'insights' will be invaluable

BY ANNELOES DE GRAEFF

The National Congress 2017 provides a wonderful opportunity to learn from all who have been instrumental in making the Society what it is today, to get a better insight into what drives and concerns our members and the challenges and opportunities they identify.

In a time of unprecedented change, growing inequality and mass uncertainty, the St Vincent de Paul Society feels more relevant than ever before. Yet competitive pressures are growing exponentially, from other charities, corporations and individuals. It is critical that as a Society we build clarity around our identity and use the values that have helped the Society become what it is today to continue to draw people to our mission.

In 2014, creative agency M&C Saatchi led internal stakeholders through a workshop exploring how our Vincentian identity could help shape our positioning. 'Renewal' was identified as the 'brand essence'. Our personality was defined as empathetic, empowering, honest and brave and brand values were agreed to include commitment, compassion, respect, integrity, empathy, advocacy, courage, pragmatism, humility and potential.

'Brand' is the term used in commercial businesses to define the character, look and feel of the organisation. The perception that the public have of a company or organisation is not just determined by the 'look and feel' of the brand. It's an image formed from every interaction they have—across every touchpoint. Hence the importance for everyone who is involved in an organisation to embrace the brand essence and to live out the brand values. Brand is not



just a responsibility for 'the marketing people'—living our brand, our identity, is a responsibility for all of us. We at Vinnies have used the term 'identity' in lieu of brand as it more closely aligns with our history and who we are as a purpose-driven organisation rather than a commercial business.

Since the introduction of the refinements to our brand/identity in 2015, 'renewal' has been used in several ways across the country. It has guided the redevelopment of the reflection booklet in Victoria, it has supported member recruitment in South Australia, it has been rolled out to the shops in Canberra/Goulburn, and nationally it has been used to align fundraising campaigns and publications.

In workshops with the National Council and CEOs we have started to explore how our identity can help address the challenges we face as a Society, how it can function as our united voice and support the key objectives of our Strategic Plan. Can our identity indeed play a role in building a welcoming culture and attracting new members? How can we use our identity to increase our fundraising results and shop revenue? How can it contribute to the effectiveness of our social justice

advocacy with the community and government?

Strong brands lead with purpose and take time and consistency to build. The Society's identity has been doing exactly that for nearly 185 years. However, for an organisation with our history, size and outreach, we are seeking to lift our profile with the public to improve

their understanding of what exactly it is we do to support the community. In doing so we will not only focus on what we do or how we assist but we will try to express why we do this in the first place. And this brings us back to our Vincentian identity, the definition of who we are, our commitment to social justice and our Vincentian spirituality.

I very much look forward to attending the Society's National Congress 2017 and taking part in discussions with other members about how we can continue our work towards a more just and compassionate Australia. These understandings guide the further roll-out of the refreshed identity, ensuring we continue to build on our solid foundation to create a sustainable future. ♦

Anneloes de Graeff joined the Society in August 2014 as Director of Marketing and Partnerships at the Canberra/Goulburn office. She moved to the National Council office in February 2017 as the inaugural National Manager Strategic Marketing. Anneloes is a member of the National Marketing Committee, NMC representative on the National Centres Committee and regularly liaises with the National Youth & Young Adults Advisory Committee. In her role she gives guidance to the National Digital Specialist and the Senior National Marketing Coordinator. Anneloes is an associate member of the Society's ANU Conference.

Mutual respect and friendliness essential

Robert Leach: Vice President, St Vincent de Paul Society Queensland

How did you first become involved with the Society?

I joined the Society with my wife Trish way back in the 1990s because we both felt an obligation, expressed wonderfully well in Matthew's Gospel (chapter 25), to assist the less fortunate. We understood that love of God is expressed in love of neighbour.

Do you think members from small towns and centres will have something different to contribute to the National Congress 2017 compared to their city counterparts? If so, why?

Vincentians from small towns often know personally the people who call on them for help. Thus it is probably easier for them to build rapport than it would be for Vincentians working in the cities. Also, I would imagine that Vincentians in small towns do not have to deal with large numbers



Robert Leach

of requests, which is inevitably the case in the bustling cities. This raises the question of the time we spend with the poor. Time and attention are vital but Vincentians working in city areas, faced with large numbers, are often under extreme pressure to give sufficient time to people seeking assistance. This also raises the question of how best to avoid giving mere hand-outs which can create dependency—unintentionally of course, but the risk is clearly there.

How do we ensure that membership of the St Vincent de Paul Society is a joyful experience that brings people together?

Making sure that membership of the Society is a joyful experience is a challenge. Given that virtually everyone who joins does so out of concern for the poor, every member knows that he or she is in good company. That's a great start. On the other hand, we all have faults and some of us can be difficult to get along with. It means that the establishment of mutual respect and friendliness are regarded as essential aspects of the Society's ethos. The occasional social get together can help as well. The intermingling of conference and council members at Festival Masses and meetings should also be encouraged. The bottom line, for me anyway, is that we must be friendly to one another and very welcoming of new members. Rule 3.4 comes to mind: 'Meetings are held in a spirit of fraternity, simplicity and Christian joy.' ♦

Marie O'Brien: North Western Central Council President, St Vincent de Paul Society Victoria

Can you describe your role at the St Vincent de Paul Society in Victoria?

I serve the Society as a substitute Regional President of the Wimmera Region and I am the President of the North West Central Council in Victoria.

Will this be your first trip to Adelaide or first time attending a Society event held interstate?

I have not been to Adelaide for over 15 years. I have attended several interstate Society events.

What do you feel are the greatest challenges currently facing the



Marie O'Brien

Society when it comes to helping people experiencing poverty and inequality in your community?

In rural areas an ageing and diminishing conference membership is dealing with increasing poverty in towns with diminishing accessible support services.

While respecting people's privacy, could you please describe your most rewarding or challenging experience of being a conference member?

Sharing a meal of ice-cream and topping with a terminally ill teenager.

Describe how you would like to see spirituality and religion included in the discussions at the congress?

Spirituality within the Catholic religion must permeate the whole congress, as it is one of our great points of difference with other charities. We must show that we can walk the walk as well as talk the talk. ♦

Exploring what is an 'extremely humbling privilege'

Cassandra Bull:
Mission and
Membership Executive
Officer, St Vincent
de Paul Society
Queensland

Can you describe your current role at the St Vincent de Paul Society in Queensland?

I am currently a member of two conferences as well as a staff member. I love being a member of a parish-based conference, where I undertake a home visitation once a week. I'm also the Vice President of a work-based conference, which is an exciting opportunity for Vinnies staff members to form a conference and be involved in conference work. On top of all of this, I have the good fortune and honour of being a paid staff member working as the Mission and Membership Executive Officer for Queensland. For this congress, I am representing my Regional Council on behalf of my Regional President, who is unable to attend.

Is it your first trip to Adelaide or your first time attending an inter-state event for the Society?

I have been lucky enough to visit Adelaide a number of times now, and was last here for the Australian Catholic Youth Festival, which was an amazing chance for young Vincentians to network at a wider Catholic youth event. I have also previously visited Adelaide for a National Mission and Membership meeting and for an Australian Catholic Youth Ministry Convention, which was held at the same venue as the congress. I have such fond memories and have fallen in love with South Australia just that little bit more each time.



Cassandra Bull

What do you feel that the Society is currently doing well when it comes to helping people experiencing poverty and inequality in your community?

I personally believe the Vincentians involved in the Society are excellent witnesses to what Jesus meant by 'Love thy neighbour'. I see through my work that the members in Queensland are regularly discussing ways we can improve the conditions of those we visit. There is a deep compassion and concern for our companions, and the conference meetings are filled with conversations about how we can best serve. We provide friendship and a listening ear in a time when people are perhaps feeling more and more socially dislocated. It's an extremely humbling privilege to be part of an organisation that meets with people at their most vulnerable and extends the hand of Christ.

Do you find the use of technology in the Society is improving, and what could we do better?

There are so many different resources and tools we can utilise in our Vincentian work, and there is certainly a resolve amongst members in Queensland to try and embrace technology that will help us serve better. Our support database, our intranet, new services website, utilising apps on phones to refer companions to external services, checking Centrelink statements from the portal, and reading spiritual reflections on iPads are all great examples of how technology is making a difference to Vincentian work. I'm reminded of a quote from Steve Jobs that I love, which fits with this question well: 'Technology is nothing. What's important is that you have a faith in people, that they're basically good and smart, and if you give them tools, they'll do wonderful things with them.'

How will you be getting to the congress in October?

I am genuinely excited to be flying there with fellow Vincentians and staff members from Queensland and having the chance to join together with old, and hopefully new, friends from around Australia. I've met the most amazing people through my Vinnies work, and when a group of like-minded, faith-filled, passionate individuals come together, there is no doubt that something extremely special will happen. ♦

Jacob reflects on the Vincentian charism

**Jacob Miller:
Development
Officer, Young
Adult Engagement,
St Vincent de Paul
Society Victoria**

How did you first become involved with the Society?

College Conference was my first involvement, at Sacred Heart College in New Town, Tasmania, over 10 years ago. However, it wasn't until stepping outside of the school framework to assist people in my local community on a Buddy Camp / Kids Camp that I really imbibed the Vincentian charism. On my first Buddy Camp I remember being able to see, hear and feel the difference my peers and I were making in the lives of each participant. It was the first time I had truly experienced the Vincentian mission of walking with our companions in hope and love.

Can you describe your current role at the St Vincent de Paul Society in Victoria?

After working as a member for the Society in Tasmania, New South Wales and more recently Victoria, I accepted a role in the Victorian Central Office in early 2017. Now as the Development Officer, Young Adult Engagement, I have the chance to support, assist and create opportunities for young adult members to respond to the mission of the Society. Working within our Services Development Department I am able to encourage the State Youth Team and young adult members to live out our charism in the most effective ways.



Jacob Miller

Is it your first trip to Adelaide or your first time attending an inter-state event for the Society?

I have only been to Adelaide once before and I am really looking forward to seeing a little bit more of the city. I have been to multiple national youth events such as the National Youth Team, Rekindle the Flame and National Advanced Training, but this will be my first gathering with members from across multiple works and regions of the Society.

What do you do in your down time?

While this may sound a little crazy, after all my volunteering and work I indulge in a little op' shopping! Vinnies Shops have supplied me with some great bargains and outrageous shirts over the years. After that, some independent films and all the wine and fine food Carlton and Fitzroy have to offer.

As a young supporter of the Society do you believe that conferences are a place of welcome and diversity?

Vinnies has been home for me for employment, social networks, volunteering and faith. Having travelled and moved interstate, it is always the Vincentian smile and open arms that have made me feel welcomed and included. Yet, when stepping into the world of conferences, there can be barriers to diversity that inhibit our welcome and potentially, our response to social justice. Of course, this changes from conference to conference. As society has shifted away from the parish, our conference models and structures have been slow to adapt. Many individuals sharing our mission live in our communities without any connection to the parish, so how do we welcome them? Responding to the Rule, which calls us to 'strive for renewal, adapting to changing world conditions', I hope that the congress is a chance for us to challenge ourselves with regard to the conference context and embrace new models of coming together to put our faith in action. Young people, non-parishioners, non-Catholics, women, and working people can all encounter roadblocks in their efforts to support our mission. I encourage us to use the congress as a vehicle to challenge these obstacles. Conferences focussing on Special Works, conferences based in schools, work places or other community locations and conferences meeting through new technologies are all models that I would like to see examined, enabling us to preserve a 'spirit of youth ... characterised by enthusiasm, adaptability and creative imagination'. ♦

A National Council perspective

Pat Garcia: Vice President and Bailly, St Vincent de Paul Society National Council of Australia

How did you first become involved with the Society?

I was originally employed as a children's officer for the Society in Sydney. I ran Mini Vinnies in schools and buddies days for the children staying at our refuges.

As Vice President on the National Council, how do you see the Society's role in the region evolving?

I would love to see its role as a regional social justice advocate grow. I would like the Society to speak truth to power—wherever that that may be.



Pat Garcia

What are you most proud of about the Society?

I love the fact that the Society's members and volunteers get to see the impact of their work. I love the fact that we still believe that the little things matter—that our actions don't need to be measurable to have impact. I'm proud that we are a living

embodiment of the preferential option for the poor and vulnerable.

Do you think members from small towns and centres will have something different to contribute to the National Congress 2017 compared to their city counterparts? If so, why?

I think conferences, whether they're in the city or in the regions, are wonderful because they're authentically local. Conferences are able to respond to their communities in unique ways because they are part of the communities themselves. What I think we need to realise, though, is that not all communities are geographically based these days and the Society needs to adapt to permit conferences that service communities in need wherever that may be.

Will this be your first trip to South Australia?

No, I've been to South Australia a number of times. Adelaide is one of my favourite cities. ♦

Celina Lai: Vice President Twinning, St Vincent de Paul Society National Council of Australia

How did you first become involved with the Society?

I was invited to a meeting by a new friend I made at church. I had moved to a new town within the previous 12 months, but found it difficult to make new friends. Meeting Vinnies' members was fantastic—I've been here for 12 years now and my oldest and closest friends are from that first group!

What are you most proud of about the Society?

It is led by lay people and welcomes all people who wish to volunteer.

Do you think members from small towns and centres will have something different to contribute to the National Congress 2017 compared to their city counterparts? If so, why?

We need to understand how assistance is given in smaller communities and how to recruit and retain volunteers in smaller towns. ♦



Celina Lai

Retail Centres and the Vincentian identity

Rick Stankiewicz: Vice President Retail Centres, St Vincent de Paul Society National Council of Australia

How did you first become involved with the Society?

Through an invitation from a friend in my local parish.

As Vice President of Retail Centres, how do you see the Society's role in retail evolving?

In reaching out to our communities to fulfil Frederic Ozanam's vision, Vincentians recognise that we and our companions have needs well beyond the material.

More often than we would like to experience, however, we become aware of the need for basic material support—food, clothing and housing. Sadly, those material needs are growing.

Retail Centres have traditionally been a conduit for providing clothing. They have now become the main source of funds available to finance our many other services. Some \$170 million



Rick Stankiewicz

nationally is now generated each year (before covering the many costs involved), with \$70 million available for our services—and we continue to provide clothing, bedding and other homewares for those unable to purchase them through their own means.

To meet the many challenges in the competitive world of retail we need to become even more successful.

We need to actively seek out and identify ways and means to increase our revenues. For this purpose we need to increase the number of stores and to attract more customers. We must support the professional

development of our staff and volunteers and improve how we collect, deliver and present the generous donations intended for sale.

Importantly, we have a distinctive Vincentian identity which will ensure the success of our Retail Centres to achieve their potential to meet the needs of the communities. That identity includes an authentic welcome and attentive service for our customers, respect for the dignity of our companions, and an evident appreciation for our donors' generosity. A critical element of our identity is the purpose to which the retail revenues are directed.

We also need to recognise that the Retail Centres are the most tangible public face of the Society in the community and increasingly so.

Our communities of staff and volunteers must grow to 'exude' the Society spirit and identity. This is the most important step in the Retail Centres' evolution—success will increase community support for our activities, the work of our conferences, grow the retail business and enable our companions to more fully address their potential. ♦

Ben Hob, Design Director at Future Friendly, the organisers and facilitators of National Congress 2017

What is your position at Future Friendly?

I'm the Design Director, which means I ultimately look after all the things we need to do to make an experience meaningful—from discovering the needs and motivations of those we serve, to developing concepts with those people that will create positive change, to deciding what colour something should be.

Did you know a lot about the St Vincent de Paul Society before organising the congress?

My dad's been a conference member for many decades, and so I learned about the Society as a child ... when some of my favourite toys went 'missing', only to end up with a family in need during his home visitations!

What types of events or activities can members of the Society expect at the congress?

Because this congress is going to be workshop-oriented, it's going to be very immediate and hands-on—this

isn't an event to ratify documents in the abstract. We have some great speakers lined up that will inspire and challenge you, but primarily we are concentrating on making it a space for people to establish trust with each other and to work together in the here and now to kick-start some new initiatives in the Society.

It'll be a little different to what attendees might be used to, and we know that working together isn't always comfortable—we're counting on all of us to help each other move out of our comfort zones a bit—but it is always exciting and rewarding. ♦

Saving lives with text messages

BY VINCENT NGUYEN

The Australian Digital Inclusion Index published by RMIT measures the extent of digital inclusion in Australia. The latest Index was published last month and it shows an increase, nationally, of 3.8 points over the last four years, from 52.7 in 2014 when data was first collected to 56.5 in 2017.

In line with this trend we have observed an increase in visitations to the St Vincent de Paul Society's 'Vinnies' websites as well as donations made online over the same period. There is still much work to be done to close the gap between digitally included and excluded Australians and we will continue to monitor these developments and what impact they might have on the people the Society assists.

Internally we have taken advantage of new digital technologies to better collaborate and engage with the community. For instance video-conferencing is now widely used. It eliminates time-consuming and costly travel while enabling more productive meetings than the previous generation of telephone-based conferencing systems. With video-conferencing, attendees feel like they are in the same room, can share screens, annotate what's on the screens and text-chat. These meetings can also be recorded and played back for participants who could not attend. The technology is mature, works on computers and smartphones, is easy to use and an average internet connection is sufficient. It's usually free or only costs a fraction compared to traditional telephone-based conferencing systems.



We also use digital technologies to engage people and get them to become involved in the Society. As I was preparing this article an inspiring story came to mind.

In the May episode of *People Fixing the World*, published by the BBC, the reporter tells the story of an American paramedic who was able to use existing communication technologies to save lives in the Dominican Republic.

Jason Friesen was working as a translator for an NGO when he witnessed the devastation caused by hurricane Katrina in New Orleans in 2005. Watching the news on CNN during the weeks following, he realised he wanted to be involved in medical emergency relief missions. Jason decided to retrain as a paramedic. When a 7.0 magnitude earthquake struck near Port au Prince on 12 January 2010 he was among the first medical emergency relief teams to be deployed to Haiti. While in Haiti, Friesen had a revelation.

'During that experience it just became apparent to me that even if you had sent all the ambulances in the world to Haiti and given them advanced care paramedics with unlimited supplies of equipment materials, it wouldn't have made a difference. And the big reason is that if you want to have the 24-7, on demand, door-to-door ambulance services that we enjoy in

the wealthiest countries, you'd need at minimum two things: lots of money and very good roads everywhere.'

Since good roads and money for advanced paramedics are lacking in many countries, the challenge becomes how to build an emergency service when the two most critical things for a traditional ambulance service are not available.

Fortunately Friesen had another realisation. 'I left Haiti about a week or so later and the one thing that stuck out to me was that everybody has phones. And here we are in the middle of one of the worst disasters in modern history and everybody is connected to a cell phone and they're working. So communication isn't the problem. Another thing is that in all of these countries people do eventually get to the hospital. They just don't get there efficiently or necessarily as soon as they should. So there must be a way to coordinate something out of all these raw materials.'

Friesen founded Trek Medics, and in 2013 it began operation in the small towns of Manzanillo and Guayubin in the Dominican Republic, the country next to Haiti. Guayubin is a poor rural community surrounded by farmland and banana plantations with rocky tracks more suited to goats than ambulances.

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REFLECTION ONE

Placing our lives in the potter's hands

BY FR TROY BOBBIN

The National Council has, for the first time in more than 60 years, agreed to hold a National Congress in 2017. The Society is very excited to be holding this historic gathering at St Aloysius College in Adelaide on the weekend of 6–8 October 2017. We are expecting somewhere between 150 and 200 participants, consisting of Regional Council Presidents, National Council members, other targeted members, especially young people, and some staff.

As we approach this historic moment in the Society's journey in Australia, it might be good for all of us to reflect on how we can let the Holy Spirit mould us, just as a potter moulds their clay.

This metaphor was used in ancient times in the book of Jeremiah (18:1-6):

The word came to Jeremiah from the Lord: rise up, be off to the potter's house; there I will give you my message. I went down to the potter's house and there he was, working at the wheel. Whenever the object of clay which he was making turned out badly in his hands, he tried again, making of the clay another object of whatever sort he pleased. Then the word of the Lord came to me: Can I not do to you, house of Israel, as this potter has done? Indeed, like clay in the hands of the potter, so are you in my hands, house of Israel.

As we journey as members of a spiritual movement for social justice and love, let us begin to be open to the hands of the potter, our God, and feel the tenderness of this inexhaustible love.

Far from being something to be ashamed of, it is actually good to know that we are not complete. As human beings we are far from complete and as a movement of faith, hope and love, the St Vincent de Paul Society is far from complete.



Fr Troy Bobbin

We need our God to complete us, a God who comes to us through each other and through the people we assist, our companions with whom we break bread and hope, who teach us the meaning of love, who are the sacrament of the presence of God in our lives.

Do you remember the first major interview that Pope Francis gave? The first question he was asked was: 'Who is Pope Francis?'

After reflecting for a moment, the new Pope replied, 'I am a sinner. But I trust in the infinite mercy and patience of our Lord Jesus Christ'.

This infinite mercy and patience is for all of us and for all who accompany us on our collective journey of building the Kingdom of God. Like Pope Francis, we take heart and are filled with courage because, in the words of St Paul in his Letter to the Romans (5:20): 'Where sin increased, grace overflowed all the more'. Or as Pope Francis has said, 'God is greater than our sin' (General Audience, 30 March 2016).

In other words, our journey towards the October congress is one in which we can feel free to reflect on our imperfections and failures as an organisation—our failures to see Christ in the people who are marginalised and excluded; our failures at times to really minister to their needs, to hear their hearts, to understand the new forms of inequality; our failures to love each other and to be a place of welcome, especially to people who we might feel are different to ourselves or who challenge our beliefs and assumptions.

For reflection

- 1 How does the St Vincent de Paul Society need to change?
- 2 How can we make the Society a place in which we are moulded anew by God?
- 3 Reflect on a time when you were changed by an encounter with God through someone who was marginalised. ♦

Fr Troy Bobbin is the St Vincent de Paul Society's National Council Spiritual Advisor.

REFLECTION TWO

A journey of faith

BY FR TROY BOBBIN

In our first National Congress Reflection we dwelt on the image of God as a patient and careful potter who walks with us, individually and collectively, to help us develop to our fullest potential as members of a spiritual movement for social justice.

In keeping with this powerful metaphor, it is useful to reflect on the opportunities God uses to melt us and mould us anew. This is why we seek the wisdom of the Spirit to be alert to God's work in our hearts. The truth is that the journey of melting and moulding is often painful as well as rewarding. To use a simple set of very human examples: Every time you sense that you should avoid saying or doing something harmful, realise that this is probably the Holy Spirit speaking to you. Recognise this as God's way of melting you. Every time you feel a prompting to show someone compassion or to be generous to someone, recognise that this, too, is probably the Holy Spirit—this time moulding you.

There is always an element of trial and error involved in letting the Spirit melt us and mould us. There is always an element of risk as you step out in faith to follow these promptings. Sometimes you'll get it right, sometimes you'll get it wrong. But if you're trying your best, and if you're staying open to the Lord, you can be at peace, knowing that you are safe in the potter's hands.

As Vincentians, we are challenged to recognise the promptings of the Holy Spirit when we encounter Christ in the people experiencing marginalisation, our companions with whom we are privileged to share the sacrament of time.

Remember the story of Simon Peter's denial of Christ?

Simon Peter and another disciple were following Jesus. Because this disciple was known to the high



priest, he went with Jesus into the high priest's courtyard, but Peter had to wait outside at the door. The other disciple, who was known to the high priest, came back, spoke to the girl on duty there and brought Peter in. 'You are not one of his disciples, are you?' the girl at the door asked Peter. He replied, 'I am not.' ... As Simon Peter stood warming himself, he was asked, 'You are not one of his disciples, are you?' He denied it, saying, 'I am not.' One of the high priest's servants, a relative of the man whose ear Peter had cut off, challenged him, 'Didn't I see you with him in the olive grove?' Again Peter denied it, and at that moment a rooster began to crow. (John 18:13–27)

As we read through this tragic narrative we must ask ourselves the difficult question: do we ever deny Christ?

I do not believe that we deny Christ in the sense of denying our faith to the world. What I do wonder, however, is whether at times we deny to ourselves that we are actually meeting Christ in our companions.

The Holy Spirit gently but firmly whispers the questions to our hearts:

Didn't I see you with Christ when you were visiting that young mother and her two children in the cramped flat last night? Wasn't it Christ I saw you with last week as you sat with the old man who was very much alone and wondering how he was going to keep the electricity on?

I suspect that, for all of us, and this is precisely the nature of the journey of melting and moulding by the Spirit, our immediate response is sometimes: *No! It was not Christ we were with. That was someone else!*

May we journey to that beautiful recognition that it is Christ we encounter in our companions and that our encounters can be both deeply human and truly sacred. Like the journey of faith itself!

For reflection

- 1 In our journey as Vincentians we are careful not to deny our faith. But how do we sometimes deny our love? Or our hope?
- 2 Christ is our Teacher. What have we learned from him in our encounters with him during home visits? ♦

Father Troy Bobbin is Spiritual Advisor to the St Vincent de Paul Society National Council of Australia.

REFLECTION THREE

Questions of inequality and poverty

The St Vincent de Paul Society in Australia has been working towards a more just and compassionate society for 163 years, and we have a wealth of experience and tradition to draw from.

Over the past six months we have been speaking with conference members, volunteers, staff and companions to best understand how and why the Society exists and how it might need to change. The insights were clear and showed that the Society as a spiritual movement for social change is made of an extremely diverse collective of people who are deeply interconnected in their views and experiences.

In the lead-up to the congress we will be sharing some insights from this research, in an effort to invite members along on the journey of reflection that the National Council has been on in recent months.

We would like to share with you two key insights from the research, and ask you to participate in a related reflective activity that will help to shape our conversation over the course of the congress in October.

- Firstly, what we found in listening to Vincentians across Australia is that their commitment to the Society comes from a deeply spiritual desire for good coupled with a profound discomfort with injustice. Both of these impulses find a home in the Society but it is not always easy to find a path that nourishes the spirit while energising us to be a force for change in the world.
- This is the type of commitment that the St Vincent de Paul Society is built on. We're interested in the challenges for change that exist not only within society at large but also within the St Vincent de Paul Society at the beginning of the 21st century, and the opportunities that come along with them.
- Secondly, we found that when it comes to integrating our mission with our lives it is clear that one size does not fit all. While there exists an overarching understanding of and commitment to how and why we do our work,

we are a collective of individuals, thousands strong and spread across the nation. Amongst ourselves there are differences that we must acknowledge and accept in order to harness the opportunities that the future presents.

To help us further prepare for the congress, please take a few minutes to answer the following three reflection questions in this link: <https://mentallyfriendly.typeform.com/to/HKM8AZ>

- 1 What do you feel that the Society is currently doing well when it comes to helping people experiencing poverty and inequality in your community?
- 2 What do you feel are the greatest challenges currently facing the Society when it comes to helping people experiencing poverty and inequality in your community?
- 3 Do you have any questions for us, or is there anything else you'd like to add before you go? ♦

REFLECTION FOUR

Exploring the notion of change

We invite you to reflect on the notion of change. The drive for positive social change is the energy that brings us together as Vincentians. Yet change can sometimes feel daunting and present itself in unwelcome ways.

In speaking with conference members, volunteers, staff and companions over the last few months, we have gained a very helpful insight about change in the Society. When, through our ministry, we are confronted with social reality, we often feel an even stronger and more passionate motivation for social justice and social change. However, along with this urge for change is the

presence of friction in relation to the unfamiliar.

We are thrilled to welcome Professor Larissa Behrendt to address the 2017 National Congress with a clear-sighted view of difference, change and how these relate to social justice. The world is changing rapidly and we need to change with it: what is the future of how innovation and social impact relate? And how do we strike a balance between keeping up and not leaving anyone behind?

To help us further prepare for National Congress, we invite you to answer the below questions on your thoughts and experience with change

in the Society as well as in your community. Please share your answers with us by following this link: <https://mentallyfriendly.typeform.com/to/ZwKOjO>

1. What positive changes have you noticed or experienced in the Society or in your community over the beginning of the 21st Century?
2. What changes have occurred in recent years in the Society or in your community that you have felt to have a negative impact? Why were these changes negative?
3. How do you feel about the idea of future changes in the Society? ♦

REFLECTION FIVE

Opening our hearts and minds

In recent months we have invited you to share with us the challenges and successes you see and experience as a part of the Society in this day and age. We'd like to thank you for your openness and honesty in your responses, and invite you to reflect on one of the themes that sung out to us; how can we cherish our history and heritage in a way that inspires diversity rather than restricts?

As Vincentians, the heritage of our Society and the faith that underpins it are a central source of strength, community, and inspiration. However, as a Society, we are becoming increasingly aware of our weaknesses when it comes to youth engagement and diversity - a challenge that we cannot ignore if the spirit of the Society is to flourish and grow.

As we move further into the 21st Century, we must open our hearts

and minds to those who can continue to champion our mission for years to come. We are at a point in time in which we need to move forward, yet we have a heritage that we do not want to lose sight of. This challenge is a deeply personal one to us all, and one that all Vincentians deserve a voice at the table when it comes to discussing.

On the Saturday of congress, we have set aside some time for panel discussions. These panels will assemble a small group of great thinkers from both within and beyond the Society, and will centre on some of the key themes that have emerged from our research.

Please take this opportunity to reflect on our past, our present, and our future as a Society, and how we might shed our restrictions and step into the future, stronger, more inspired, and more diverse than ever before. The following

reflection questions can be answered via this link: <https://mentallyfriendly.typeform.com/to/hmLrtG>

1. How does our heritage inspire you and the work you do as a part of the Society?
2. What elements of our heritage do you feel are critical to not lose sight of as we consider our future?
3. Inspiration can often surprise us in its source and its form. Has there been an occasion in which you have been inspired in an unexpected way or through an unexpected source? If yes, tell us more.
4. How do you feel that we, as a Society, could broaden our horizons and embrace greater diversity - in our membership as well as our sources of inspiration? ♦

REFLECTION SIX

Preparation for National Congress 2017

Welcome to the sixth Reflection in the lead up to our fast-approaching 2017 National Congress. Over the last few weeks we've been asking you to ponder and share your thoughts and experiences regarding our current challenges, our mindset toward change, and how we might hold on to the dearest parts of our history and heritage as we embark on our journey further into the 21st Century as a Society. Your responses thus far have been incredibly insightful and we are looking forward to collaborating with you on these issues in the just a few short weeks.

On the Saturday afternoon of congress, we will be breaking out into teams to work together to come up with ideas and imaginings on the challenges and opportunities that face us as a Society today. Now, we'd like to share some of the key challenges that you've brought

to our attention so far, and invite you to reflect on which are the nearest and dearest to you, and how you think we could face these challenges head on.

We are, of course, not expecting you to come up with the answers alone. For this reflection, we encourage you to talk with your fellow Vincentians, your Companions, your family, friends, and community, and be inspired by the perspectives and solutions they bring to the table.

Please share your thoughts and responses to the questions below via this link: <https://mentallyfriendly.typeform.com/to/azLJxI>

1. Out of the following challenges currently facing us as a Society, what do you feel most passionately about solving?

- a. Helping Companions change their circumstances by delivering on our 'hand-up' rather than a 'hand-out' promise
- b. The increasing costs of utilities and rent within the community
- c. Better networking with other organisations helping disadvantaged Australians
- d. The 'corporatisation' of the Society
- e. Improving youth engagement and increasingly ageing member base
- f. Developing greater openness to people who, despite potential differences, want to help us in our mission
- g. Visibility of the Society in relation to publicity and lobbying
- h. Other (please specify)

2. Thinking of your chosen challenge, how do you think that we as Vincentians can come together to solve this challenge? ♦

As good as it gets or as good as it could be? Benchmarking human rights in Australia

Professor Larissa Behrendt is Professor of Law and Director of Research at the Jumbunna Indigenous House of Learning at the University of Technology, Sydney. Prof. Behrendt will deliver the keynote speech at the Society's National Congress 2017 on Saturday 7 October on the topic 'A sign of the times'. The following excerpt is from a previous speech Prof. Behrendt gave on the topic of human rights and self-determination for Aboriginal Australians. The points Prof. Behrendt makes in the speech are still relevant a decade on, especially in light of the recent Uluru Statement from the Heart, which called for the establishment of a First Nations Voice enshrined in the Constitution

The Role of a Rights Framework

In the current conservative climate, there has been, in some quarters, a failure to appreciate the important role that respect of rights plays in balancing the freedom of the individual from the tyranny of government. Discussion of rights tends to be dismissed as the folly and luxury of the elite who are out of touch with the realities of the day-to-day lives of the masses.

This simplistic rhetoric fails to appreciate the important role rights play in the small details of people's



Professor
Larissa Behrendt

lives. Rights such as access to education, adequate health care, employment, due process before the law, freedom of movement and equality before the law target the very freedoms that an individual needs to be able to live with dignity. They are precious and they are inherent and should not be given merely at the benevolence of government.

Bills of Rights are not about curtailing the rights of the majority. And they are not about giving more power to judges. Bills of Rights are aimed at ensuring a better balance between the rights of individuals against the state and as such are more often an infringement on the rights of governments than the rights of people.

Thomas Jefferson wrote: 'The natural progress of things is for liberty to yield and governments to gain ground'.¹ It is as true today as when he penned those words in 1788, the year in which the colonisation of Aboriginal Australia began. And Aboriginal people have experienced in recent years the infringement of human rights that cannot be rectified.

Native title that has been extinguished will never be regained, cultural heritage that has been destroyed will never be recovered and failure to access adequate health services and opportunities for basic standards of education are difficult, sometimes impossible, to rectify. In fact, these losses are a reminder of why it is important to have rights protections in place when society moves away from valuing the importance of the rights of the vulnerable.

And it is these experiences of the infringements of the rights of the vulnerable that need to remain our focus. It is not enough to say that our human rights standards are better than other countries who have more brutal and systemic abuses of rights than those that occur on Australian soil. I firstly question why it is worse for an Aboriginal child to experience third world levels of health care than for the child actually living in the third world. And secondly, it is not enough that we are better than the worst offenders on a human rights report card; we should be the best society that we can be.

As has been attributed to Thomas Paine:

*When it shall be said in any country in the world, 'My poor are happy; neither ignorance nor distress is to be found among them; my jails are empty of prisoners, my streets of beggars; the aged are not in want, the taxes are not oppressive; the rational world is my friend, because I am the friend of its happiness': when these things can be said, then may that country boast of its constitution and its government.*²

In this way, a human rights framework can be a benchmark. And while there is more acceptance of a rights framework that protects civil and political rights, there has been less support for economic, social and cultural rights. The latter have often been deemed too difficult to legislate into a rights framework. But is it too difficult? I would estimate that eradicating illiteracy from Australia would be a harder task than erasing it from India. The Indian Constitution was recently changed to include a right to education and during my visit their highest court deemed that this meant that the states, regardless of their economy, were required to put adequate resources into the education system and ensure that all children had an education (there are an estimated 10 million children who do not go to school!). This gives states in India a duty to put more resources into education and so prioritise it over other things. While the rights agenda is out of favour with our federal government, it is interesting to see how other countries, with far deeper socio-economic issues to tackle than us, are using a simple right like the right to education to make a difference. It is a strategy that puts the emphasis on government to make the issue a priority.

One final aspect of a rights agenda that needs to be addressed is the constant claim within political rhetoric that 'self-determination' has failed so we need to move on to other ideas. The 'self-determination' that failed was a government agenda that weakly promoted Indigenous participation but fell far short of Indigenous aspirations for self-determination. It was the era of ATSIC and most of the rhetoric implies that ATSIC failed. Indigenous disadvantage might not have ended in the ATSIC era. Of course, ATSIC did not have fiscal responsibility for health and education. They were still the responsibility of federal and state and territory governments. ATSIC was a convenient scapegoat. But it was also a strong advocate on where the governments of all levels failed to meet basic human rights standards. And many think that success goes further to explain why they were dismantled.

'Self-determination' as a policy failed because, while it changed the dominant philosophy of paternalism to the notion of self-management, it co-opted Indigenous people into decision making processes but did not seek to alter structures or institutions. It did not seek to give Aboriginal people, at the grassroots level, capacity to make decisions over the policies that affected them and the programs that were delivered into their community. In short, the policy of 'self-determination' did not go far enough in devolving power from government to Aboriginal people.

This means that, while it is true to say that 'self-determination' as the Labor Party implemented the policy was a failure, it is not true to say that self-determination as a fundamental human rights principle failed. In the sense that

Indigenous people aspire to both self-determination and the right as understood under international law, no government has ever attempted to use it as a basis for policy. Despite that, too many commentators are using the catch-phrase that 'self-determination has failed' and making the additional, erroneous, step that there is proof that the rights agenda has failed. There is no such proof. There has never been a time when self-determination in its true sense was the key basis for the approach to Indigenous policy.

And self-determination is not just a principle or ideology. If governments are concerned to implement research-based policy, they would do well to look at similar jurisdictions like Canada where models of self-government based on a stronger adoption of the principle of self-determination are leading to better socio-economic outcomes for Aboriginal communities. It is proven that the more involved Indigenous people are with decision-making over policy and programs and their implementation, the more effective they are likely to be. It is this principle that should provide a cornerstone for a research-based approach to policy. ♦

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1. Looney Jefferson (ed), *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson: Retirement Series* (2004).
 2. Thomas Paine, *Rights of Man* (1984).
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Read the article in full at:
<http://bit.ly/2xB5LKx>

To view more of Prof. Behrendt's work please visit <http://bit.ly/2vO7BFS>

You can also listen to her show on ABC Radio <http://ab.co/2vNiyaK>

Prof. Larissa Behrendt is a Euleyayi/Kamillaroi woman. She is the Director of Research at the Jumbunna Indigenous House of Learning and Chair of Indigenous Research at the University of Technology, Sydney. She is a barrister, writer and filmmaker and is the host of Speaking Out on ABC Radio.

Marketisation and competition policy:

Challenges and opportunities for the faith-based social services sector

BY DENIS FITZGERALD

Introduction

Competition and efficiently working markets have their role to play, but collaboration, not competition, and mission, not markets, should be the drivers of social service delivery in the 21st century. These are central issues for faith-based service providers. Related to this, these bodies can only achieve their potential in service and advocacy and be true to their prophetic calling if they also develop and advance a new vision of a society informed by the needs of all. Formation for leaders and broad-ranging collaboration and dialogue are necessary if they are to rise to this pressing challenge.

In March the news media was full of accounts of the failure of energy markets in Australia—state-wide blackouts, galloping rises in gas and power prices, fears of gas shortages in a country soon to be the world's largest producer, and the much higher profits of retail suppliers in Victoria compared with other states. This was not always the narrative. In Victoria, the disaggregation of the power industry—separating out generation, reticulation and retail—and its subsequent privatisation were promoted as the high point of micro-economic reform in the 1990s and beyond. Greater efficiency and lower prices through market competition



PHOTO: ANNIE SPRATT/UNSPASH

and consumer protection through a strong regulatory framework were promoted as key benefits from these reforms.

Many human services operate in markets that are shaped by government: general practitioners, private schools, universities, private hospitals, aged care and, increasingly, disability services and support. Vocational education too was catapulted into a market environment over the past decade in what is generally considered to have been a disaster for students and for existing government providers, as some private sector participants exploited the sector in ways that had not been envisaged by the policy makers.

The 2015 Competition Policy Review, chaired by Ian Harper, recommended further examination of human services. An ongoing review by the Productivity Commission 'into the increased application of competition, contestability and informed user choice to human services' is part of a response to that recommendation. The experience of the electricity sector and beyond

indicates that we should proceed with great caution in further marketising human services.

Competitive markets and social wellbeing

Competition policy analysis tends to assume that competitive markets, in which the private sector can participate, can provide services that are both cheaper and of better quality, and more responsive to the needs of 'consumers'. Related to this, informed consumer choice underpins new models of funding for service delivery, as illustrated by government-funded employment services, aged care and the National Disability Insurance Scheme model. Competition between service providers is an essential feature of these markets.

Increases in consumer choice, efficiency and innovation can indeed be associated with competitive markets. And, in some influential circles, moving health, education and social services into a market-driven environment, with the inevitable entrance into service delivery in these areas of the private sector, is

considered to be an important way to improve consumer access and outcomes.

But there are many reasons to question this idealised position and to proceed slowly and with care. The lessons from recent history make clear that there are significant risks in dramatic changes to the ways that governments control or influence the various aspects of markets. If they get things wrong, citizens and the community can be worse off. Changes need to be introduced with caution, and, in this context, the Productivity Commission Inquiry is a welcome step. Market rules and behaviours should only be considered if they can be shown to enhance the outcomes of social service delivery.

The reason for this caution is not that the private sector is not capable of delivering any high quality human services—see, for example, the work of general practitioners—but that a system built around a private sector paradigm can have adverse consequences for society.

While competition policy may have important insights for the community sector, hasty implementation has in the past damaged the delivery of services and affected clients and institutions alike. Competition policy should complement, not replace, the way in which the sector works.

To touch on just some of the risks to the community:

- In the world of ‘marketisation’, viability for not-for-profit social service agencies becomes a real and, indeed, an urgent issue. This is important because it is only mission-driven agencies that care for those people who are at the margins—those who don’t have the wherewithal to participate in markets and who will never be attractive customers to a profit-focussed service. Nor are for-profit bodies able to mobilise volunteers



in the numbers that are attracted to faith-based and other community sector organisations.

- Advances in the community sector in Australia have been built upon a rich tradition of cooperation between willing volunteers and trained specialists. Experience has shown that, in a financially competitive sector, cost-conscious organisations may limit services, use volunteers sparingly and cherry-pick clients. Cooperation is an early casualty.
- The benefits delivered by the sector to the most vulnerable in our community are outcomes of relationships between service providers and the people they serve. At their best, relationships over time and ‘wrap-around’ services that faith-based and other not-for-profit social services provide complement and enrich the basic services, and add value to the recipient beyond the basic service provided. This is not common among for-profit providers.
- Many disadvantaged people are unable to equip themselves

with the knowledge or financial means to make optimal market choices. Moreover, some of the most disadvantaged people in our communities survive and thrive only because of long-term relationships with dedicated and expert service providers, often particular individuals. The rapid introduction of commissioning in recent times has caused needless destruction of many such relationships. When people have no capacity-to-pay or experience severe disadvantage, choice is limited and a different paradigm is required.

It is an existential imperative for the faith-based and broader community service sector to engage actively with these issues. But this is far from easy. It requires an investment over time in analysis, reflection and dialogue, leading to advocacy and other action. The relatively rapid turnover of staff in the relevant agencies, the distance between issues of completion policy and the day-to-day work of agencies, and the many demands on leaders in the sector make such an investment challenging.

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A measure of this challenge is that there were so few community sector submissions in response to the initial issues paper issued by the Harper Review. Another is that the 'recommissioning' of community mental health services by the Victorian Government in 2014, which saw a broad loss in funding for community providers of mental health services for people on the margins, had been preceded by a consultation process, but that process did not lay bare many of the potential consequences of the proposed efficiency-driven approach.

The focus of the faith-based and community sectors on the current challenges of marketisation has been heightened by these episodes, by the advance of the NDIS and by other indications of the encroaching orthodoxy of the market. Further work is needed to ensure that this encroachment doesn't undermine the objectives that these sectors are committed to.

Mission, leadership and cooperation

The mission of faith-based social service agencies must surely shape their understanding of the role they play in the marketplace, but consideration at Catholic Social Services and beyond of these issues has also led to a focus on broader but related issues.

An overriding observation is the prophetic role such organisations must adopt, as we consider the fundamental place of mission and identity in shaping the social services that faith-based organisations provide. We are here to serve, not just to provide a service, and this must mean contributing an alternative paradigm of what constitutes a good society. Working towards, and advocating for, such an alternative, founded upon the gospel-inspired principles of Christian social thought, is central to this prophetic role.



PHOTO: NATHAN ANDERSON/UNSPLASH

This very soon raises multiple issues around the formation of those who would lead such a project and those who would contribute to it. A deep understanding of mission is needed, including of the pivotal role of Catholic Social Teaching principles (and their equivalents in Christian thought and social analysis generally), especially the principles of the dignity of the human person and the centrality of the Common Good, in contributing to growing a just, civil society.

For those who would lead such faith-based organisations, there is a need to be both theologically and professionally literate if their work is to find a relevant and appropriate place in our largely secular society. This requires more than a personal faith commitment or strong linkages within a Church structure, although these can be invaluable. It requires a familiarity and a confidence with the fundamentals of mission—including its source, how it can be nurtured and what implications it has for us as individuals and as organisations. And a solid foundation and confidence in our own mission is required to enable fluency in a new language with which to communicate about such

matters within our largely pluralist organisations, and with which to enable a new pragmatism around opportunities for collaboration in service and advocacy, while avoiding any diminishing of identity because of enmeshment with policy directions such as competition policy.

Such leaders will be found at all levels within an organisation, but will, one hopes, include a critical mass of people at board and executive level. They all need to be formed for this work. This formation will be complementary to their professional formation and development in the areas where any effective leader today must be competent: management, finance, social analysis, service provision, political nous etc.

Much work is being done to provide such development opportunities. There are various tertiary programs in Christian leadership: Catholic Health Australia has been at the forefront in development of high-level programs in governance and leadership in a Catholic health context; and many larger individual organisations, particularly those auspiced by religious congregations within the Catholic

Church, have internal programs for mission awareness and leadership development.

Catholic Social Services Victoria has developed a program of development opportunities designed to help meet the needs of smaller organisations, and of leaders whose time commitment falls short of that required by an accredited tertiary program. An annual series of workshops on mission inspired leadership; introductory programs in Catholic Social Teaching; regular conferences and associated publications to engage with others over the range of mission, service and justice issues that are part of the contemporary agenda: these all play a modest part in filling a gap.

This work also highlights the centrality of cooperation across agencies and across sectors in the broad project of ensuring that our mission does have a positive impact on those we are called to serve. This involves cooperation in those aspects of formation etc. that are explicitly faith-based, but also in reflection and analysis, and in those aspects of our service that are a common objective of the many talented people of goodwill across the community services sector.

Reflection on these issues has intersected with an active dialogue on the essential nature of faith-based social service providers in Australian society today. The Brotherhood of St Laurence, Jesuit Social Services and other agencies have contributed to this contemporary dialogue. Academics working from a faith-based perspective, such as economist Paul Oslington, social worker Beth Crisp, and social policy thinkers Paul Smythe and Doug Hynd, have been strong contributors.

In recent years, Catholic Social Services Victoria has worked with these organisations and people, as well as the Victorian Council of Churches, Catholic Social Services

Australia and many others, through seminars, workshops, submissions and the like. We have also brought these issues to the forefront in conferences in 2013 and 2016, exploring the impact and implications of mission for our member organisations working to build a more just and compassionate society.

Peak bodies at national and state level can play an effective role in facilitating such networking and collaboration, especially around leadership formation and advocacy. In addition, agencies themselves need to be sensitive to the urgency of working and reflecting together; and close relations across Churches and with the community sector generally are important, so that opportunities to articulate and advocate for alternative social and economic models are fostered and not missed.

Seizing the day: advancing a vision of a better society

It has been said that we live not so much in an era of change but rather a change of era—in the language of the New Testament, a *kairos*, an opportune time for bringing about God's purpose. There is evidence that many of the concepts that have governed the way we think about our world, our environment, our economies and our social structures are in decline and that the time is ripe to begin a new conversation with a new language of justice, equality and the priority of those who are on the margins. If this is so, we must be prepared to intervene and influence this time of change.

Within the Catholic Church, Pope Francis has been a catalyst for such conversion. As one example, the 2015 Encyclical Letter *Laudato Si'* (On the care of our common home) had at its heart a call for ecological conversion, which required a re-appraisal of so much of our faith and life.

And international political developments have reminded us of the urgency of the project. The Brexit vote and the election of President Trump, linked as they are to growing inequality within many advanced capitalist societies and disenchantment with politics-as-usual, highlight the need for all people of good will to play their part in re-building a shared vision of society with which the whole community can identify. Such awareness is a first step; credible work for moving towards that vision is equally important.

If the mission and identity of faith-based organisations is to mean anything in practical terms, it surely must mean that we be proactive in advancing this dialogue about a new kind of economy with moral purpose, and a new kind of service system that invests in justice, compassion and equality.

Social service organisations deal every day with the most vulnerable members of society. They are therefore in a prime position to shift the economic debate from a language of individualism and consumerism to a language of communities and of the connectedness of communities to each other. A new conversation is called for that does not exclude moral purpose from economic goals or discard the necessity of investing in prevention and early intervention, giving priority to the poor and the most vulnerable. This conversation does not limit the definitions of service efficiency and improvement of outcomes to market-driven criteria but finds its roots in justice, participation and equity, all of which are foundational to the society we are called to envision and build.

If indeed this is a *Kairos* moment, then seizing this moment is an imperative for the sector, for much is at stake—including the integrity of the faith-based social services sector itself. Why is this so? Neo-liberal ideology, including competition policy

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and the marketisation of social services, threatens to marginalise such organisations as organs of the community and builders of a civil society, whose social capital is built upon the gospel-inspired principles of Christian social thought. They are not arms of government, simply state-contracted entities, working in an often uneasy alliance with government to deliver services to those in need.

In recent years, faith-based organisations have had their credibility impaired by the revelation of child sexual abuse within Churches and other institutions. Their authenticity requires that they ensure that they and the religious bodies

with which they are affiliated are safe places for all who are vulnerable, and do their very best to respond to the needs of those who have been abused.

Nevertheless, the not-for-profit social services sector generally, and organisations that have their origins in the Churches, still possess considerable leverage to engage with governments and society in an attempt to shift the debate. Their highly regarded work, along with their professionalism and expertise in service delivery and advocacy, gives them a credibility and authenticity from which to engage in a dialogue that promotes the principles of the common good and refuses to

marginalise the role of spirituality or a theological narrative in adding value to the services of faith-based organisations.

To be true to its calling, the faith-based social services sector must rise to these challenges, even as it engages intensively with the issues and challenges of greater competition and marketisation. ♦

Denis Fitzgerald is the Executive Director of Catholic Social Services Victoria. In that role he has led a focus on the implications of mission for the work of Catholic social service providers, and the development of formation opportunities for contributors in the sector. This article was first published in *Zadok Perspectives* winter 2017 by Ethos, the Evangelical Alliance Centre for Christianity and Society. For more information visit www.ethos.org.au.

ANTI-POVERTY WEEK

15-21 October 2017

Poverty and severe hardship affect more than a million Australians. Around the world more than a billion people are desperately poor.

The main aims of Anti-Poverty Week are to:

- **strengthen public understanding** of the causes and consequences of poverty and hardship around the world and within Australia;
- **encourage research, discussion and action** to address these problems, including action by individuals, communities, organisations and governments.

Last year, at least 600 organisations around Australia participated in more than 400 activities during the Week, with a total participation of more than 10,000 people.

- > **Why not organise a display, stall or award?**
- > **Maybe a workshop, lecture or forum?**
- > **How about a fundraiser, fact sheet or petition?**

For information and ideas, visit the website, or email apw@antipovertyweek.org.au or call **1300 797 290**

www.antipovertyweek.org.au

**This is
a week
when we
can all
do something
about
poverty**



Just Art: Advocacy through art

BY CHEYNE PETTIT

Just Art is an art competition that makes advocacy accessible to all people, of all ages, through creative representation of a contemporary social justice issue.

The initiative grew out of the St Vincent de Paul Society Victoria's recognition that young and creative voices should be heard on important topics of social justice.

Just Art calls for participants to explore the competition's theme in context with the Society's values of compassion, respect, empathy and courage.

Just Art 2017 – First Australians

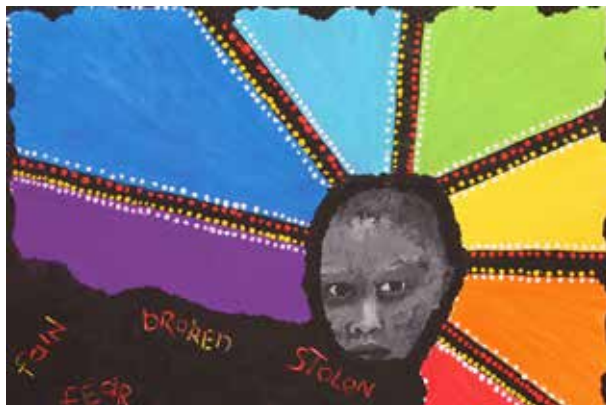
This year's theme 'First Australians' marks two important historic and cultural references: 25 years since the Mabo court decision and 50 years since the 1967 referendum. These milestones have helped to shape, and continue to shape, modern-day Australia.

As people who form the longest continuous culture in the world, our Indigenous Australians are a source of pride for our nation.

Just Art 2017 was a chance to celebrate the culture and strength of our first Australians, and to call for a genuine valuing of the indigeneity that is central to our Australian identity.

One of the Just Art judges was respected Shepparton-based Indigenous artist and member of the Stolen Generation, Eric Brown, who said the underlying message of the works was 'hope'.

"We're all on different levels of our journey, but at the end of the day the point is that we end up in the same place and connect together. We all want to walk together; no-one wants



to walk alone. Art is a way to connect with others," said Mr Brown.

Over 350 artists offered challenging and inspiring artworks that celebrate Indigenous culture and identity. These works invite us to see the strength, courage and endurance of humanity. They reflect on compassion and love. They prompt us to engage in what it means to be Australian by committing to an active reconciliation and valuing of the rich culture and spirituality of the first people of Australia. ♦

Top: This artwork 'My Stripes' by 14-year-old Georgia Collins was the 2017 Ozanam Award Winner. Georgia said the artwork was inspired by a strong theme of advocacy and "how a young Aboriginal child's smile symbolises love and hope for the future".

Above left: 'An Emerging Freedom', an artwork by St Peter's Catholic Primary School, Epping senior students received a Judge's Commendation. The students said: "As a collective – we feel the need to be the voice for the voiceless and create a future of hope and brightness."

Above right: This artwork 'Pride' by Maria Nguyen was the Open Visual Arts Winner. The artist said: "'Pride' is a piece that tells a story of an Indigenous man who reflects the strength and resilience of the First Australians from the outset."

Cheyne Pettit is Mission and Social Justice Coordinator – Secondary Schools and Team Leader of the Youth and Education Development Team at the St Vincent de Paul Society Victoria.

Immersion program

BY JULIANA KITTEL &
SARAH DIXON

In April, a group of 10 Vincentians from all over Australia touched down in the community of Nganmarriyanga (Palumpa) to kick off this year's National Immersion Program. We were deeply touched by the warm welcome we received from the community who shared their home, stories and spirituality with us over the two weeks.

During the first week, we headed to the local school to observe and support the teaching staff. Each class has a teacher's assistant, a local community member who acts as a bridge between the language of instruction—English, and the local language—Murrinhpatha. I was amazed by the collaboration among the teaching staff, who displayed skill, dedication, patience and care. I spent most of the week with the year 4/5 class. I really enjoyed the opportunity to connect with the children and spend some time with them individually to assist and encourage them with their tasks. I will always remember the bright smile of one boy that I sat with when he received praise and a sticker from his teacher for his creative writing. This experience in the school gave me a greater appreciation of the importance of education and the opportunities that it provides as well as the different realities and challenges faced by school communities in remote areas.

The children were excited as the week came to an end, as it



Members of the Nganmarriyanga community are pictured here with participants in the St Vincent de Paul Society's National Immersion Program 2017.

meant the holidays had finally arrived! The school grounds were converted for some games and activities run by the 'Vinnies mob' for the local kids (and the 'big kids') to enjoy. The days were packed with scavenger hunts, craft, sport, mini Olympics, cooking, team games and—who could forget?—the slip 'n' slide and great water balloon fight! The activities were met with enthusiasm from the kids, who gave free rein to their athletic, artistic, and sometimes competitive sides. Our mob trod home at the end of each day with exhausted bodies but hearts warmed and spirits lifted by the smiles of the children and the laughter we had shared.

We were lucky enough to join the local community in church over the Easter period. The deep spiritual connection the Indigenous culture shares with the environment was tangible,

particularly in the Mass celebrations. Palm Sunday saw a beautiful array of lilies, gathered by the children, lining the red dirt road that we travelled along towards the church, as we re-enacted Jesus' footsteps. On Good Friday the community travelled around the roads, re-enacting the Stations of the Cross, creating a powerful moving imagery. Saturday saw a vigil Mass around the bonfire where each person lit their candle from the fire, creating another powerful connection to nature and spirituality.

A highlight of our time came during Mass on our last day. The Vinnies mob had decided to give a blessing to the community, sharing a word with each member—'peace', 'compassion', 'hope' etc. This was a small way to pay our respects to them for the openness with which they had welcomed us. Following this, during communion one of the young boys who had spent the two weeks with us participating in the



program walked up to each one of us scattered throughout the crowd and placed his hand on our heads and gave us a blessing in return. This was not prompted by anyone, and was an incredibly special and powerful moment—one we will all remember.

Spending two weeks in community was a unique experience and such a privilege. Throughout our time in Nganmarriyanga we encountered the joy of the children, gained a greater understanding of the Indigenous culture, and built friendships that will remain engraved on our hearts. We highly recommend the experience to all to broaden your horizons and create a greater understanding of remote Australia and the Indigenous culture. ♦

Juliana Kittel and Sarah Dixon are members of the 2017 National Immersion group. For more details about the National Immersion Program visit www.vinnies.org.au/Immersion2018

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Before Trek Medics, if there were a medical emergency in Guayubin, someone would have to call the hospital directly and the hospital would, maybe, send a nurse and taxi to help.

Today if someone has an emergency in Guayubin, they call the local fire station and a text is sent out to everyone in the area to see: 1) who is available to help and, most importantly, 2) who's the nearest to the emergency scene.

The first insight Jason had for building his emergency response service was that it could rely entirely on volunteers.

Volunteers have one week of essential first-aid training. As paramedics Jason understood that the most important element of emergency service isn't high tech equipment or even highly trained paramedics, but access to the patient. That's why volunteers go straight to the scene on bikes. Trek Medics have also donated custom motorbikes with stretchers attached to get through those dirt paths.

Angela is one of the volunteers in Guayubin. She's a preschool teacher and mom of a small child. In the past nine months there were 61 emergency calls in her area and she was able to intervene 20 times. She vividly remembers one of her interventions: when she arrived on the scene a small boy was choking on something stuck in his throat. His parents didn't know what to do. She stuck her hand down his throat and got it out. She said he would have died if Trek Medics emergency system hadn't been in place.

The second insight was to use communication technology better. Noticing that almost everyone has a mobile phone, Jason realised there was a way to crowdsource help.

By replicating the essential

functions of a traditional dispatching system on a simple mobile phone, not necessarily a smartphone, Jason's system is able to 'coordinate, allocate and dispatch large numbers of resources simply through very basic text messages on any kind of mobile phone'. The cost of running this text-based emergency system is \$500 per month, compared to the \$10,000 of a traditional dispatcher alone used by ambulance services in developed countries.

It's inspiring to see how Jason managed to crowdsource help by leveraging existing mobile communication technologies. The solution costs little to run, is simple to use, and empowers the community to make a real impact in saving lives.

The upcoming National Congress is expected to gather hundreds of Vincentians from all over Australia. I hope the two-and-a-half days will see opportunities to share initiatives and experiences similar to Jason's in Guayubin. In a recent report, Google Australia found that 80 per cent of Australians have a mobile phone. I believe innovative solutions using mobile technologies could be developed to our organisation's advantage too. As the Society's National President, Graham West described it in the last issue of *The Record*: 'We live in an extraordinary time; a time of great challenges and opportunities—social, environmental, technological. There are new ways people connect, relate and get involved'. ♦

References:

People fixing the world,
<http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p052299k>
Australian Digital Inclusion Index,
<https://digitalinclusionindex.org.au/>
Video conference: <https://zoom.us>

Assist a Student

An education support program aimed at breaking the cycle of poverty.



Where we assist...

Assist a Student is a program of the St Vincent de Paul Society in Australia.

Donations from Australians are used to provide education support for students across partner countries in Asia and the Pacific.

Throughout partner countries, local St Vincent de Paul Society members select students from families in need to be supported by the program. They receive support for one year and the money donated contributes to their education needs.

The program includes students at all levels—from primary, secondary and post-secondary. Funds are allocated across the countries to ensure fair distribution. One of the program's strongest and most attractive features is that administration costs, funded by the Society, are kept at an absolute minimum.

No administration cost is deducted from your donation. 100% goes towards the students' education needs for one year.

100% of your donation goes to the students' education needs for one year.

It is a common belief that education improves a young person's opportunity of gaining useful employment, thereby increasing their ability to support themselves and their families in the future. It is a means of empowering an individual to break out of the cycle of poverty.

One of the most positive ways of helping families in need throughout Asia and the Pacific to become self sufficient is through education. The Assist a Student program gives you the opportunity to support the education of students in Asia and the Pacific. The students supported by this program may not be able to attend school without this assistance.

In choosing to donate money to the Assist a Student program, you are taking the opportunity to provide education support to overseas students in need throughout their education.

As well as this you will receive:

- A certificate with the student name, country and course of study for each \$70 donation.
- A complimentary copy of *The Record* with an Assist a Student insert will be sent annually.

NB: To protect the privacy and dignity of the student, and in accordance with The Rule of the St Vincent de Paul Society, photographs and addresses of the students are not provided.

Yes, I want to Assist a Student today!

To donate online please visit www.vinnies.org.au/aas

- ☐ I am an individual assisting a student; OR
☐ I am assisting a student on behalf of a group

NAME (group or individual): _____

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