

# the Record

Autumn 2017



St Vincent de Paul Society  
*good works*

# NATIONAL CONGRESS

2017

**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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## IN THIS ISSUE

### 3 EDITOR'S NOTE

### 4 FRONTLINES

From the National President, Graham West.

### 5 SOCIETY NEWS

Vincentians support asylum seekers at Canberra rally.  
Kate Barton receives ACT community services award.

### 6-8 CONGRESS 2017: TAKING THE NEXT STEP *by Dr John Falzon*

### 10-11 MORE SOCIETY NEWS

The Vincentians honoured this Australia Day.  
The Society's International President, Renato Lima de Oliveira, visits Canberra and Sydney.

### 13 PAST CONGRESSES

Congresses held from 1921 to 1954.

### 14-15 RENEWAL: WHY WE NEED TO HAVE A CONGRESS *by Brian Spencer*

### 15 MEMBER SURVEY

Why we need your input.

### 16 POVERTY IN OUTBACK NSW *by Leo Woodman*

### 17 VINNIES ON THE QUEENSLAND SUNSHINE COAST *by Bernie O'Brien*

### 18-19 FROM THE ARCHIVES

Mike Moran looks at a monumental congress the Society held in Adelaide, in 1936.

### 20-21 NEW STYLE OF CONFERENCE

Last days of Australian car production for Elizabeth, South Australia.

### 22 ANGLICARE RENTAL AFFORDABILITY SNAPSHOT/SCRAPPING OF NAHA AGREEMENT

### 23-25 PENALTY RATES *by Corinne Dobson*

### 25 YOUTH Michael Walter on ABC television's Q&A program.

### 26-27 CO-CREATING THE FUTURE OF THE ST VINCENT DE PAUL SOCIETY

### 27 MINI VINNIES

### 28-30 A HISTORY OF SOCIAL SECURITY IN AUSTRALIA *by Andrew Herscovitch and David Stanton*

### 31 POETRY *by Dr John Falzon* Solidarity is the tenderness of the people

### 32 OZANAM LECTURE Delivered by Marcelle Mogg.

### 33 HOMELESSNESS AND WOMEN IN THE NATION'S CAPITAL *by Rebecca Vassarotti*

### 35 ALTERNATIVE FACTS IN THE CENTRELINK DEBACLE *By Kasy Chambers*

### 36-37 POVERTY AND INEQUALITY IN AN AGE OF BUDGET REPAIR *by Frank Brennan*

### 38-39 FROM THE ARCHIVES National Presidents of the past.

# Editor's note

***Passionately written and frequently blunt, the Power and the Poor Box: Inside Vinnies, is full of thoughts by social justice journalist Cliff Baxter, on what the Society needs to be, in order for it to maintain its relevance to those it serves.***

Some of these relate to differing views over whether the Society should be known as a welfare organisation only, or one that also gets involved with social justice advocacy.

'The Society's future is not as a hand-out 'welfare' organisation, filling in the social gaps ignored by our national government, but as a spiritual organisation that can confirm and restore human dignity,' Mr Baxter, also a former editor of *The Catholic Weekly*, maintains in his yet-to-be published, early 2000s book.

'It can facilitate their discovery of the ability they have to change unjust social structures, and to find their rightful place in the community hitherto denied to them by those who hold the power.'

Fast forward to 2017, plans are underway for a congress in Adelaide in October, where there will be ample opportunities for attendees to discuss their views on achieving a positive vision for the Society's future.

Catering for up to 200, attendees will include regional council presidents, and a strong contingent of the Society's youth and staff. Participants will be invited to collectively analyse organisational challenges the Society faces, particularly in relation to membership.

Each person who comes will bring



with them, their own personal take on how the Society's work is and should be done.

For Bernie O'Brien, regional president of the St Vincent de Paul Society's Sunshine Coast Conference, a congress like this, the first of its kind in more than 60 years, 'allows us to see what others are doing, enabling us to learn from them.'

'Equally, the Congress will undoubtedly provide opportunities for interaction, learning and debate,' he adds.

For Leo Woodman, Regional President of Broken Hill, in the far west of outback NSW, networking is crucial.

'Aside from finding out what others are doing, we learn from their mistakes, and are open to new ideas and the possibility of changing the way we have always done things,' he said.

A key aim of the Congress is for attendees to return to their work with a new take on navigating the changing nature of social injustice, emerging manifestations of poverty, inequality, loneliness and exclusion.

In this edition of *The Record*, we

invite you to read about challenges facing regional presidents in Broken Hill, where isolation is all-pervading; in the outer northern Adelaide suburb of Elizabeth, where an entire industry is winding up; and at Queensland's Sunshine Coast, where low income people often struggle to find suitable accommodation in an area driven by tourism. For these stories, turn to pages 16, 17 and 20.

In an article on pages 14 and 15, the Society's South Australian State Premier Brian Spencer reminds us the world around us is changing, 'and we need to reconsider the needs of the people we serve and how we serve them.'

We are also inviting all of our Society's members to take part in a short survey ahead of the Congress (for more information, please see page 15). This will help organisers ensure we make the best use of our time together in Adelaide.

The Congress will be an opportunity to reflect on our own identity, mission and structure. It will also, however, be a time of analysing the new forms of poverty, inequality and marginalisation that the Society is called to address, which is why we have also devoted some space to these matters in this issue. ♦

# From the President



Former National President of the Society from 1972 – 1976, Ted Bacon, addressing a state congress in Orange, central west NSW, in 1966.

BY GRAHAM WEST

## ***Welcome to the first of our Congress themed editions of The Record.***

For much of the history of the Society in Australia, we gathered as members to ensure that we were not only responding to the challenges of the day, but also renewing our faith-filled commitment while ensuring that the Society was a vibrant and thriving part of the community.

Sadly, we have not done this at a national level for 60 years, despite the fact that gatherings like these occur in most countries where the Society has a presence, every few years. At an international level, they are held every six years.

By coming together we can ensure that our rich Vincentian tradition and

charism is enriched and refocussed, and that we are ready to respond to new and emerging forms of poverty.

We can learn from each other about ways to improve our membership as a Catholic social movement, responding to poverty wherever we find it, seeing Christ in the poor and in each other, and serving in hope.

That is why in October, we are encouraging all regions to join together in Adelaide, at St Aloysius College, to work collectively. Where a region is unable to send its president, we would ask that you consider sending a youthful representative on the region's behalf, to ensure that we benefit from the wisdom of all ages.

We are focussing on regions, as they represent areas where all conferences come together as one,

and because every area has its own challenges.

Preparation for the Congress will involve materials for reflection at a conference and regional level. These will be distributed from May until October, when the Congress begins. All members will be invited to complete a survey prepared by researchers from the University of Adelaide too.

Please take the time to complete the preregistration form, work through the materials, and gather in Adelaide to ensure that Ozanam's vision of a network of charity encompassing the whole world continues to thrive and give hope to all. ♦

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



# Vincentians come out in force in support of asylum seeker and refugee rights

***A strong contingent of Vincentians joined thousands of others in Canberra's Civic Square on 9 April for the Palm Sunday Refugee Rally.***

Waving blue banners stamped with Vinnies logos that soared high above the crowds, they were easy to spot among the many other faith based groups, unions, students, and political parties who came out in support of asylum seekers and refugees fleeing persecution.

Dr John Falzon, CEO of the St Vincent de Paul Society's National Council, told the crowd it was time to 'resist the politics of cruelty and replace it with the politics of love.'

'We are here because it is time for us as a nation to collectively dream of a society that does not lock people out, or lock people up, for the crime of hope,' he said.

Dr Falzon said refugees who fled from war, torture, persecution, pain and suffering, left with nothing but 'a nugget of hope so small, it could easily be mistaken for despair.'

'But friends it is not despair. Another kind of life is possible. And another



kind of world is possible. The time has come for us to offer protection to, rather than pretending that we need protection from, the people who seek refuge.'

Other speeches were given by former asylum seeker Jamila Ahmadi, who fled with her family from Afghanistan more than a decade ago, and later studied international and development studies at the University of Adelaide.

After the speeches the groups made for a colourful sight throughout

Canberra's city centre as they marched and chanted for refugees to be welcomed to Australian shores.

Some carried banners emblazoned with the words 'Refugee Policy a Wretched Disgrace' and 'Seeking asylum is not illegal' and 'Fear divides us. Human rights unite us.'

The event was organised by the Canberra Refugee Action Committee.

Other rallies like it took place across major capital cities and in some regional towns. ♦

## Kate Barton receives community service award

Vinnies ACT Youth Representative Kate Barton was acknowledged at the ACT government's Young Canberra Citizen of the Year Awards on 31 March.

She received the Individual Community Service Award.

A law student at the ANU, Kate has been a volunteer and member of Vinnies for seven years. She is also a swimming teacher, and has been



involved with summer camp programs in the United States.

Her exceptional work with the St Vincent de Paul

Youth Program has helped hundreds of vulnerable children and young people.

'The children are often traumatised through family histories of abuse and neglect, and have trouble trusting adults and forming positive connections,' Sarah Clifton, Director of Youth and Young Adults at the

Society's Canberra Goulburn office said.

'Kate is a gentle person who provides the structure and boundaries that children need to feel safe. She encourages them all to try their best and to aim high.'

The Young Canberra Citizen of the Year Awards marked the start of National Youth Week celebrations in the ACT.

Nominees include young people aged 12-25 years, who have achieved extraordinary personal achievements and made a significant contribution to the community. ♦

# Congress 2017: taking the next step

DR JOHN FALZON

***Inequality is injustice. It has many forms but it has only one meaning: that the people who bear the brunt of it are worth less, in the eyes of the society, than the people who benefit from it. There's no getting around it. We can kid ourselves that inequality signifies the luck of the draw or, worse, the fiction that those who work the hardest reap the greatest benefits in our society. The reality, however, is that inequality happens at the unique intersection of personal story and structural history. Colonised peoples, for example, such as the First Peoples of Australia, know only too well how the history of dispossession intersects with the personal stories of deaths in custody.***

The existence of inequality was at the heart of the story of the beginnings of the St Vincent de Paul Society. Its stark presence was what drove Frederic Ozanam and his young companions to hear the gospel of hope and liberation being proclaimed to them by the marginalised, the people who were considered by society to count for nothing, in biblical terms, the Poor of Yahweh.

The heart of the scriptures, and indeed the heart of our founding story as the St Vincent de Paul Society, is this good news of liberation, this deep and profound



hope that is found in the people who are crushed by structures of oppression and injustice.

My deepest hope is that it will also be at the heart of the October Congress this year. We are holding this congress to save our collective soul. It is easy to be swallowed up by a world that glories in inequality. It is easy for us to even be instrumental in preserving the injustice of inequality by our actions and thoughts and attitudes. We need to examine our hearts collectively as a social/spiritual movement dedicated to building a more just and compassionate society. The congress will be a space in which we can collectively reflect on where we have placed our priorities, and how these priorities compare with the core of the Gospel. It will also be a time for us to collectively, and courageously, imagine how we can better fulfil our sacred mission of solidarity and love in the future.

We live very much in a transactional world. It has become second nature to us to believe that you get what you pay for and you pay for what you get. This is a key reason why many organisations, from faith-based groups to clubs and trade unions, often struggle to gain or retain members. Because we are taught by a consumerist society that any investment of money or time or energy should be carefully chosen on the basis of what you get in return. This is the transactional culture, which is exemplified more by a gym membership than a spiritual or social movement membership. It is precisely this culture that the St Vincent de Paul Society prophetically questions. Our basis is not transactional, although it can easily fall into that mode when, for example, people feel that they are only doing good works in order to get to heaven! The heart of our calling is far more human, and





therefore far more sacred, than this mean-spirited approach. We stand with people who are crushed, not because we want something in return, but because it is a profound privilege to share their stories and their lives as sisters and brothers. In the same vein, we challenge the unjust structures not because we are “politicking” but because we have a sacred duty to challenge the causes of oppression rather than merely dealing with the results after they have occurred.

As the Prophet Isaiah puts so eloquently:

*Woe betide those who enact unjust laws and draft oppressive legislation, depriving the poor of justice, robbing the weakest of my people of their rights, plundering the widow and despoiling the fatherless. (Is 10:1-3)*

And as our Rule teaches:

*Where injustice, inequality, poverty or exclusion are due to unjust economic, political or social structures or to inadequate or unjust legislation, the Society should speak out clearly against the situation... (Part 1, 7.6)*

When we speak up against a social injustice the voices are many that come to condemn us.

This simply provides us with the opportunity to quote the beautiful words of Dom Helder Camara, the Brazilian Archbishop, who observed: *When I give bread to the poor, I am called a saint. But when I ask why they have no bread I am called a communist.*

This is to be expected since, not only do we stand in contrast to the transactional way of thinking but so too does our sense of a more just and compassionate society. We embrace a more gospel-based model of ensuring that no one misses out on the

necessities of life, more akin to the principle of: *from each according to their ability and to each according to their need*, rather than *you get what you pay for!*

As Blessed Frederic wrote:

*Do not be dismayed even if the hard-hearted rich, offended by your attitude, should accuse of communism.*

Current welfare “reforms” in Australia not only do not offer bread. They actually further degrade people. As J K Galbraith put it so accurately: *They are degraded, for in the literal sense they live outside the grades or categories which the community regards as acceptable.*

We urge governments and the community to embrace a politics of hope instead of the current politics of cruelty.

People are forced underground. They resurface in our prisons or on our streets. They’re forced to hock their furnishings, their personal possessions. They seek consolation in the arms of loan sharks and payday lenders.

When you put together the welfare reforms and the Industrial Relations reforms, what you get is a noxious distillation of policies that will drive many of our community’s most vulnerable members out of the frying pan and into the fire.

Australia at the dawn of the twenty-first century appears to be embarking on a road that will take it swiftly back into the nineteenth century.

It was in the nineteenth century, of course, that Blessed Frederic Ozanam called for many of the social policies that are now beginning to be undermined in Australia. He was unrelenting in his efforts to:

*continued on page 8 ►*



*In order from left to right. Jennifer Robson, Ray Akhurst, Kate Barton, Dr John Falzon, Sarah Clifton, Warwick Fulton, Cheryl Hamill, Anthony O'Connell. The group formed a strong contingent of Vincentians at the Palm Sunday 2017 Refugee Action Coalition Rally in Canberra on 9 April.*

*Provide education opportunities for unskilled workers.*

*Fight for the right of workers to organise themselves into unions and, if necessary, to strike against injustice.*

*Establish a strong, independent, compulsory arbitration and conciliation commission.*

*Secure minimum wages for the low-paid.*

*Build a social security system for the sick the injured the aged and the unemployed.*

*Reduce working hours so as to improve the quality of life for workers and their families.*

*Ensure that the taxation system was strongly graduated so that those on lower wages would be paying a much lower proportion of their incomes than the rich.*

*Secure legislation that would protect children from exploitation.*

We are still bound to speak up on these issues today because we have every reason to expect that the

combined effect of the Welfare and Industrial Relations Reforms will be a lowering of wages and a loss of conditions such as penalty rates and reasonable job security. This will result in an increase in the number of working poor Australians.

The scriptures are unequivocal in condemning these manifestations of structural injustice. Similarly, as Saint John Paul II put it: *The needs of the poor take priority over the desires of the rich, the rights of workers over the maximisation of profits.*

We in Australia have the wherewithal to systematically address the structural causes of exclusion. We can afford to provide affordable housing, education and training, childcare, healthcare, transport and social services. As the Social Policy Research Centre has shown, it would take around 2-3 per cent of our GDP to lift everyone out of poverty. The fact that we do not is a matter of choice, not affordability.

Blessed Frederic Ozanam wrote that: *Charity is the Samaritan who pours oil on the wounds of the traveller who*

*has been attacked. It is justice's role to prevent the attack.*

The magnificent members of the Society provide assistance to those who have been pushed to the margins of society. What people long for, more than charity, however, is justice and it is justice that we will not cease to clamour for.

Our October Congress is a time for us to ensure that we will continue to be there, flourishing in members and spirit, to both assist with love and to struggle for justice.

Pablo Casals, the great Catalan cellist, noted on the occasion of his 80th birthday: *The situation is hopeless. Let us take the next step.*

We see things a little differently in the St Vincent de Paul Society. We say that the situation is fraught with human pain but always filled with hope. What we agree on with Pablo Casals however is that we must courageously take the next step! ♦

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





## *What we imagine*

We are holding a congress in October 2017 in Adelaide. Around 200 participants will be invited to join us for a national gathering, the first of its kind in over 60 years.

We want it to be a time in which members, especially young people and those in leadership positions at a regional level, can come together to collectively imagine the future for the Society, based on our collective experience of belonging to a spiritual movement for social change.

We envisage the time together will critically encompass these two elements of our cultural identity, while acknowledging the great diversity in its expression:

1. The spiritual sense of who we are and how we relate to each other.
2. The social imperative to address injustice and to build a better society. ♦

# Australia Day Honours for Vincentians

***On 26 January, numerous volunteers and members of the St Vincent de Paul Society were recognised across Australia, for tirelessly providing a hand up to people in need.***

They included the following:

## Victoria

**Ken Wilson (OAM)** in the General Division. For service to people who are homeless, and in the community. Mr Wilson has worked as a volunteer on the Fitzroy and Collingwood Vinnies Soup Vans for more than 30 years, and has made an outstanding contribution to recording its treasured history through written works.

**John Gerrard O'Loughlin (OAM)** in the General Division, for service to the community through church and social welfare groups. Mr O'Loughlin has served as a member of the St Vincent de Paul Society Benalla Conference for more than 40 years as president, secretary, treasurer and/or committee member.

**Linda Marion Dessau (AC)** in the General Division, for eminent service to the people of Victoria through leadership roles in the judiciary, the advancement of economic ties and business relationships, and as a supporter of charitable, sporting and arts organisations. Linda has generously given her time to serving people experiencing hardship and homelessness, through being a member of the Vinnies Soup Van team in Victoria, and taking part in the CEO Sleepout event.

**Vedran Drakulic (OAM)** in the General Division, for service to the community through a range of charitable organisations. He was the highest fundraiser at the 2016 Vinnies CEO Sleepout event and is a consistent supporter of the works of the St Vincent de Paul Society.



*Gavin Houlihan (right) received recognition for his contribution to the Dairy Farmers Day Out initiative in Rochester, Victoria.*



*Paul and Michael Finch. Paul (right) received an OAM for his outstanding volunteer work with the St Vincent de Paul Society over more than 37 years.*

PHOTO COURTESY OF THE CATHOLIC LEADER.

**Gavin Houlihan.** Local Australia Day Committee Recognition, for his contribution to the Dairy Farmers Day Out initiative, hosted on 9 October 2016. Mr Houlihan is President of the Rochester Conference.

## Queensland

**Paul Finch (OAM)**, for service to the community, particularly to social welfare. Paul has been Conference President of Our Lady of the Way Catholic Church, Petrie, since 2013. He was treasurer from 1984 to 2013. His work with Vinnies has included crisis care, fundraising and administration.

Paul's son Michael, who nominated him for the award, estimates he has made around 5000 crisis care visits, whereby he has provided food and clothing, financial and emotional support to people suffering from domestic violence, the mentally ill, and the drug and alcohol dependent.

**Peter Conaghan** was named Livingstone Shire Council's Citizen of the Year, for giving back to the

community through volunteering with the St Vincent de Paul Society for more than half a century.

**Phillip Hoy** was one of 20 individuals acknowledged at the 2017 Lord Mayor's Australia Day Awards, at a ceremony at Brisbane's City Hall. The annual awards celebrate the achievements of otherwise unsung Brisbane heroes whose efforts have significantly improved the lives of individuals and communities.

## Western Australia

**Michael Playforth** was named the Stirling Community Citizen of the Year. Michael has been a volunteer at the St Vincent de Paul Society in Osborne Park for 30 years.

**Kerry Bayley** was awarded the City of Busselton's Citizen of the Year Award, for her tireless work in the community towards helping disadvantaged people.

**Marion Sewell OAM**, for services to youth in the communities of Albany and Tambellup. ♦

# International President of the St Vincent de Paul Society visits Canberra and Sydney

***The Society's International President, Renato Lima de Oliveira, was in Australia in late March, to meet staff and volunteers and learn about our work.***

Renato was elected the 16th President General of the International St Vincent de Paul Society in Rome last year.

Growing up in Brazil, he was involved with the Society from his early years, seeing the wonderful work carried out by members firsthand.

'I started at the Society as a teenager in 1986 in Brazil when I was in high school. At that time, my only objective was to serve the poor. I found the Conference a sacred place where I could not only serve the poor, but also enhance my religious understandings. It was my best choice in my life to become a Vincentian.'

Renato is particularly interested in youth development and services that help children and young adults living in poverty or disadvantage – part of the early intervention philosophy of the Society.

In Canberra he visited the National and Canberra/Goulburn offices. Renato also had time to meet staff and volunteers at the Vinnies retail shop, at Dickson, before he served lunch at the Blue Door, a drop in centre at Ainslie.

In Sydney a busy itinerary saw Renato visit services run by the Society in the city's inner-east, including the Matthew Talbot Hostel; the Ozanam Learning



*Top: Renato hanging out with NSW Broken Bay President Barry Finch and Special Works Manager David Murphy.*



*Left: Renato at the Society's Youth Reach Broken Bay centre, in northern Sydney.*

Centre, and Frederick House and Palliative Care Unit.

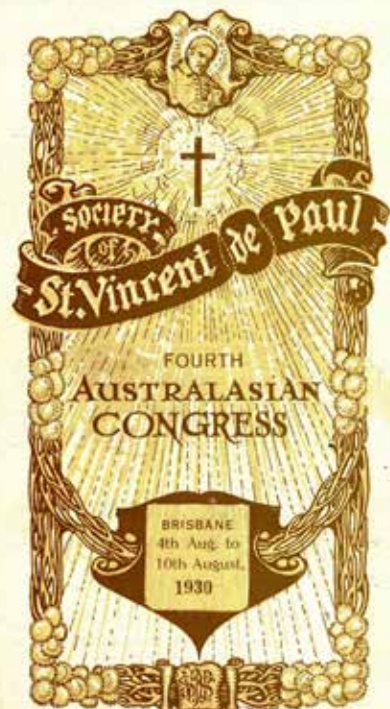
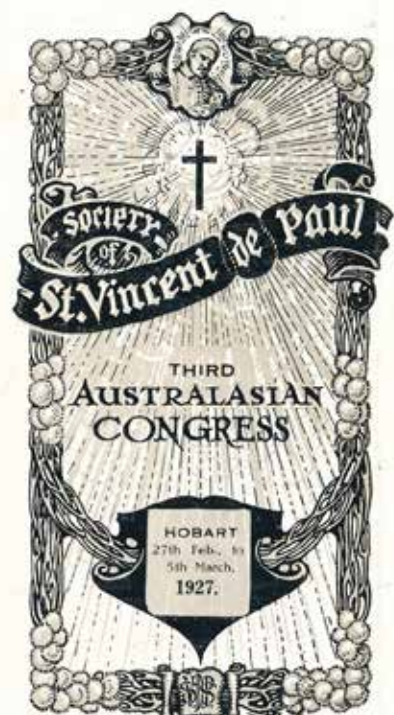
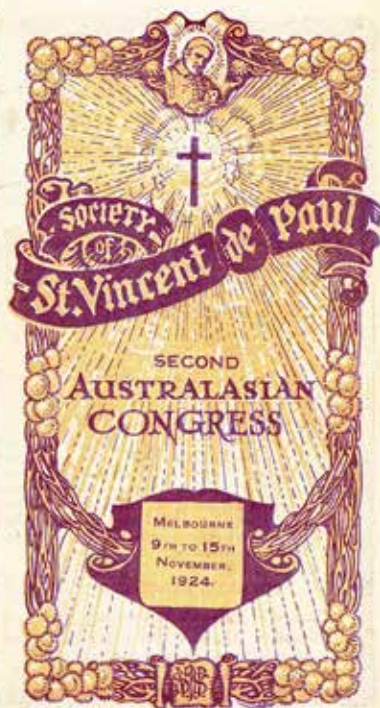
Renato also took in a Manly to Circular Quay ferry ride, and walked across the Sydney Harbour Bridge.

An afternoon at the Society's Youth Reach Broken Bay centre, in northern Sydney, saw Renato completely at ease with young people, staff and volunteers, who welcomed him with a barbecue.

The centre is a special works of the St Vincent de Paul Society, which delivers care and support for young people aged 11 to 24, who are at risk of homelessness or disengaging from the community. Services include recreational programs, resume and employment advice, and even barista training.

While looking at the centre's music studio, Renato jumped at the opportunity to try out his DJ skills, and even sang two songs, including Matt Maher's 'Lord, I need you.' ♦







# Past Congresses

***From 1921 to 1954 national congresses were a regular occurrence in the Society's calendar. Then they stopped. More than 60 years later, the future of the Society is set to be shaped by the 2017 Adelaide congress.***

In the last century there have been 10 congresses held by the St Vincent de Paul Society. The first of these was in Sydney, in 1921. The last one, also held in Sydney, was in 1954.

Others were held in Melbourne, Brisbane, Hobart and Adelaide.

Social activities were a very big part of the congresses, says Mike Moran, archivist for the St Vincent de Paul Society.

'While they were usually church related, consisting of visits to monasteries, schools and orphanages, attendees also took in tourist attractions.'

Papers and discussions focussed on the Society, its works and the spiritual life of its members, rather than on social issues or policies.

'There were no papers between 1921 and 1954 on what we would call social justice issues or Catholic social teaching. 'Catholic Action' popped up occasionally, but as a matter of religious zeal rather than social reform,' Moran adds.

At the first two congresses, in 1921 and 1924, visitors were put up by local members in their own homes. By the third congress, in 1927, this had started to change and visitors stayed in hotels.

Up to 1400 people attended the 1921 congress. And they came from as far afield as Perth and Rockhampton. An estimated 2000 attended the 1954 congress.



*In 1948, the Society held a congress at Nudgee Junior College, Indooroopilly, Brisbane.*



*A contingent of Vincentians leaving Sydney for Hobart to attend the 1951 congress.*

Why so long since our last national congress? And why hold one now?

Frank Brassil, National Treasurer of the St Vincent de Paul Society, says it is not the changes in the past 60 years or so that call for a national congress – it is the challenges that are coming, both for the Society and for the world in which it works.

'The key challenge for the Society is to retain its essential charism as a lay Catholic organisation fundamentally based on a Conference model, closely linked to the core values of Catholic faith and living the principles of Catholic Social Teaching,' he says.

The Society is now a broad and diverse organisation with a huge range of volunteers and thousands of staff, all of whom have a legitimate contribution to make to the future of the Society.

Equally, there are many thousands of people who volunteer at Centres and Special Works who are not Conference members, who make a wonderful

contribution to this large, diverse and truly extraordinary Society.

A major threat, says Brassil, is the risk of the Conference system slowly withering, as an aging membership gradually retires and is not replaced with new and vibrant members who are strongly committed to the mission and vision of the Society. This is a nationally consistent problem, and it needs a nationally consistent approach to address it.

'It is clear that we face critical challenges in sustaining the Society over the next 20 years and the people who should be most involved in determining the future of the Society are its members,' Brassil adds.

'That is what a congress is for – to enable members to come together to address important questions. I am confident that much good thinking and many good ideas can arise when Vincentians from many different places and backgrounds come together.' ♦

# Renewal: Why we need to have a congress in October

***Adelaide is hosting a congress for the Society's regional presidents and youth this October. It coincides with a need to address new forms of poverty and inequality, while attracting and retaining more youth, writes South Australian state president Brian Spencer.***



'Do not be afraid of new beginnings. Be creative. Be inventive. Organise new works of love in the service of the poor.'

These are challenging words from our Founder, Frederic Ozanam. Words that we should contemplate, as the needs of the communities we serve undergo change.

In October this year we are holding a Congress of Regional Presidents in Adelaide to consider:

- the spiritual sense of who we are and how we relate to each other, and
- the social imperative to address injustice and build a better society.

As part of meeting Frederic's challenge, we need to look at how we operate in our conferences and other works. The Rule of the St Vincent de Paul Society in Australia describes some of the characteristics we should strive for:

*Faithful to the spirit of its founders, the Society **constantly strives for renewal**, adapting to changing world conditions. Members of all ages strive to preserve **the spirit of youth**, which is characterised by **enthusiasm, adaptability and creative imagination**.<sup>1</sup>*

The Rule also refers to how we should treat one another. We are invited to share a deep relationship of solidarity

as brothers and sisters. How is it possible to love those we don't know if we are unable to love each other as brothers and sisters?

Members must experience three dimensions of the Society:

- Work for the poor, deprived and suffering
- Spiritual development
- Mutual support, inspiration and friendship.

Let's reflect on these aspects of *The Rule* and assess how we are going.

Do we have a culture in our own conference/shop/special work that is looking at new ways of meeting the needs of people in our community? One of enthusiasm and creativity, where new members and volunteers feel welcomed and able to contribute to our work? Do we operate in a way that makes it possible for younger people, working people, people we have assisted in the past, people from different ethnic and social backgrounds, to be able to join us and be part of what we do?

Or are we locked into the way we have always done things, finding it difficult to change or not seeing a need to change?

The world around us is changing and we need to reconsider the needs of the

people we serve and how we serve them.

Bertrand Ousset, the previous French National President, visited our National Council in November 2016. He outlined 'renewal initiatives' the Society is pursuing in his country, along with the new relationship it is attempting to build with the poor and marginalised.

'The Society must give a new place to people in a situation of precariousness', Mr Ousset said.

He maintained the importance of allowing people to feel active when he stated: 'Participation offers an opportunity of empowerment and renewed dignity. This will allow them in turn to serve their brothers or sisters.'

The French Fraternity Initiative is based on the concept that 'companionship with the most vulnerable people can transform societies'.

We in Australia also need to look at developing a new relationship with the people we are here to serve. Can we move our mindset from 'people we assist' or 'assistentship' to a relationship where 'eventually there is no beneficiary or caregiver, but rather, a meaningful friendship'?

'People we assist' might become



# Member survey

‘companions’, walking with us and giving us guidance so we can be part of their journey.

Mario Trinidad, who is the project leader of the Community Response Team pilot in South Australia, offers the following observations:

*The etymology of the word ‘companion’ is Middle English from Old French compaignon, literally ‘one who breaks bread with another’, based on Latin com ‘together with’ and panis ‘bread’. The English (com+pan+ion), the French (com+pagn+on) and the Spanish (com+pañ+ero) retain those roots. ‘Bread’ of course is a symbol for life.*

*From a Christian point of view, the word has strong Eucharistic undertones—it was at the Last Supper where Jesus called his disciples ‘friends’ and it was through the breaking of the bread that the disciples at Emmaus recognised the Risen Lord. Jesus calls himself ‘the bread of life’.*

*I think the word implies a mutuality of relationship: in the process of assisting others we—both the ‘helper’ and the ‘person we assist’—[should] discover our shared humanity. The ‘helping process’ allows us to enter into each other’s worlds. If we are open to it, our respective worlds become intertwined and enriched. It gradually ‘equalises’ the relationship. We accompany them, they accompany us—we are companions.*

Are we able to develop new relationships both within the Society and with the people we are here to serve? Challenging, isn’t it? But these are the type of challenges we need to contemplate as part of our Congress. ♦



***Jodie Conduit, a researcher from the University of Adelaide, is currently collating data to obtain insights into how the St Vincent de Paul Society can best support its members, so they in turn are empowered to break down the barriers that make people feel disenfranchised and marginalised.***

The survey contains a range of topics including how engaged members are with the Society, what motivates them to volunteer their time, their perceptions of the support they get from the Society, how well they feel they are able to provide support to people in need, and their intentions towards continuing to support the Society into the future.

Motivations to volunteer are many and varied and if we are to attract new members and volunteers while retaining existing ones, it is important to understand people’s reasons for joining and staying with the Society. For some, for example, socialising

with others is a side benefit of giving back to the community. For others, opportunities to learn new skills and perform tasks that bring about personal satisfaction are important.

Do our volunteers believe their work is making a worthwhile contribution to the community? And does the effort they put into improving people’s lives, in their view, influence real change?

We are also interested in knowing whether volunteers feel appreciated by the Society, and if suitable recognition is given. Are they likely to recommend volunteering with the Society to others?

‘The survey itself will only take about 15 minutes to complete, but the value to Vinnies of understanding how it can better support its members will be invaluable,’ Associate Professor Conduit said.

All members, not just those attending the October Congress, are encouraged to take part in the survey, which will be emailed in May, and uploaded onto the Society’s website.

**A link to the survey is also available at <http://bit.ly/2p2yKEE> ♦**

1. *The Rule*, 7th Edition 2012. Section 1.6, ‘Adaptation to a Changing World’.

# Poverty in the outback

BY LEO WOODMAN

***As preparations for a major gathering in Adelaide of regional presidents and others gets under way, Leo Woodman, President of the Broken Hill Conference, shares thoughts on attending to the needs of others in an outback NSW community.***

Broken Hill is a mining town located in the far west of NSW, with a population of 19,000.

The first St Vincent de Paul Society Conference in the town was formed in July 1906, and the Society has operated ever since with two more conferences, a meal centre and a shop. All are staffed by volunteers.

Like all Vinnies centres, the three conferences are required to address a variety of issues related to poverty on a daily basis.

The Bishop Fox meal centre serves 35 of the most vulnerable and lonely men and women each day.

Twice weekly, volunteers Mary Leebane, Margie and Steve Mahoney visit patients at the Broken Hill Hospital, especially those flown in by the Royal Flying Doctor Service from remote areas.

It is because of our isolation that we have a long history of doing things for ourselves, but this also means we don't get a chance to see what others are doing.

We work with other agencies in the city (Salvation Army, Department of Family and Community Services, Mental Health, Mission Australia, Lifeline, Domestic Violence), who face the same isolation.



***It is because of our isolation that we have a long history of doing things for ourselves, but this also means we don't get a chance to see what others are doing.***



*Top: Broken Hill Conference members Mary Leebane (Volunteer Manager, Far West Health), Margie and Steve Mahoney. The trio visits the Broken Hill Hospital twice weekly, assisting anyone in need, especially those who have been flown in by the Flying Doctor from remote areas; Bottom: Broken Hill, 30, on Pinterest*

We meet regularly and try to help each other where possible. When other agencies run out of funding to help the needy, Vinnies fills in the gaps.

We see networking with a range of agencies and other St Vincent de Paul regions as having many benefits. Aside from finding out what others are doing, we learn from their mistakes, and are open

to new ideas and the possibility of changing the way we have always done things.

We are looking forward to the upcoming congress in Adelaide, because we believe it will give regional presidents a chance to network with each other, while taking the Society forward in the coming years. ♦



***It's a different story on Queensland's Sunshine Coast, where tourism and a steadily increasing population pose unique challenges, writes Bernie O'Brien.***

The Sunshine Coast of Queensland is approximately 95km north of Brisbane, and bounded by Caloundra in the south, Noosa in the north, and the hinterland to the west. It has a steadily increasing population of more than 300,000, which raises its own challenges.

The region's nine conferences are supported by five Vinnies shops. The first conference in the area was St Joseph's, at Nambour, which was founded on 25 February 1929, and finally aggregated on 9 February 1950.<sup>1</sup>

The region differs from other areas of Queensland, in that it is a major tourist destination. A fair percentage of the population is mobile, and all conferences are kept busy servicing the disadvantaged in the area.

As one can imagine, demand for rental property in a tourist area is high, and suitable accommodation for the disadvantaged is scarce. Work in the tourism sector is transient and mostly part-time. Partly because of these factors, there are approximately 1600 homeless people in the region looking for a place to sleep each night.

The Society's Cornerstone Homelessness Services program in Nambour aims to, whenever possible, transition people straight from homelessness into stable, long-term housing, with support provided when necessary to sustain the tenancy. This approach minimises vulnerable people having to be moved through multiple short-term, temporary living situations, which can be unsettling and prevent their stabilisation.



Crisis accommodation is available at Rendu Lodge, at Kawana Waters (between Caloundra and Maroochydore) and at Mackillop Village, Nambour.

Education for disadvantaged children is a high priority for all conferences. A state-based Back-to-School Children Education Fund has been operating effectively for a number of years. All conferences can apply for funding through the grant, with more than \$260,000 distributed in 2016.

At Christmas time, all conferences assemble hampers that are delivered to disadvantaged families in their area. Several conference members have gotten involved with the local *Sunshine Coast Daily* newspaper's Adopt-a-Family program. In other instances, parishioners have made up a hamper for a family they have selected from a list prepared by their local conference, somewhat similar to the 'Jesse Tree' initiative run in some areas. Support was fantastic over Christmas 2016, with more than 500 hampers delivered.

In the Coolumb area, with the support of local Anglican, Uniting, Baptist, Salvation Army and Christian Family churches, Christmas gifts are provided for people who may be facing financial difficulties during the festive season. This program is known as 'The Spirit Of Christmas'.

Special works of the Society, namely

Compeer and Buddies programs, provide additional support. Compeer is an internationally recognised companionship program for people living with a mental illness. Volunteers are carefully matched with a companion who is receiving mental health treatment, and they meet each week to share in simple acts of friendship.

Our very successful Buddies Day program provides opportunities for disadvantaged children within the community to have a safe and enjoyable day out once a month, away from the routines and influences of their normal home situations. The program is open to children from the ages of eight to 12.

Networking with a range of agencies and other St Vincent de Paul regions has many proven benefits, as it allows us to see what others are doing, enabling us to learn from them. Equally, this year's congress in Adelaide will undoubtedly provide opportunities for interaction, learning and debate. ♦

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Bernie O'Brien is Regional President of the St Vincent de Paul Society Sunshine Coast.

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1. To be aggregated a conference must have been established for at least 12 months, be actively engaged in all works of the Society and make a written application through the National Council to the International Council. Until the aggregation takes place, the conference is 'on trial' and does not officially have all the privileges associated with being a conference.



# Adelaide, 1936

BY MIKE MORAN

***Ahead of the October congress, our national archivist Mike Moran has taken a look at congresses of the past—in particular, one hosted by Adelaide back in 1936.***

We're a weird mob in the St Vincent de Paul Society. Witness the names we give things. What we call 'conferences' other people would call 'committees'. And what we call 'congresses' other people would probably call 'conferences'. In the interests of diversity our history has also featured many 'conventions'.

It goes back to our French origins and our adoption of French terms. For example, our regional councils were once known as 'particular' councils from a translation of obscure French provenance. If Ozanam had been Irish rather than French, things would be clearer.

In October we are holding a national congress in Adelaide. Regional Presidents and other Society members from all over Australia will attend.

We've held all sorts of congresses in our history, national and state. We held national triennial congresses for 30 years before they were replaced by state congresses for cost reasons. We've held 'intra-state' congresses, such as one at Ballarat in 1959, and even a devolved or virtual congress, the tercentenary congress in 1960, to celebrate the 300th anniversary of St Vincent de Paul himself. In that case there was no central meeting but a series of celebrations all over the country.

Our first national youth congress was at Lavender Bay, NSW in 1963—young men only in those days—and our most recent at North Tamborine, Queensland, last year.



*A crowd of 60,000 took part in a Eucharistic procession in Adelaide during a congress held in the city in 1936.*

Our congresses were often timed to coincide with other events. For example, the first NSW state congress, held in Orange in 1966, was timed to coincide with the centenary of Orange.

The last great national congress in Adelaide, in 1936, was held in conjunction with the All-Australian Catholic Education Congress, aimed at 'securing educational justice' for Catholic schools.

The 1936 congress lasted a whole week, like the education congress which was a huge production. A special train from Port Augusta was arranged to collect interstate visitors, and other special trains brought people in from outer suburbs. 'The cream of our Catholic laity are in the ranks of the St Vincent de Paul Society', the Archbishop of Adelaide proclaimed.

50,000 people attended a Combined Religious Demonstration at the Wayville Showgrounds, where our members sold 10,000 candles to raise money for the Society. Benediction at the night service was given by their light.

A eucharistic procession through town, in which our Society members marched as a body, drew a crowd of 60,000. There was a garden party, a ball ('His Grace the Archbishop has given a dispensation for abstinence for this Friday of the congress week'), dinner parties, Communion breakfasts, and a slew of side events.

The Archbishop of Adelaide complained about the 'deplorable' state of the Broken Hill road, which kept many people away from the congress. He told a newspaper the South Australian Government should never have allowed the road to become so



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# Society of St. Vincent de Paul

## Sixth Australian Triennial

### C O N G R E S S

### HELD IN ADELAIDE

From 8th to 15th November, 1936

\*\*\*\*\*

*Print advertisement from a congress held in Adelaide in November 1936.*

bad, given 'many affluent men lived in Broken Hill, and as work ceased in the town on Friday afternoons, many of those who owned high-speed cars would come to Adelaide for weekend trips.'

But in 1936, he added, 'many Broken Hill people told me they would not risk their lives or their cars in motoring to Adelaide.'

At one of the dinners, Archbishop Mannix, visiting from Melbourne, spoke of 'the stand-up fight between God and Satan in Spain'. The Westmead Boys Band travelled from the Society's home in Sydney via Broken Hill to play for the celebrations.

To revisit the 1936 Adelaide Congress is to enter another world. We can see how the Society has changed by comparing their agenda to ours. Issues

of social justice were not discussed. The main topics included, not surprisingly, future congresses. They also discussed the spirit of the Society, membership, visitation, good literature, Catholic Action and two special works no longer conducted by the Society—probation work for youth caught up in the justice system, and work for seamen visiting Australian ports.

Catholic Action will ring bells for some older members. It was a recurrent theme of our earlier congresses.

Accommodation has always been a big issue with our congresses. In early years visiting participants were billeted with local Society members, but this had become impractical by 1936 when out-of-state visitors outnumbered locals. Several hundred Society members came from outside South Australia. In 1936 there were no motels in Adelaide, incredible as it may seem to contemporary readers. Hotel accommodation ranged from four shillings and six pence per day, to 23 shillings and six pence at the poshest hotel in Adelaide, the Richmond Hotel in Rundle Street. Most hotels of the sort our members stayed at cost about seven shillings a night, the equivalent of only \$33 in today's money. Oh for such low prices for our members in October!

One quarter of our 500 attendees were women. The Women's Society of St Vincent de Paul was particularly strong in Adelaide and Perth.

The purpose of the congress was not only to discuss the issues of the day but also 'to imbibe fresh zeal and new inspiration to carry on the apostolate'. It was a social event where our members could get to know and learn from each other.

Next October's congress runs for only one weekend. The 1936 congress ran for a week and there was time for social activities. On the last day 22 large buses filled with hundreds of Society members took a long drive around Adelaide and through the Hills, stopping briefly at the Onkaparinga Racecourse and, perhaps not so briefly, at Penfolds.

Half the buses became lost. Our October congress will be a more modest affair than the first Adelaide congress. Let us hope that our members do not get lost again or, if they do, that it is in the vicinity of Penfolds. ♦

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Mike Moran is the Archivist at the St Vincent de Paul Society National Council of Australia.

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Sources: *SVDP Archives, Adelaide News, Adelaide Advertiser, The Southern Cross*



# Last days of Australian car production for Elizabeth

***A new style of conference is being trialled at Elizabeth, South Australia, where car manufacturing is fast winding up. It places a great deal of emphasis on companionship.***

Former Premier Tom Playford set up the satellite city of Elizabeth, in Adelaide's outer-north, in 1955, while embarking on a bold new 'social experiment'.

It soon attracted thousands of migrants who helped build up the state's manufacturing base.

But nowadays unemployment in the area is the worst in South Australia, and when Holden closes its Elizabeth plant in October for good, thousands of the car maker's workers, along with those working in associated industries, will be navigating the challenge of finding alternative work.

At the end of 2015, the St Vincent de Paul Society's Elizabeth North Conference identified at least 40 families that had sought assistance more than six or seven times that year.

In anticipation of already stretched resources needing to go further, a new model of conference is being trialled by the Society in the area.

It involves new ways of recruiting volunteers, including the birth of a Community Response Team in September 2016.

The team is made up of eight volunteers, including school teachers and administrative staff, tertiary students and people working in the corporate sector.

By mid-March the team had interviewed 20 people with



*Final assembly of a Holden HD motor car at the Elizabeth plant in 1965.*

various needs, and devised a comprehensive model with two key objectives.

One of these is for those who were interviewed to achieve a sense of wellbeing, hopefulness and control over their lives.

'The first step for us is to serve as companions to people who need help, allowing us to listen to their stories with reverence and gratitude,' Mario Trinidad, the project's team leader explains.

The second step of the project, which is being trialled over a year, is to gauge whether some problems can be resolved collectively.

'The hope is that people will give each other mutual support, to deal with problems like social isolation.'

***The first step for us is to serve as companions to people who need help, allowing us to listen to their stories with reverence and gratitude.***





*Staff at Vinnies, Elizabeth shop.*

Some people have proven to be hard to reach. As Mario explains, people won't always answer their phone if they don't recognise the number.

'They realise it could be debt collectors,' he says.

To date, the team had noted material needs like food, clothing and shelter were only the tip of the iceberg. 'Beneath that is intergenerational poverty and ongoing indebtedness, intergenerational family violence, family breakdown, social isolation, ill-health and disability, mental health issues, racism and alienation from country', Mario adds.

But resilience and persistence, dreams of a better future, a sense of humour and friendship were also prevalent.

'More importantly perhaps, we are rediscovering what Frederic Ozanam and his friends experienced during their home visits—that the Vincentian relationship does not humiliate people.

'Help is only humiliating when there is no reciprocity, when you give to the poor person nothing but bread, or clothes, or a bundle of straw, and there is no likelihood he can give you something in return.'

Through offering companionship, the poor are treated with respect, 'not only as an equal, but as a superior, since they are suffering what perhaps we are incapable of suffering'. ♦

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For further information about the project, Mario can be contacted at [mtrinidad@svdpsa.org.au](mailto:mtrinidad@svdpsa.org.au)



*Cathryn Moore*

I have had the privilege of calling myself a Vincentian for over a decade ... and I'm 27. In that time, I have witnessed young Vincentians gather to celebrate their achievements, to strengthen our community and to share the ideas that drive us forward.

It is often said that young Vincentians (or 'Youth') are not just the future of the Society, but its vibrant present. Congress is the Society's opportunity to take these words from mere platitude to reality. ♦

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Cathryn Moore is the acting National Youth Representative.

# Rental affordability in crisis, Anglicare survey finds

***The private rental market is failing to provide millions of Australians with affordable and appropriate shelter, Anglicare's eighth annual Rental Affordability Snapshot found.***

Consistent with previous years, the survey shows a single person on Youth Allowance and Newstart finds it almost impossible to access an affordable home anywhere, whether that be in regional or metropolitan Australia.

'In Western Australia, the ACT and the Northern Territory, there wasn't a single property affordable for a single person living on Newstart or Youth Allowance,' Anglicare's Executive Director Kasy Chambers said.

Across the country, less than one per cent of properties were affordable for pensioners, those on Centrelink benefits, or those earning the minimum wage.

No properties were available for a single parent on the Newstart Allowance in Sydney, Canberra, Adelaide, Darwin, Hobart or Brisbane.

The trend was a reminder to the federal government that policies like longer waiting periods for Newstart were particularly unhelpful for single parent households already struggling with finding affordable accommodation, Ms Chambers said.

The report defined rental stress as a household paying more than 30 per cent of its income to a landlord.

The report's recommendations include:

- Increasing funding for public and community housing by rebooting the National Affordable Housing Agreement.
- Including public and community housing in new developments.
- Winding back negative gearing and capital gains exemptions, and redirecting funds saved from doing so into public and community housing.
- Increasing and amending Commonwealth Rent Assistance to ensure it reflects rent levels in different markets.

The snapshot was taken on the weekend of 1-2 April, 2017, and covers both regional and metropolitan areas.

Nationally, more than 67,000 properties were surveyed. ♦

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## Society opposes scrapping of NAHA

***The St Vincent de Paul Society strongly opposes the scrapping of the \$1.3 billion National Affordable Housing Agreement (NAHA). In Canberra alone, the money funds nearly 50 homelessness and domestic family violence services, the Society's Canberra/Goulburn CEO, Barnie van Wyk says.***

The funding also goes towards the maintenance and repair of 11,000 public housing properties in the Nation's capital.

'In 2015-16 the Society provided



*Barnie van Wyk and his wife Annette, at a fundraising BBQ for the Society earlier this year.*

support to 810 individuals and families, 33,973 bed nights and 44,145 meals for people who were experiencing or were at risk of experiencing homelessness,' Mr van Wyk said.

'Many people we support have gone through significant trauma, such as domestic and family violence, abuse,

loss and addiction, and for many of these people, Vinnies is the last option.

'We work with the most vulnerable and challenging members of our community and we do it because nobody else is there for them, and they deserve the love and support many of us take for granted.' ♦



# Penalty rates for Sunday and public holiday work slashed

***On 23 February, the Fair Work Commission announced penalty rates on public holidays and Sundays for full-time and part-time workers would be cut in the hospitality, retail and fast-food industries.***

The St Vincent de Paul Society responded with a media release that described the move as ‘a sad day for our nation’s history.’

National Council CEO Dr John Falzon said the ruling was ‘an attack on people who already struggle to survive.’

‘Cutting penalty rates will not create jobs but it will build inequality,’ he said.

The media release was picked up by ABC radio outlets across Australia, along with print media outlets in several states.

The Society also published answers to ‘Frequently Asked Questions’ on its national website, covering details of the proposed changes and who would be affected by them.

## What are penalty rates?

Penalty rates have been an integral part of Australia’s industrial relations system for more than 100 years. They stem from a longstanding understanding that weekends and time with family, friends and community are valuable, and that those who miss that time due to work should be compensated. As such, penalty rates provide a basic premium for being at work during times when other people get to relax or spend time together—on weekends, public holidays, and at night. For many, that compensation helps to make ends meet.



PHOTO: BROOKE CAGLE

## What are the proposed changes to penalty rates?

On 23 February, the Fair Work Commission announced that Sunday and public holiday penalty rates will be reduced for workers in the hospitality, retail, pharmacy and fast-food industries.<sup>1</sup>

The loss in earnings varies by industry and type of employment. In retail, the reduction in penalty rates could result in a loss of \$72 from a seven-hour Sunday shift. For a young person experiencing housing stress, such a loss in earnings could tip them out onto the street.

## Who will be affected by penalty rate cuts?

The changes to penalty rates will affect more than 700,000 workers across the retail, hospitality, fast-food and pharmacy industries. These industries have the largest proportions of low-paid, award reliant workers.

Employees who rely on penalty rates to meet their household expenditure are most likely to be a single parent, a woman, a young person, someone in receipt of a household income less than \$30,000, and/or living in regional Australia.

## Young people

While a third of Australians rely on regular Sunday shifts as a part of their wage, nearly 40 per cent of young people rely on penalty rates to survive. For many, working on Sundays is a necessity, not a matter of lifestyle. Sunday penalty rates help to make up for earnings they don’t receive when they are studying, doing care work, or working fewer casual shifts than they need.

Recent studies show young people regularly struggle with cost-of-living pressures and a compromised

*continued on page 24 ►*

work-life balance.<sup>2</sup> Student poverty has increased over the past decade, with nearly two-thirds of university students living below the poverty line.<sup>3</sup> They battle with unaffordable housing, insecure work, reduced access to social security, and low levels of student assistance.

Cutting penalty rates will only compound these pressures.

### Women

Cuts to penalty rates will disproportionately affect women and will increase the gender pay gap.

While they make up less than half of the total Australian workforce, the majority of workers in the sectors affected by the penalty rates decision are women.<sup>4</sup>

They often receive minimum award wages only, and are highly likely to rely on penalty rates to meet household expenses.<sup>5</sup>

For those with caring responsibilities, working on weekends may be their only option, given limited workplace flexibility and a shortage of affordable child care.

### Regional Australia

Cuts to penalty rates will inflict a heavy burden on rural and regional communities, where nearly one in five workers is employed in the hospitality or retail sectors.

These communities already lag behind their metropolitan counterparts on a variety of socio-economic measures, including income.

Modelling undertaken by the McKell Institute<sup>6</sup> shows that in addition to the financial hardship on workers and their families, a partial reduction of penalty rates

## Sunday penalty rate cuts

	Full & part-time	Casual
Retail	200% → 150%	200% → 175%
Hospitality	175% → 150%	No change
Fast-food	150% → 125%	175% → 150%
Pharmacy	200% → 150%	200% → 175%

## Public holiday penalty rate cuts

	Full & part-time	Casual
Retail	250% → 225%	275% → 250%
Hospitality	250% → 225%	275% → 250%
Restaurant	250% → 225%	No change
Fast-food	250% → 225%	275% → 250%
Pharmacy	250% → 225%	275% → 250%

would reduce discretionary spending in local economies by between \$175 million and \$353.5 million each year.

## Why does the Society oppose cuts to penalty rates?

### Penalty rates are a vital part of the social safety net

Many workers on penalty rates are among the lowest paid in our community. According to the Australian Work and Life Index, 37.8 per cent of people who work weekends only rely on penalty rates to meet household expenses.<sup>7</sup> This increases to 48.8 per cent for those working both evenings and weekends, and 52.2 per cent for Sundays only.

The Fair Work Commission has acknowledged that ‘many of these employees earned just enough to

cover weekly living expenses’—yet they are the very people the commission has penalised.

Over the past decade, workers reliant on minimum wages have seen their income slipping further behind average weekly earnings and for some, below the poverty line. This trend is reflected in the growing number of ‘working poor’ who seek assistance and support from charities such as Vinnies. These are people who are holding down jobs but not earning enough to make ends meet.

### Will cutting penalty rates create more jobs?

There is no reliable evidence to support the proposition that reducing penalty rates will boost the economy and create jobs.<sup>8</sup>

Even the Productivity Commission has conceded that there are ‘several deficiencies’ in the evidence for



## St Vincent de Paul Society youth engagement coordinator opposes penalty rates cut on ABC's Q&A program

cutting penalty rates, and that 'robust evidence' in favour of lower penalty rates is 'hard to find'.

The notion that reducing penalty rates will create more jobs is not based on empirical evidence, but relies on discredited 'trickle-down' economics,<sup>9</sup> which assumes the benefits will flow on to workers in the form of more jobs, as opposed to just increasing profit margins and inequality. ♦

Answers to 'Frequently Asked Questions' compiled by Corinne Dobson, National Policy Advisor at the St Vincent de Paul Society.

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3. Emmaline Bexley et al, 2013. *University student finances in 2012*. Centre for the Study for Higher Education, The University of Melbourne. <https://www.universitiesaustralia.edu.au/news/commissioned-studies/Australian-University-Student-Finances-in-2012/Australian-University-Student-Finances-in-2012#.WLzWZ2996UkChromeHTML/Shell/Open\Command>

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6. The McKell Institute. Who loses when penalty rates are cut? April 2015

7. Tony Daly, 2014. *Evenings, nights and weekends: working unsocial hours and penalty rates*. Centre for Work + Life, University of South Australia. [https://www.unisa.edu.au/PageFiles/34117/PenaltyRatesReport\\_Oct2014%20Final\\_R1.pdf](https://www.unisa.edu.au/PageFiles/34117/PenaltyRatesReport_Oct2014%20Final_R1.pdf)

8. Ray Markey, 2015. 'Myths about penalty rates and those who rely on them'. *The Conversation*. <https://theconversation.com/myths-about-penalty-rates-and-those-who-rely-on-them-49947>

9. Ross Gittins, 27 February 2017. 'Cut in penalty rates another win for "bizonomics"'. *The Sydney Morning Herald*. <http://www.smh.com.au/business/the-economy/cut-in-penalty-rates-another-win-for-bizonomics-20170226-gulhuo?device=Type=text>



Screen shot of Michael Walter on ABC Television's Q&A program.

***Michael Walter, a youth engagement coordinator at the St Vincent de Paul Society in Victoria, used an appearance on ABC television's Q&A program on 27 February to make the point that some individuals would lose up to \$6000 a year.***

'How will the government support these individuals with the sudden change to their income?', Michael wanted to know.

Special Minister of State, Scott Ryan, told him people would still get paid more for working on a Sunday than a Monday, and that he understood tens of thousands of new jobs would potentially be created. 'Now, if you particularly go to regional areas where you might see a little strip of shops, penalty rates have been keeping some of those cafes and places like that closed. So, we will see some increased employment opportunities.'

Labor frontbencher Clare O'Neil,

who was also on the panel, had a different view.

She argued the government was avoiding discussing the impact of reduced pay on some members of the community, by discussing 'process' and 'who did this and who set up which piece of legislation.'

'That is exactly what the government wants you to be talking about and thinking about right now because they don't want to talk about the substance of this,' she said.

'And that is a very fundamental question about our country. Exactly how unequal are we willing to allow Australia to become? Now, this is a direct pay cut for 700,000 of the poorest paid people in this country. More likely to be women, more likely to be migrants, more likely to be not very well educated.'

Others on the panel included disruptive sustainability advocate Leyla Acaroglu, philosopher and ethicist Peter Singer, and former Abbott Government adviser, Ted Lapkin. ♦

# Co-creating the future of the St Vincent de Paul Society through the October Congress

***For more than 180 years, our wholehearted commitment to people living on the margins has resulted in the Society becoming one of the most publically recognised charities in the world.***

But like any organisation, big or small, it is not without its problems and challenges.

These challenges and concerns were raised at a weekend meeting in March when National Council members got together in Sydney to assess the Society's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities for growth and threats facing our future.

What follows are some snapshots of these reflections and analyses.

## Organisational context

- Assist people in need
- Combat social injustice
- Promote a more open, transient society
- Address immediate needs, structural disadvantage and deeper needs
- Injustice, poverty, inequality, loneliness, exclusion
- Build a welcoming culture
- Encourage new ideas
- Open up to people through existing pathways
- Organisational challenges
- Respond to 2016-2020 strategic plan
- We want a collaborative approach to create a future direction.



## Congress purpose and goals

- Create an inspiring event
- Build an open and welcoming culture
- Identify new forms of poverty (social isolation)
- Create an alignment between story and mission
- Co-create the future direction of the society
- Reconnect with the 'lost generation'
- Strive for a more sustainable Society
- Promote a new sense of hope
- Reinvigorate our sense of compassion
- Reconnect with the founding 'activist' roots.

## Strengths

- Strong brand with public recognition
- Passion of all stakeholders
- Our commitment to and solidarity with the people who are marginalised
- The simplicity of the Gospel
- Reputation for doing good
- Trust
- Belonging and feeling valued
- Fearlessness
- Spiritual foundation
- Conference structure: subsidiarity, local adaptability
- Members: passionate, generous, willing



# Mini Vinnies



- The Society is unique: we are invited into the homes of people in need and those we serve
- Catholic lay group
- Catholic population support
- Respected by government
- Members' personal commitment
- Highly experienced staff
- Great foundation story/inspirational founders
- Embracing new technologies now.

It was clear from the discussions that above all, that our spirituality must be at the heart of our renewal. The question for us, in the face of a changing world, is how we innovate and broaden the ways we conceive of our spirituality in the service of Christ's poor and in fidelity to the Gospel. ♦



PHOTO: SUPPLIED

*Immaculate Heart of Mary Catholic Primary School students give up their own time to be involved with social justice initiatives.*

***As part of living out its motto 'In giving we receive', Immaculate Heart of Mary Catholic Primary School at Sefton, in western Sydney, has initiated a Mini Vinnies group.***

The group consists of students in Years 4 to 6 who are willing to give up their own time to attend meetings and be involved in social justice initiatives throughout the school, such as the St Vincent de Paul Society Winter Appeal.

Immaculate Heart of Mary is part of the Catholic system of schools in Sydney who pride themselves on providing a quality education for students in a pastoral and caring environment.

Principal John Kennedy is very excited about the school year.

'We have such an enthusiastic community of students, staff

and parents who are willing to get involved in the school and its events. I look forward to our students participating in a wide range of educational, sporting and cultural experiences during 2017,' he said.

'Many parents expressed that they were attracted to our school by its size and the warm welcome that they have received. This is seen as a very positive aspect of our school, coupled with the values and respect that the school teaches.' ♦

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This story originally appeared in *The Canterbury Bankstown Torch* and is reprinted here with permission from the editor.

# A history of social security in Australia

***Just about everyone in Australia benefits from social security at some point in their life. Those who don't are, for the most part, born into big money and remain very prosperous—and it is a fair bet that they will profit from some form of 'welfare' such as superannuation concessions (and negative gearing) through the tax system.***

How did social security come to be so important in Australia?

Ahead of the centenary of the country's national system of social security (in 2008) Andrew Herscovitch and David Stanton chronicled some significant milestones.<sup>1</sup> Here is a much condensed version of what they had to say.

## The system is born

Before 1900 there was nothing in any of the Australian colonies that would be recognised today as social security. The only assistance available was through charitable relief provided by benevolent societies like the St Vincent de Paul Society. On the odd occasion, there was financial help from the authorities.

During the economic depression of the 1890s, pressure built for a more organised approach to the relief of hardship. In 1900, New South Wales and Victoria followed the lead of Denmark (1891) and New Zealand (1898) by introducing age pensions for those aged 65 and above. Queensland followed suit in 1907.



Top left: Children line up for soup during the Depression. 1932. Courtesy of the State Library of NSW; Top right: image courtesy of Wollongong City Library; Bottom: Man and television set, circa 1970.

The Commonwealth began to pay age pensions in 1909, followed by 'invalid' pensions in 1910. Both categories of pension were means-tested. And the age pension schemes of the state schemes were terminated.

Maternity allowance, a payment to mothers on the birth of a child, was introduced in 1912. It was not means-tested, and was the last new benefit to be introduced for nearly 30 years.

## What happened next: War and peace

World War 1 erupted in 1914. The period from then until the start of World War 2, in 1939, was notable for the complete absence of new Commonwealth benefits. Several attempts were made to change the system to an insurance model, which was funded by employer and

employee contributions. In the end, nothing came of them.

Some states introduced measures of their own.

In 1923, Queensland initiated an insurance-based scheme of unemployment benefits, which was funded by employer and employee contributions.

New South Wales began paying widows' pensions in 1926, and child endowment in 1927. A year later, New South Wales also introduced an insurance-based system of workers' compensation – a model which other states copied in the years that followed.

The New South Wales widows' pension and child endowment schemes were abolished in the early 1940s, when the Commonwealth introduced similar schemes of its own.

The Queensland system of unemployment benefits gave way to a means tested Commonwealth scheme in 1945.



## The 1940s: a decade of major reform

Australia had just gone to war again when the 1940s arrived. One might expect that reforms to social security would have been put to one side, given a plan to introduce a radical reform in the shape of an insurance-based model was dropped at the very last moment in 1939.

What actually happened was very different. The 1940s turned out to be a decade of major reform.

In 1940, the then Coalition government introduced child endowment, a universal payment to mothers for their children. In 1941, a bipartisan Parliamentary Committee began looking at further reforms.

A Labor government came to power in 1941. It began paying a means-tested pension for widows in 1942 – the new payment was available not only to widows, but also to other women who had lost the support of their partners – in other words, deserted wives (married and de facto) and unmarried women whose partner had died.

In 1943, allowances for pensioners' wives and children began.

Unemployment and sickness benefits started in 1945. They were like pensions in that they were means-tested (albeit on a different basis). The introduction of unemployment and sickness benefits was part of a broader strategy to restore and maintain full employment, and was accompanied by the opening of the Commonwealth Employment Service (CES) to assist job-seekers.

Legislation introducing the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme was introduced in 1948.

From 1950, it provided free prescriptions for life-saving drugs. This was later extended to a wider range of medications but subjected to co-payments.

Throughout 2016, the Society's National CEO Dr John Falzon maintained that a driving force of increased poverty was the low rate of the Newstart Allowance.

He argued the \$38-a-day-Newstart-Allowance for single people was not enough to help them into jobs, and that it should be increased by \$53 a week. The Society noted the allowance was equivalent to 40.2 per cent of the national minimum wage. 'In real terms, we have not seen an increase to the Newstart Allowance since 1994', Dr Falzon said.

While moving people off social security and into work is the intention of every government, Dr Falzon says unemployment is rarely a personal choice.

'If we are serious about getting people into work, rather than look at individuals and pretending that the deficit lies with them, let's look at the failures in the labour market.' ♦

## All quiet on the social security front: the 1950s and 60s

These years were relatively stable after all the changes of the 1940s.

Changes to Australia's social security system included free medical and hospital treatment for pensioners (1951), additional support for pensioners paying rent (1958), a higher 'single' rate of pension (1963) to reflect the extra costs of living alone, and a major liberalisation of the means test on pensions (1969).

## The pace quickens: the 1970s and 1980s

By the start of the 1970s, new questions were being raised. Was the social security system dealing adequately with poverty? How was it affecting people's incentives to work and save? And were some groups of people in real need missing out?

A flurry of initiatives followed, including:

- The abolition of the means test on age pensions for people aged 75 and over (1973) and 70 to 74 (1975). These were subsequently reversed in two steps (1978 and 1983).
- The introduction of a pension-type payment for lone parents not receiving a widows' pension (1973 for lone mothers, 1977 for lone fathers).
- The removal of the assets component of the pensions means test (1976), followed by its restoration in a very different form (1985).
- The creation of a new allowance for the parents of children with disabilities (1974).
- The abolition of maternity allowance (1978), the purchasing power of which had deteriorated for many years prior to this.
- The introduction of automatic increases in pensions and most other benefits to compensate for price increases.

*continued on page 30 ►*

Such changes took place against a backdrop of the Henderson Commission of Inquiry into Poverty (1972 to 1976). Its findings were not formally adopted, but they influenced policy decisions in the years that followed. In 1976, a proposal for national superannuation known as the Hancock scheme was rejected. Then came the rise of private superannuation as an instrument of retirement incomes policy—the government legislated to compel contributions by employers to superannuation for their employees.

### **Rapid change becomes the norm: the 1990s**

The Cass Social Security Review had suggested Australia's social security system should treat people more as individuals, and that the scope for dependency-based additional payments should be narrowed. Changes to the means test for unemployment benefits followed in the mid-1990s.

The former Commonwealth Employment Service (CES) was replaced with the Job Network in 1997, comprising Commonwealth-subsidised private and non-profit providers of services for job seekers.

Meanwhile, the recession of the early 1990s saw unemployment peak at more than 11 per cent, and the number of working-age people receiving social security payments rose dramatically. The economic tide began to turn by the mid-1990s, but the number of people who were receiving social security payments continued to climb. 'Welfare reform' became a central focus, and in 1999 the Commonwealth established the McClure Reference Group to consider the issue.

### **The new century**

A package called Australians Working Together followed. Announced in the 2001–02 Budget, it was phased in over four years. The centrepiece of the package, at least in terms of cost, was a 'working credit' to ease the impact of means tests on working-age people in the early stages of returning to employment, after an extended period of reliance on income support. The package also provided for additional supports and services to parents, people with disabilities, the mature-aged, and other people who had been out of work for an extended period.

In its 2005–06 Budget, the Commonwealth announced a set of changes collectively called Welfare to Work, which took effect from July 2006. Their main impact was on lone parents with school-aged children, and on people with disabilities who had part-time work capacity. The measures:

- Reduced the maximum rates of social security entitlement
- Tightened the means test (aligning it with that for unemployed people generally); and
- Imposed an obligation on some recipients to work part-time or to look for part-time work.

Another theme of the new century was tax reform. The ANTS (A New Tax System) package, introduced in mid-2000, included sweeping measures to compensate recipients of social security payments for the price effects of the new goods and services tax (GST). The measures included:

- A supplement to pension rates
- Easing the means test on pensions

- The removal of family payments from the Social Security Act and replacing them with a new and more generous Family Tax Benefit (FTB) scheme in separate legislation.

### **Conclusion**

Herscovitch and Stanton's research takes the story of Australia's security system to 2008. The system has continued to change in the years since, but its essential shape has remained intact.

Much can be said about the system's strengths and weaknesses, but three issues are worth highlighting here.

- First, the system is 'efficient' in that it concentrates assistance most heavily on people with the least resources.
- Secondly, housing costs are critical to the wellbeing of people who rely on the system. Rent assistance is available, but it is not enough to redress the effect of the rental costs many people face.
- Thirdly, the rates of Newstart and related allowances are far from adequate.

How will the social security system as a whole look in 100 years from now? Given that the social and economic impact of climate and technological change is so unpredictable, forecasting the shape of social security is at best hazardous. Sometimes, however, the 'more things change, the more they remain the same'. ♦

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Andrew Herscovitch is a writer and former senior public servant.

David Stanton was Director of the Australian Institute of Family Studies from 1999 to 2003 and senior public servant.

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1. Herscovitch, A and Stanton, D. 'History of social security in Australia'. *Family Matters*, No. 80, Australian Institute of Family Studies.



# Solidarity is the tenderness of the people

There is a beautiful saying from the Sandinistas that  
*Solidarity is the tenderness of the people*  
 Solidarity  
 Is that profound human tenderness  
 Profound because it is simple  
 Human because it is concrete

Anything that is only an idea or an ideal  
 Can never even remotely be equated  
 with solidarity  
 In the face of oppression  
 In the struggle for liberation  
 It is the locking of arms  
 Not the sending of wishes  
 It is expressed in the smallest of  
 gestures

As well as in the grandest of plans  
 It is what comes of the  
 interconnectedness of things  
 The intersectionality of the experience  
 of oppression  
 The recognition of the dialectic  
 Such as when the Reverend Doctor  
 Martin Luther King was shot  
 Because he named the connection  
 The structural and historical knot that  
 ties

Oppressive racism  
 To capitalism  
 It being no accident that he was in  
 Memphis at the time of his killing  
 To support striking garbage workers  
 Something worth remembering in  
 Australia today  
 As the lowest paid in society  
 Whether they are in the labour market  
 On its insecure margins  
 Or completely excluded from it  
 Are attacked and punished  
 Sacrificed on the altar of greater profits  
 and lower corporate taxes

His stance beside them  
 Was also a recognition of another  
 foundational principle of solidarity  
 Namely  
 That solidarity might produce heroes  
 But it is never individualistic  
 It is deeply collective

It is a privilege  
 Not a favour  
 To stand in solidarity with  
 People experiencing oppression



If we commit ourselves to the struggle  
 for liberation  
 Then we take our orders from the  
 People  
 The word obedience  
 Comes from the Latin word meaning  
 To listen to  
 Solidarity  
 Means studying reality  
 The concrete study of the concrete  
 situation  
 Cutting through the lies  
 For the truth told by the people pushed  
 to the margins  
 Will  
 In the end  
 Drown out the lies  
 Told about them

Sometimes  
 When I type out the word solidarity  
 I mistakenly type  
*Soilidarity*  
 I like this typo  
 Because it reminds me that solidarity  
 Is about the common ground  
 That must be fought for  
 Against the commodification of  
 everything  
 And everyone  
 That human solidarity cannot be  
 disconnected from  
 The environment in which we live  
 That we are all made from the most  
 magnificent and magical dust  
 And that the socially constructed  
 hierarchies  
 Of power and wealth  
 Are just that

Produced by socio-economic formations  
 Not nature  
 And that just as they are made  
 They can and must  
 Be unmade  
 And that the real power for progressive  
 social change  
 Comes not from above  
 But from the People  
 Under the guiding stars of struggle and  
 hope

The feminist movement teaches us that  
*The personal is political*

The refusal to take the side of the  
 oppressed  
 Is the acquiescence to being taken by  
 the side of the oppressor  
 As the poet and theorist Audre Lorde  
 reminds us:

*The true focus of revolutionary change  
 Is never merely the oppressive situations  
 We need to escape  
 But that piece of the oppressor  
 Which is planted deep within each of us*

I will leave you with the most beautiful  
 description of solidarity that I know  
 Which comes from Auntie Lilla Watson  
 And a group of First Nations activists in  
 Queensland in the 1970s

*If you have come to help me you are  
 wasting your time  
 But if you have come because your  
 liberation is bound up with mine  
 Then let us work together. ♦*

*Dr John Falzon*

# Ozanam Lecture 2017: The living presence of the love of God

***The Ozanam Lecture celebrates the spirit of our founder, Blessed Frederic Ozanam, and the work of the St Vincent de Paul Society.***

***On the 20th anniversary of the annual event, Marcelle Mogg delivered the lecture in Melbourne on 26 February.***

My first connection with the Society was through my great uncle, Oswald (Ossie) Hehir. Ossie was the younger brother of my grandmother Ida. As a young man, he worked on the docks of Melbourne, hauling cargo on and off ships. Raised in a Catholic family, his devotion to his faith was only strengthened when his twin sister Monica died at age 19. It was a loss from which he never really recovered.

I don't know at what age Ossie joined the Society of St Vincent de Paul, but by the time I came along, he had been an active member of the Society for decades. By the time I was finishing primary school, Ossie was an older man, well in to his 70s. Each week I would help my mother as we made several loaves of sandwiches for Ossie. And over the course of the next several days, Ossie would catch a tram in to the city and meet with people living on the streets and in the boarding rooms of Melbourne. He would share the sandwiches with those he met, spending time with them, listening to their life stories, and being a companion and friend. Ossie did all of this from his own modest resources. While long retired, he only claimed an age pension much later in life, believing that the money should go to others more deserving than himself. I'm not sure the government ever recognised his generosity.



Marcelle Mogg, second from left, with Victorian State President Michael Liddy (far left), Sue Cattermole (the Society's Victorian CEO) and Doug Knez, the Society's Gippsland Central Council President.

Ossie was not one to spend much on himself. His clothes were worn, faded and many times repaired. In fact, people would often stop him as he caught the tram in to town, to ask if he himself needed assistance.

Ossie continued his solo journeys in to the city for years, well beyond what we as family considered wise. As he aged, the years of physical labour he had undertaken as a younger man took their toll. His gait became unsteady, his sight deteriorated, yet his faith and his commitment never diminished. Each Friday, he would set off again, walking to catch the tram in to the city to visit those in need of a companion, offering the simple gifts of sandwiches and friendship.

His example left a deep impression on me. He had well earned the right to slow down and enjoy a contented retirement. Yet Ossie saw it as an opportunity to do the work he most wanted to do. It is not hard to see how he found his own identity in devoted service to those who, like him, had been broken by life. And through mutual companionship, and in the presence of a loving and

prayerful Society, he was nurtured and sustained through the many years ahead.

In contemplating the life of my great uncle, it is not hard to find evidence for the living presence of the love of God. Through his participation in the Society and his encounters with those made poor, we see the movement of which John Paul speaks: the [leaning] down and [reaching] out to those made vulnerable, in order to bring every person into an encounter of God's loving mercy.

And this is the invitation extended to each of us: to bring to reality, each day, in each encounter, the loving presence of the living God whose greatest desire is to make us whole, to help us to realise fullness of life, to experience ourselves as loved, and as loving of one another.

So how do we make manifest this love of God, in our lives and bring this extraordinary gift of hope and healing into the lives of others?

St Ignatius would tell us that the first step is to recognise our



# The women without a home



Oswald (Ossie) Hebir and his twin sister, Monica

own humility and need for mercy—to recognise our need for God's love conscious of our own brokenness and vulnerability.

Becoming conscious of our vulnerability can arise in many ways, but I would suggest that as followers of Christ, in the spirit of Frederic Ozanam and St Vincent de Paul, we are called to ensure we always make a time and place to encounter and enter into the life of those made poor. Such encounters are not only an opportunity to convey God's love and mercy, but serve as a reminder of our own fragility and need for healing. ♦

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This is an extract from the lecture. To listen to the full speech, go to [www.vinnies.org.au/page/Publications/VICTORIA/Ozanam\\_Lecture](http://www.vinnies.org.au/page/Publications/VICTORIA/Ozanam_Lecture)

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Marcelle Mogg was appointed to the role of Group Director Mission Integration, St John of God Health Care, in November 2016. She was formerly CEO of Catholic Social Services Australia.

***New forms of poverty in Australia include a growing number of older, single women. And the nation's capital has some of the worst rates of homelessness in Australia, writes Rebecca Vassarotti.***

While a comfortable retirement beckons for many older people, there is a growing group of women who are facing a nightmare of poverty, homelessness and hopelessness.

The economic disadvantages facing many women are well known, but we generally consider the impacts of this multiple disadvantage over a lifetime. So, let's consider it. We know that women earn less than men throughout their lifetimes. We know that women have less superannuation savings. We know that women are much more likely to have time out of the workforce due to caring responsibilities—for children and increasingly for parents. We know that feminised industries are those that are poorly paid, casualised and can have poor income security. We know that women are much less likely to own property in their own right, and are less likely to rebound to financial security following relationship breakdowns. We also know that the violence that one in three women experiences in her lifetime can often lead to financial hardship. When we consider how all these factors may come together over a lifetime, it is not at all surprising that older women are facing increasing levels of poverty, financial stress and homelessness.

We are just starting to hear more about this issue. In February a number of ACT services reported the growing number of older women who are accessing homelessness services and facing the prospect of having nowhere safe to live. This coincided with the release of the Productivity Commission Report into ACT homelessness services, which indicated funding for the local sector was still in decline.

We need to work hard to respond to this new group at risk of homelessness, if we are serious about reversing the trend of the ACT having some of the worst rates of homelessness in Australia. We need to address the gendered issues of housing, and increase the level of social, community and affordable housing that is suitable for older women.

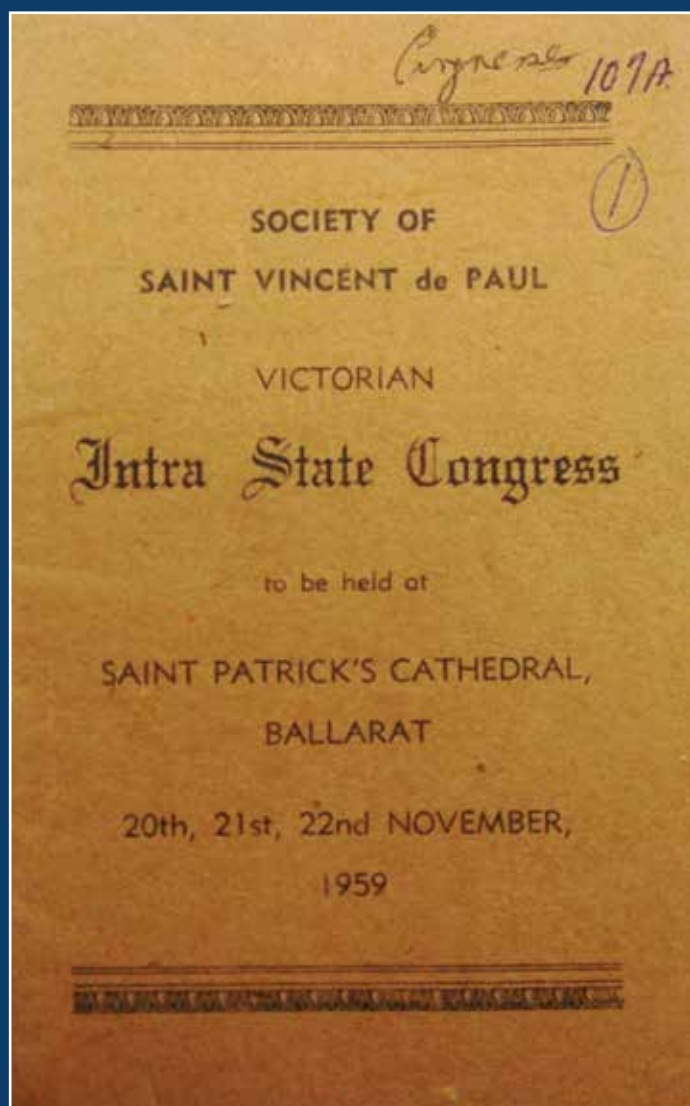
Government certainly has a role but this is an issue that will only be solved in partnership with the private and community sectors. We need to encourage innovation to deliver more suitable social and affordable housing for older women. We need more options that focus on both independent and communal living. We need to find models that can be priced in a way that are truly affordable. We need to see clever design that engages with and embeds gender sensitive design—in the physical spaces, location in supportive communities, and accessibility to amenities and facilities. While the government has made positive noises about a renewed commitment to affordable housing, we need to see real action to enable more people to access housing that is safe, affordable and provides a decent life.

In 2010 ground-breaking research was released documenting the growing issue of older women's homelessness. Titled 'It could be you', it documented the reasons behind this growing phenomenon, and outlined the stories of women struggling with homelessness. It highlighted that anyone could be affected—all it takes is bad luck, bad health, a crisis, a relationship breakdown. It could be you. It could be me. Let's work together to make sure it's none of us.

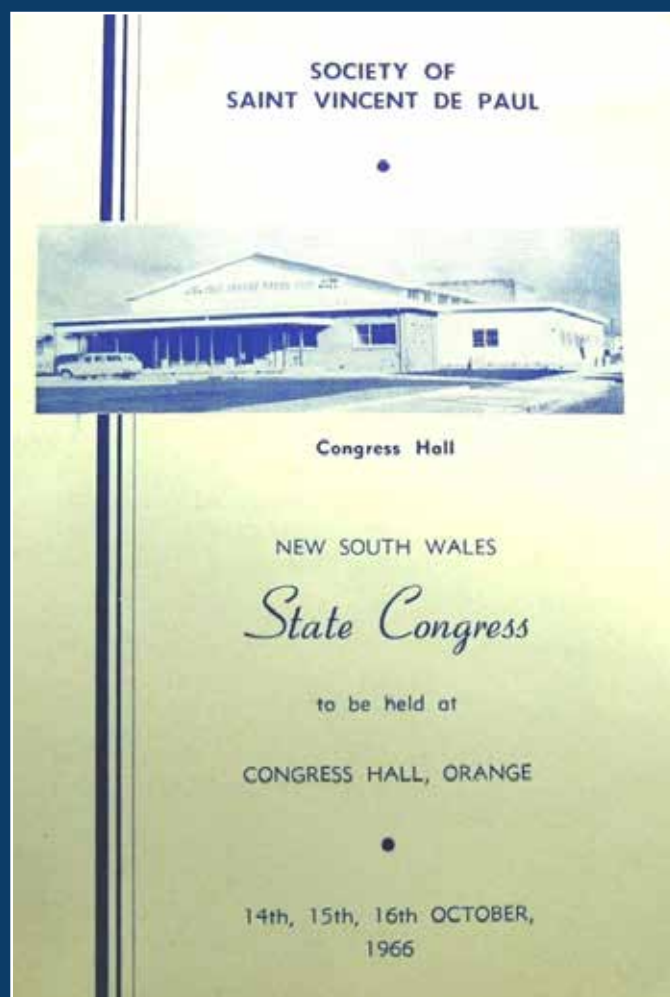
What do you think? Do you think there is more we can do to ensure that older women do not become the new face of homelessness in the ACT? ♦

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Rebecca Vassarotti is editor of Canberra news and opinion website, The RiotACT. This piece originally appeared on the RiotAct website, and is reprinted with permission.



## Congress advertisements from the past





# Alternative facts in the Centrelink debacle

***Over Christmas 2016 and well into 2017, Centrelink's new policy of automated online debt collection was subject to conflicting reports, making us wonder what version of truth we might best believe, writes Kasy Chambers.***

Over the past few months the Minister for Human Services, Alan Tudge and the department head have stuck to the assertion that everything is, and was, working fine. It would be surprising if these assertions were deliberate lies.

Yet there is another version of the truth, and it is compelling. It can be seen in the still growing list of people talking publicly about the distress caused to them by being falsely targeted. The journalists who are prosecuting this side of the argument are not fools. And the Commonwealth Ombudsman would not have seen the need to launch a wide-ranging investigation, if there weren't some reasonably sonorous alarm bells.

The outcome will no doubt be that there is truth on both sides. And we should say straight up that, ignoring the dismally low level of most benefits, we believe that where a person has received money they are not entitled to, that needs to be recovered.

That still leaves the problem of the manner in which these debt notices were sent out, the timing, and the tone in which citizens have been addressed by their government.

No doubt we will trawl through the adequacies (or otherwise) of the planning and thinking put into setting up this automated system. Anyone who has tried to interact with Centrelink knows the difficulties of dealing with the bureaucratic nature of the beast.

If you have income cycles which differ to its reporting periods, if you are moving in and out of work (very common when you are trying to get a job), if your children reach certain milestones or you meet a partner, difficulties will be created in your relationship with Centrelink.

"We are left with a fracture in the way we treat each other and a lack of respect from a government to its citizens."

Until now humans have raised the debt notice after looking at the individual situation of each case. Automatic systems to date have been good at repetitive and routine decision making, leaving the humans to the more complex and individualised cases. The irony is not lost on us in the social services sector that the Department of Human Services was one of the first to step this far into automation.

Another difficulty with the process has been that the adversarial manner that it set up has made it unlikely to allow Centrelink to learn from the cases it reviews.

A 2008 study by Anglicare Tasmania explored the experiences of people who found themselves in debt to Centrelink. Their stories were analysed and their community legal centre files reviewed. The research revealed a pattern of overpayments, poor communication by Centrelink and a lack of assistance to deal with the problem of Centrelink debt. And that was before the system was automated.

Most people, at some stage in their life, will benefit from the public purse. That includes welfare benefits, with aged pensions and family tax benefits being the mainstream ones, as well as universal services such as education, vaccination and health.

Furthermore, many people caught in this current debt recovery process are now working. They thought they had ended their connection with Centrelink years ago, and are unlikely to have kept all their records.

It may be that Centrelink tried to run before it could walk in terms of technology and system design. It may be that in the culture of never admitting a mistake, it has proved to be difficult to back down and build a better process. Those facts (and a number of 'alternative' facts, have washed through the public hearings of an ongoing Senate inquiry, and in the Commonwealth Ombudsman report into the matter. And certainly, although without a note of apology, the department has amended its processes to address some of the more obvious frustrations and injustices of the automated process. In the meantime we are left with a fracture in the way we treat each other in this country and a lack of respect from a government to its citizens. And yet there is a swing in public sympathy towards those caught up in the mess: perhaps that offers some cause for optimism in what we can expect of our communities at least. ♦

Kasy Chambers is executive director of Anglicare Australia. This is an edited extracts of a piece that originally appeared on EurekaStreet.com.

The St Vincent de Paul Society's National office expressed its concerns over the federal government's attempt to return around \$4 billion to the budget, through targeting Centrelink customers, in a media release on 10 January. These concerns reached broad audiences, including readers of *Business Insider*, *The Guardian*, *PRObono Australia* and *The New Daily*.

During an interview with Sky News on 12 January, National Council CEO Dr John Falzon told presenter Laura Jayes the government was going out of its way to hound people. 'Many of whom have not been improperly paid, many of whom are struggling to survive from below the poverty line,' he said. ♦

# Addressing poverty and inequality in an age of budget repair

***The first teaching document authored mainly by the Pope invites people to take on a new mindset that considers the needs of all. Meanwhile the federal government's plan for budget repair pays little respect for the dignity of the poor, writes Frank Brennan.***

Pope Francis' 2013 document, *Evangelii Gaudium* (The Joy of the Gospel), refers to a scene from the gospel involving the miracle of the loaves and fish, when thousands came to a lonely place in order to hear Jesus speak. Jesus took pity on them because they were like sheep without a shepherd. When it was getting late, his disciples urged Jesus to stop his teaching and to send the people away to the surrounding villages so they could buy their supper. But Jesus told his disciples: 'You yourselves give them something to eat!' (Mk 6:37). What happened next involved five barley loaves and two small fish supplied by a boy being miraculously used by Jesus to feed five thousand.

Pointing to the scene to deliver a modern day message, Pope Francis says it is important to work towards eliminating the structural causes of poverty, 'and to promote the integral development of the poor, as well as small daily acts of solidarity in meeting the real needs [of those] we encounter'.

Pope Francis maintained: 'The word "solidarity" is a little worn and at times poorly understood, but it refers to something more than a few sporadic acts of generosity. It presumes the creation of a new mindset, which thinks in terms of community and the priority of the life of all, over the appropriation of goods by a few.'

The world would definitely be a harsher and less compassionate place



PHOTO: ANDREW TATNELL

*Fr Frank Brennan says there is no substitute for giving the occasional helping hand to the neighbour or stranger in need.*

if we were not to practise sporadic acts of generosity. There is no substitute for giving the occasional helping hand to the neighbour or stranger in need. Vinnies members do this every day of the week.

But we all know that this is not enough, if we are to provide the opportunities for everyone to achieve their full human flourishing, or even just their full economic potential—which is the main concern of governments nowadays.

Speaking to the Australian Council of Social Service (ACOSS) at their annual conference last November, Mr Christian Porter, the Minister for Social Services, reminded delegates that the government outlays more than \$160 billion a year in welfare payments—a third of government expenditure. He said:

*Any government must balance the imperatives to maintain our strong social safety net and continue to protect our most vulnerable people and also ensure there is sustainability to the system. So that increases in welfare expenditure today are not paid for with borrowings, coming at the expense of*

*today's young Australians' ability to afford a similarly generous system in decades to come.*

Though much of the talk nowadays is about structural reform and increased workforce participation, it is very easy for such talk to serve as a code for so-called 'budget repair'.

But any repair measure needs to be equitable, sustainable, and respectful of the dignity of the poor. Everyone accepts that work can and should be ennobling for people, and everyone should be encouraged to contribute what they can to the common good.

Governments are entitled to design welfare programs which include 'mutual obligation' to seek employment and to hold a job for what Mr Porter describes as 'even a modest number of working hours'.

But governments need to accept that there are some people who, through no fault of their own, are in no position to fulfil a mutual obligation for even minimal employment when that obligation takes no account of the individual's circumstances, or the state of the labour market.





With the increasing loss of trust in major institutions—including churches and major political parties—it is becoming more difficult to effect rationally, the compromises that are needed to deliver on policies which take sufficient account of the competing values at play in a pluralist society like Australia. We can see this playing out at the moment with an enlarged cross-bench in the Senate and the need for government to barter with those cross-benchers to get any measure approved.

Tax cuts for companies and the wealthy are said to be contributors to economic growth, with the promise of benefits to everyone including the poorest through the trickle-down effect. But it takes a long time for any trickle at all to reach the bottom. Meanwhile, there can be no justification for stripping the most vulnerable of what they need for survival and a dignified existence.

In February, the government was trying to get the Senate to adopt some of its proposed spending cuts. But at the same time, the government needed to concede that new measures

such as the National Disability Insurance Scheme required increased funding of \$3 billion, just so that those eligible with permanent and significant disability could receive the help and services they need to survive and live with dignity. Cross-benchers David Leyonhjelm and Cory Bernardi warned against directing savings into ‘another extravagant spending program’. Senator Leyonhjelm said: ‘The NDIS is policy based on compassion; it’s a blank cheque. I think they were counting on my support and indeed they would’ve got it had they not said, ‘We’re not going to put these savings into the bottom line’.’

Adequate funding for the NDIS is about much more than compassion; it is about respecting the basic rights and entitlements of some of our most vulnerable citizens. And since when should compassion be a bar to good policy and responsible budget repair? It was Robert Menzies who once said, ‘We have nothing but the warmest human compassion ... towards those compelled to live upon the bounty of the state’.

The gap between rich and poor,

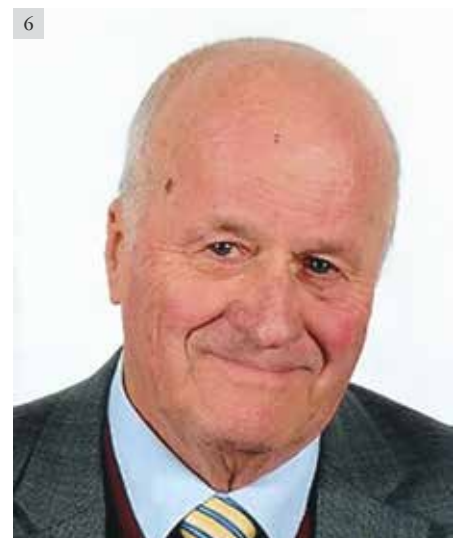
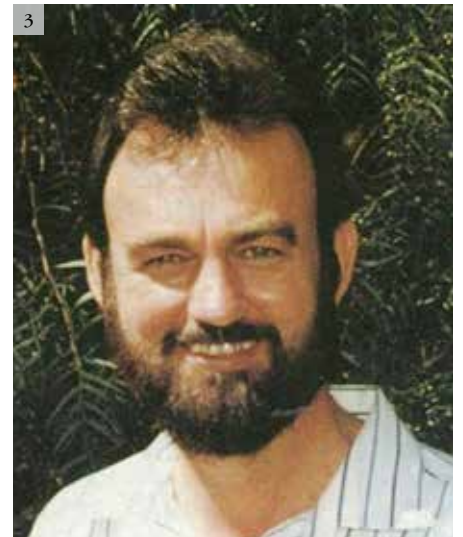
the haves and have nots, the home owners and those who will never afford a home, is widening in Australia. While committing to budget repair which will enhance inter-generational equity, we need to commit afresh to bridging this gap. If we don’t, we will surrender our claim to be the land of the fair go, and we will find governments committing more and more resources to protecting the private choices of the rich and to locking out the poor. As Pope Francis says, it’s time for ‘a new mindset which thinks in terms of community and the priority of the life of all over the appropriation of goods by a few’.

Increasing our individual sporadic acts of generosity while our parliament and government repair the budget bottom line without compassion, trying to increase the size of the pie, just won’t cut it. We need to share the pie as it presently is, equitably, sustainably, and with respect for the dignity of the poor. ♦

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Fr Frank Brennan SJ is the CEO of Catholic Social Services Australia.

# National Presidents of the Society 1895–present



Louis Heydon  
was National President 1895–1918

John Mullen  
was National President 1918–1948

Henry Morrissey  
was National President 1948–1959

Heber Boland  
was National President 1959–1966

John Trew  
was National President 1966–1972

Ted Bacon  
was National President 1972–1976

John Morahan  
was National President 1976–1981

Eric Ellem  
was National President 1982–1986

Rupe Hudson  
was National President 1987–1991

Brian Murnane  
was National President 1992–1994

Mick Smith  
was National President 1995–1998

John Moore  
was National President 1998–2003

John Meahan  
was National President 2003–2008

Syd Tutton  
was National President 2008–2010

Tony Thornton  
was National President 2011–2015

Graham West  
has served as National President  
since 2015

## Some quick facts

<i>Ministers in the NSW Government</i>	Two: Louis Heydon, Graham West
<i>Cricket lovers</i>	At least two: Ted Bacon, Syd Tutton
<i>From Grafton NSW</i>	Two: Henry Morrissey, John Trew
<i>Superannuation industry</i>	At least two: John Trew, Eric Ellem
<i>Accountants in Tax Office</i>	Two: Ted Bacon, John Morahan
<i>Accountants</i>	At least three: Ted Bacon, John Morahan, Syd Tutton
<i>Involved in car accidents</i>	At least four: Rupe Hudson, John Moore, Tony Thornton, Graham West
<i>Lawyers</i>	Two: Louis Heydon, Henry Morrissey
<i>Waverley parish</i>	Two: John Mullen, Henry Morrissey
<i>Joined at Lindfield parish</i>	Two: Heber Boland, John Trew
<i>From NSW</i>	13
<i>Private enterprise, business</i>	Three: Heber Boland, John Moore, Syd Tutton
<i>Men</i>	16
<i>Women</i>	Nil
<i>Sutherland Shire</i>	Two: Ted Bacon, John Morahan
<i>Engineers</i>	Two: Rupe Hudson, John Meahan
<i>Serious footballers</i>	Two: John Morahan, Rupe Hudson
<i>Military service</i>	Five: Ted Bacon, John Trew, Syd Tutton, Brian Murnane, Tony Thornton
<i>Public servants</i>	Two: Mick Smith, Tony Thornton
<i>Born overseas</i>	Two: John Meahan, Tony Thornton
<i>People named John</i>	Five: John Trew, John Meahan, John Morahan, John Moore, John Mullen
<i>Converts</i>	One: Tony Thornton

**1.** Louis Heydon; **2.** Former National President John Mullen (batless on the right) visiting Braidwood, NSW, in early 1940; **3.** Brian Murnane; **4.** Mick Smith; **5.** Syd Tutton; **6.** Tony Thornton.



# Assist a Student

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



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](http://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): \_\_\_\_\_

CONTACT NAME (for group): \_\_\_\_\_

TELEPHONE: \_\_\_\_\_

ADDRESS: \_\_\_\_\_

SUBURB: \_\_\_\_\_

STATE: \_\_\_\_\_ POSTCODE: \_\_\_\_\_

EMAIL: \_\_\_\_\_

- ☐ I would like to receive a certificate for this donation.

**I would like to donate** (Donations over \$2 are tax deductible):

☐ \$70 ☐ \$140 ☐ \$210 OR ☐ \$ \_\_\_\_\_

**Payment method:**

☐ EFT: BSB 062-000 Acc 16047336

☐ Debit my credit card (details below)

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☐ Mastercard ☐ Visa Card Expiry: \_\_\_\_ / \_\_\_\_

NAME ON CARD: \_\_\_\_\_

SIGNATURE: \_\_\_\_\_

- ☐ Cheque, payable to 'St Vincent de Paul Society'

Please post coupon to: St Vincent de Paul Society National Council Office, PO Box 243, Deakin West, ACT 2600