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The Vincentian Vocation

The vocation of the Society's members, who are called Vincentians, is to follow Christ through service to those in need and so bear witness to His compassionate and liberating love. Members show their commitment through person to person contact. Vincentians serve in hope

Mission

The Mission of the St Vincent de Paul Society in South Africa is to deepen the faith of its members – to go out into our nation to heighten the awareness of Jesus Christ.

We do this by sharing ourselves (who we are and what we have) with the poor on a person-to-person basis.

We seek to co-operate in shaping a more just and compassionate South African community,

Our preferred option in this mission of service is to work with the poor in development, by respecting their dignity, sharing our hope, and encouraging them to take control of their destiny

INTRODUCTION

Welcome to the St Vincent de Paul Society.

The Society is mainly staffed and controlled by volunteer members. It is a volunteer organisation.

This booklet is an introduction to the Society, the way it goes about its work and the way it functions as an organisation. It is a guide to your initiation into the life and work of the Society.

Each chapter deals with a particular aspect of the life and work of the Society.

Conferences have developed their own ways of putting into practice the topics discussed here. Encourage your conference to explain the way it does things and why members find that particular approach helpful.

We always need to be open to change; to finding better ways of helping people in need. We are about God's work among God's people. Each member, old or new, has a contribution to make to this.

The Spirit

What is at the heart of our lives as Vincentians?
What give us our particular character as a Society?

Here is how some members responded to these questions:

“I joined the Society because I wanted to be involved with people who were less well off than me, because that is what Christ said we should be doing.”

“It is the Christian in me, meeting the Christ in the other person.”

“It’s a faith thing really. In our small community, our Conference, we endeavour to support each other in faith and assist each other to live the Gospel message.”

“We are the hands of Christ, a human sacrament. We represent Christ in action.”

“I just wanted to help people in need.”

“Christ gave himself for us, what are we going to give him in return? We’ve got to give ourselves, our lives, our time.”

“We’re so human and break down so often. We’re looking to be that whole person. I think it is a search within ourselves. Helping the poor, improves the quality of our lives too.”

The Society's purpose

The purpose of the Society goes to the heart of the Gospel. It centres on the compassion of Jesus Christ, whose sympathy, gentleness and concern for the poor and disadvantaged, is an inspiration to us all.

Our purpose will be lived out by the way we work with the poor, irrespective of race, colour, creed or status.

Our aim is not only to supply immediate support, but to enable those we assist to break free from the cycle of poverty. Our desire is to **ENABLE AND EMPOWER. A HAND-UP, NOT A HAND-OUT.**

The Beginnings

The Society of St Vincent de Paul began in Paris in 1833. A group of Catholic university students, led by Frederic Ozanam, were involved in debates on religion. Against sceptical opponents,

Frederic argued that Christianity had always fostered human progress. He demonstrated this with evidence from history. They challenged him: “But what is the Church doing now? What are you doing? Show us your works, and then we might believe!”

The challenge was taken up by Ozanam. His response: “We must do what Jesus did ... let us go to the poor”. That night Ozanam and his room mate took some of their own fire wood to an old man living in an attic a few doors away.

On further thought, Frederic proposed to his friends that they form a “little society” to work for the poor. They responded with enthusiasm. They sought out Sister Rosalie Rendu and under her guidance began to visit the poor on a regular basis, helping them in whatever way they could.

In less than two years the “little society” had grown to more than 100 members. Today the Society continues to serve people in need.

The St Vincent de Paul Society’s 2500 members and volunteers work very hard to assist people in need and combat social injustices across South Africa. Internationally, the Society operates in 144 countries and has over 950 000 members.

The Conference

The Conference is the basic cell of the Society of St Vincent de Paul. It is usually parish based. It enables us to do together what we could never do alone.

The Conference meets regularly, generally weekly or fortnightly. The meeting provides an occasion for members to come together in mutual support and encouragement. There they review and organise their activities.

The agenda for meetings shows what the Conference is all about. There is a prayer followed by spiritual reading and discussion which helps members to look at their activities in the light of their faith.

Reporting on, and discussing visits and other activities, provides an opportunity to review what has been done and what still needs to be done. Together we can find better ways of responding.

Conference Work

The Society of St Vincent de Paul seeks, in a spirit of justice and charity, to help those who are suffering. It is open to any form of help that relieves suffering and promotes human dignity. It is concerned, not only with relieving need, but also with redressing the situations that cause it.

We do work by going out in pairs, visiting people in their homes. In meeting people face-to-face on their home territory, we have an opportunity to get to know them personally. We see their circumstances, meet their families, and thereby gain a more immediate understanding of their problems.

In time, they may find in us a friend whom they can trust, someone they can confide in, somebody who accepts and respects them. We hold as confidential, whatever people entrust to us in the course of a visit, and also the names of those we visit.

We find out what the person's needs are and how we can best assist that person.

Conference Work continued

Their needs could include the following:

- Material (food, clothing, furniture, household goods and other financial assistance)
- Social (isolation, violence, loneliness etc.)
- Emotional (physical/mental health, addiction etc.)
- Personal (migration / refugees etc.)

With these issues in mind, we attend to their needs. It is up to the visiting members to decide what assistance to give and what follow-up is needed or desired.

We do not have the resources or expertise to meet every need. We do whatever we can. We need to know what other community groups and services are offered in the district, and when appropriate, refer people there. Our aim is always to help people to stand on their own feet – “to take control of their own destiny”. (Mission)

To assist Conferences in their work, the National Council has endorsed a variety of training and development opportunities including spiritual readings for conference meetings.

Councils (District and Central) organise, to the fullest extent, formation and training sessions intended for members and future members on spiritual themes, the Vincentian vocation, social action and justice.

Assisting people in need

The main calls for assistance are:

- Referrals from Parish Priests, Parish Groups and Catholic Schools
- Referrals from Government Departments and other community groups
- Referrals from other charitable organisations
- Referrals from social workers

Financial and material assistance is not provided at the Centre. Details of people requesting assistance are passed onto the Conferences.

Special Works

From time to time Conferences, Districts or Central Councils become aware of a need in their area that they cannot address through normal conference work. A Work that is set up as a result is called a Special Work

A good example of a Special Work homes for the aged and orphans. At jumble sales donated goods are sorted, with the purpose of providing items to those in need and selling the surplus at nominal prices. The money raised through the sale of goods is used to support the work of the Society.

The nature of many Special Works require that there be full-time staff that include professionals

Conference Members are encouraged to become involved in these works. This is at the heart of all we do. It's the spirit of the Society in action.

Organisational structure of the Society

The Conference is the basic cell of the Society. It is the cornerstone of home visitation and assistance to people in need.

Conferences are formed up into a District. The District Council consists of the District President, Vice President, a Spiritual Advisor, Secretary, Treasurer and Conference Presidents.

The District exists to animate, support and assist Conferences to serve those in need.

Each District is a member of the Central Council. The Central Council has a similar structure as the District.

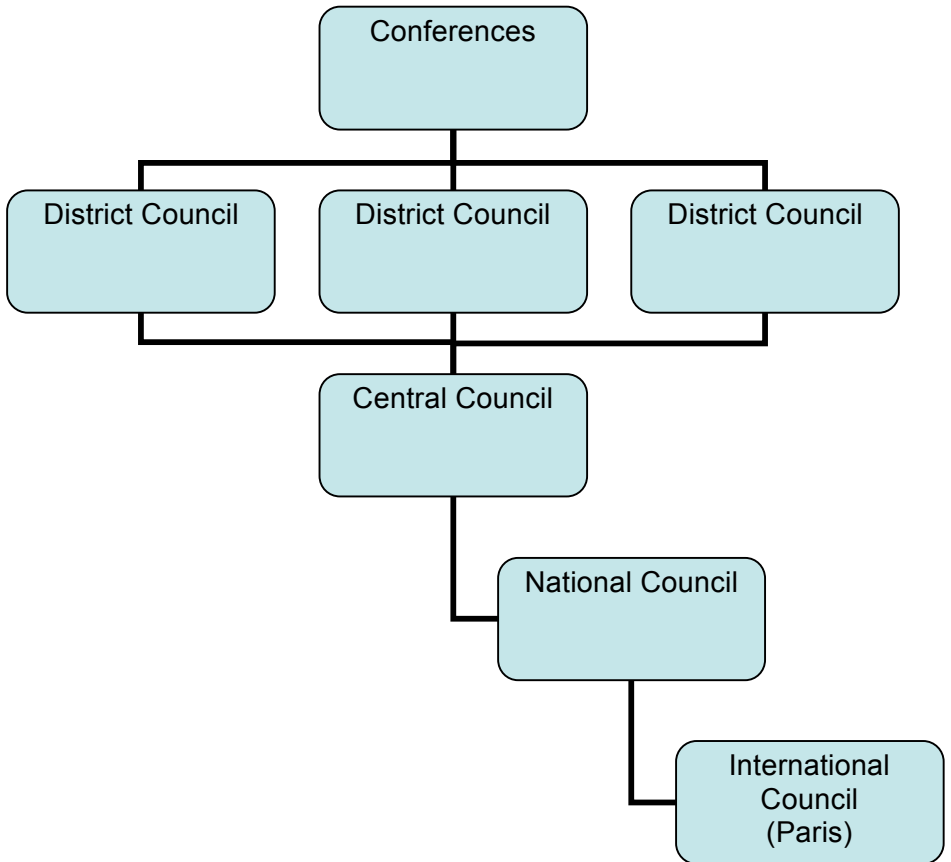
Each District President is a member of the Central Council

Each Central Council belongs to the National Council. This body co-ordinates activities of the Society throughout South Africa and overseas.

All Society property, by law, is owned by the National Council and deals with policy issues affecting the Society's image and ensures our legal responsibilities are met. This Council forms an important link in the chain

The International Council General, which has its offices in Paris, represents the Society before the Holy See and all other religious and lay international bodies.

St Vincent de Paul South Africa
Organisational structure



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