

Can Our Guests Become Members?

by Mike Syslo

A question that comes up every once in a while from our Conference leadership is: can one of our guests be a member? Usually, this question is inspired by someone whom we have been serving who says they like our organization, are thankful for the help we gave and would like to help us serve others. You would think that there is a simple answer to this – *yes* or *no*. Well the answer is not so easy.

Within the RULE of the Society, Part I Article 3.2 is very clear: *The Society, in each of its Conferences (the primary basic unit of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul), makes no distinction regarding gender, wealth, occupation, social status, or ethnic origin.* So, clearly in the RULE we are not to discriminate against our guests when selecting people for membership in the Society. In our “Standards of Affiliation for Conferences” we also state related to membership: *Diversity within Conferences is both welcome and healthy.* However, -- there always seems to be a “however.”

It has always been a recommendation of the Society to use caution when discerning whether to accept one of our guests as a member. There are two points I would like to make here. First, “discerning” is important. It has always been the recommended process of the Society that prospective members be introduced to the Conference, be given time for their own discernment, be trained about who, why, how, etc. of the Society, and then have their membership voted on by the Conference members. We should never simply accept someone into the Conference because they show some interest.

Second, “perception” is important. We should never allow others to perceive that we are in any way self-serving. In other words, we should not give more or better service to our own members than we give to those who come to us for help. Experience has shown a variety of results from accepting guests as members. In some cases, the new members have stayed with the Conference and become strong active Vincentians. In some cases, the new members have struggled with their own instability and have regularly sought to receive more assistance from the Conference making things awkward in discussing cases during a Conference meeting. In some cases, the new members have used their access to Conference resources to help themselves without going through the appropriate process (here is especially where the misperception can come into play). In some cases the Conference was forced to ask new members to step down because of their misuse of Conference resources.

Caution is the key here. We welcome all who would like to live their faith by serving others. However, we should be sure that our guests are stable before inviting them to join our Society. This is a tough thing to do. Does “stable” mean that they have gone without asking for help for a period of time (e.g. six months)? How do you determine stability? This is not easy. That is why the Society has simply made the recommendation that we not accept guests into membership while they are still in a position to need service.

The reverse comes into play also. We must be willing to help our own members when they are in crisis. But again, be careful of the perception. We are often tempted to do more or give more to our members than we would to someone else who comes to us for help. Stay within the guidelines and procedures of the Conference.

Ultimately, if you are following the RULE and guidelines and recommendations of the Society as developed over the last 170+ years, you will build strong Conferences and a healthy membership.