

Vincentian leadership— Is there such a thing?



Participants in the Vincentian Mission and Values Centered Leadership Program outside St Francis' Church in Melbourne, where they met in October.

BY LIVIA CARUSI AND
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'You say you experience great difficulty in the mission. Alas! Monsieur, there is no lot in life where there is nothing to be endured' (Vincent de Paul, patron saint of the St Vincent de Paul Society).

It is believed that Vincent de Paul wrote over 30,000 letters during his life. For Vincentians, his letters provide a small window into his character, his courage, his struggles and achievements over a lifetime

of service and leadership which was marked with great personal transformation as well as a steadfast vision for mission, charity, justice, spirituality and servant leadership.

Fast forward a couple of hundred years, and a young French man, Blessed Frederic Ozanam, and his companions, with the guidance of a Daughter of Charity, Blessed Rosalie Rendu, made a conscious and heartfelt decision to name our organisation in honor of Vincent de Paul. This decision, we suspect, would not have been taken lightly, and in choosing the name 'Society of St Vincent de Paul', they too would have understood the very essence of the man, his vision for the world and also the magnitude of his legacy.

The Vincentian model of leadership is quite simple—servant leadership is not connected to a person's title, as it is quite different to the function of management.

Like other community organisations doing 'good works', the St Vincent de Paul Society has its own unique DNA, of which our leadership model is a large part.

So what makes our DNA unique?

Briefly, it is our founding story, which no other organisation can claim.



It is our place within the broader Vincentian family; our model of assisting people; home visitation (which remains authentic to our founder's vision of assisting people in need and in pairs), and also being part of an international organisation; the opportunities that we afford to members, volunteers and staff to connect and engage in our mission, our governance model of subsidiarity as well as our model of leadership.

The Vincentian model of leadership is quite simple—servant leadership.

Servant leadership is not connected to a person's title, as it is quite different to the function of management. The cornerstone of this model is the belief that all people have within them leadership qualities and that an office,

Conference or Special Work should facilitate opportunities for individual and collective leadership qualities to come to the fore.

Servant leadership echoes the message of Christ, Vincent de Paul, Frederic Ozanam and the countless number of Vincentian men and women around the world whose primary mission is to serve another first—so yes, there is such a thing as Vincentian leadership that is very much a part of our DNA.

In accord with the *One Society, One Voice* National Strategic Plan 2013–2016, namely objective priority focus area 1, 'Building a unified, spiritual and sustainable Society', the Society in Victoria undertook a process to identify leadership programs within the Vincentian tradition. This task was made much easier as a result of being part of the broader Vincentian family and in 2012 the Society in Victoria discovered the DePaul University Vincentian Leadership program operating in Chicago in the United States.

In 2013, the State Council of South Australia initiated a project titled 'Vinnies Values Volunteers' to gain a better understanding of volunteer attitudes and issues. The project included a survey which showed that volunteers sought knowledge of and training in all aspects of leadership and to be more involved in the decision making processes of the Society. Following the State Council's search for appropriate leadership training that would enrich volunteers and staff alike, this course was discovered. Its focus on servant leadership and Vincentian values convinced the State Council to approve a trial.

Following two years of negotiations with DePaul, the establishment of a Victorian Project Advisory Committee to oversee implementation and on-going program development to ensure 'fit' for the Australian context,

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the inaugural annual Vincentian Mission and Values Centered Leadership Program was launched on 27 August 2014.

Twenty-nine participants, including representatives from South Australia and Tasmania, are participating in the 15-week course. They have embraced the course with great gusto and all have furthered their individual and collective knowledge of Vincentian leadership.

As we turn our attention to 2015, the Society in South Australia is embarking upon an implementation strategy that will result in the program being offered in that state. The Society in Victoria will continue to offer Level 1 on an annual basis and is currently exploring models with DePaul to offer the next level of the program. We welcome further opportunities for other states and territories to hear more about our leadership partnership with DePaul, our Victorian model and the benefits of offering a leadership program within the Vincentian tradition. ♦

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