



Vincentian Life: Conference



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INTRODUCTION

The National Council of the United States, Society of St. Vincent de Paul is pleased to provide you with this *“Vincentian Life: Conference”* Manual. We are deeply indebted to the Conference Resources & Concerns Committee of the Phoenix Diocesan Council, which originally developed this document as *“How to Run a Conference.”* It has been modified (generalized), where appropriate, to reflect the different circumstances that exist throughout the country. It is a living document, waiting to be used.

THE GOAL

The National Council’s goal is to provide Conference leaders with information on how most Conferences are established and organized, and on the various ways that Conference responsibilities are structured and requests for assistance are handled.

When Conferences are considered, we must look at the variety of possibilities:

1. Some Conferences are part of a District Council that is part of a Archdiocesan/Diocesan Council that has control over the corporate structure within the Diocese.
2. Some Conferences are part of a District Council that is part of a Archdiocesan/Diocesan Council that has only limited control over the Society within the Diocese.
3. Some Conferences are part of a District Council with no Archdiocesan/Diocesan Council that has control over the corporate structure of the Conferences within its area of coverage.
4. Some Conferences are part of a District Council with no Archdiocesan/Diocesan Council that has no or only limited control over the Society with its area of coverage.
5. Some Conferences are Isolated Conferences and have no District Council to report to.

6. Some Conferences within the above structures have no special works of any kind and do basic Conference work.
7. Some Conferences within the above structures have stores and/or special works that they coordinate besides doing normal Conference work.
8. Some Conferences are Special Works Conferences and have a limited amount of activities they perform.
9. Some Conferences have good working relationships with their pastor/parish and some do not.
10. Many Conferences within the various above structures also are part of upper Councils who have Executive Directors and other staff, both paid and unpaid.

As you can see, we have a lot of environments, circumstances and situations that we encounter when relating to Conferences.

Information for this document was drawn from many successfully functioning Conferences serving a wide variety of communities -- affluent and poor, urban and rural, large and small. The counsel provided is time-tested and reliable, but some Conferences may still have to modify the suggestions to meet unique needs in their community, to match the resources available to them, or to fit the Vincentians who make up their Conference.

THIS DOCUMENT - GUIDELINES, NOT RULES

Within the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, there exists the Rule, Bylaws and Resolutions of the National Council constituting the formal regulations of the Society which must be adhered to by all Vincentians. With a few exceptions, this document contains guidelines, not rules. Guidelines are flexible. They are meant to be adaptable to Conference income, the number and types of requests received, geographic considerations, and, most of all, to the uniqueness of a guest's situation. A few suggestions are strongly made, reflecting years of experience. Those items that are consistent with the Rule are clearly emphasized.

God bless you for your commitment to operate a Conference!

Please go to www.svdpusa.org – click on SVDP Members along the top of the home page, then click on Documents along the top of the Members webpage –

then click on Council/Conference. Here you will find a section titled Extension/Revitalization. Within this section, you will find many documents that are useful in forming new Conferences or revitalizing existing Conferences. Pay special attention these documents: *Model Extension Plan*, *Extension-Formation-Revitalization Toolbox-Expanded*, and the documents related to *Invitation to Serve*.

Take time to peruse these documents. They will provide a basic understanding about how Conferences are started and what is expected of them by the Society, by the pastors of the parishes in which most are located, and by their Bishops.

These documents were produced by:
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Michael S. Syslo
Editor

Part 1: What Is SVdP?



HISTORY, MISSION AND MORE

HISTORY

The Society of St. Vincent de Paul (SVdP) is a worldwide Christian community. It was founded in Paris, France by a 20-year old student at the Sorbonne, Antoine Frederic Ozanam, with six friends, on April 23, 1833. The "Conference of Charity," as it was originally known, was formed in response to taunts from fellow students: *"What is Christianity doing to help the poor and suffering?"* The group took as their model and patron the great French saint and champion of the poor, Vincent de Paul. It later became known as the Society of St. Vincent de Paul and spread rapidly throughout Paris, and then France.

Rules and regulations became necessary as the single Conference in France grew and became an organization. In 1835, the Society's Rule, a series of Articles, was developed to help preserve the objectives and Spirit of the original founders.

In 1845, Fr. Ambrose Heim catalyzed the first Conference of the Society in the United States in St. Louis, Missouri. The Rule of the Society passed to them; the movement growing quickly and widely across America.

In 1850, when growth indicated a need for a national structure, the Rule was revised to establish a Superior Councils section. The Rule of the Society, with three principal parts, has been revised a few times, the last time being in 2003. As permitted by the Council General International (CGI), the National Council of the U.S. adopted a provision requiring full members and office holders to be Catholic. Part III of the Rule (U. S. Statutes) was revised in 2018 with the approval of CGI.

You may want to secure in writing your own Conference History.

MISSION

1. The Society of St. Vincent de Paul is a Catholic voluntary organization of lay people, men and women. It seeks, in a spirit of justice and charity, to help those who are suffering or deprived.
2. Vincentians serve the poor cheerfully, listening to them and respecting their wishes, helping them to feel and recover their own dignity. In the poor, they see the suffering Christ.
3. Vincentians endeavor to establish relationships based on trust and friendship. They do not judge those they serve.
4. No work of charity is foreign to the Society. It promotes human dignity and personal integrity. It gives priority to the poorest of the poor and to those most rejected by society. They rejoice in discovering the spirit of prayer in the poor, for in the silence, the poor can perceive God's plan for every person.
5. Members of the Society are united in the same spirit of poverty and sharing. They form, with those they help, one and the same family throughout the world.

ESSENTIAL OBJECTIVES

1. Bringing men and women together to grow spiritually.
2. Encouraging Christian friendship and fellowship.
3. Serving those in need.

MINISTRY

1. To follow Christ through service to those in need and to bear witness to His compassionate and liberating love.

2. To serve those in need regardless of creed, ethnic or social background, health, gender or political opinion.
3. Through person-to-person contact, to constantly strive for renewal, adapting to changing world conditions.

PHILOSOPHIES

These are the philosophies which guide us:

ST. VINCENT DE PAUL

“You will find that charity is a heavy burden to carry, heavier than the bowl of soup and the full basket. But you will keep your gentleness and your smile. It is not enough to give bread and soup. This the rich can do. You are the servant of the poor ... They are your masters; and the more difficult they will be, the more unjust and insulting, the more love you must give them.”

“It is for your love alone that the poor will forgive you the bread you give them.”

BLESSED ROSALIE RENDU

“Be kind and love, for love is your first gift to the poor.”

“God has already given you spiritual wisdom or you would not be sacrificing your precious free day to His poor. Because you see Christ in His poor, I know you will approach each one you visit with humility as His servant.”

“Always remember, that if we had been through the hardships they have had to meet -- if our childhood had been one of constant want -- perhaps we too would have given way to envy and hatred as, I must admit, have many of the poor. Be kind and love, for love is your first gift to the poor. They will appreciate your kindness and your love more than all else you can bring them.”

BLESSED FREDERIC OZANAM

“The question which is agitating the world today is neither one of the form of government nor of persons; it is a social question. It is a struggle between those who have nothing and those who have much; it is the violent clash of opulence and poverty which is shaking the ground under our feet. Our duty as Christians is to throw ourselves between those two camps in order to help accomplish, through charity, what justice alone cannot do.”

BIOGRAPHIES

Vincent de Paul

This great Saint of the Catholic Church (1581-1660) is the patron of the Society and was the inspiration for Frederic Ozanam who founded the Society in 1833, two hundred and fifty years after Vincent's birth.

Ambition ruled Vincent's early years in the priesthood. The secret to Vincent's public achievements over the last half of his life was to be found in that slow evolution of the ambitious young priest into the man of prayer and obedience to God's will, who was to found the Congregation of the Mission in 1625.

Vincent was born at Pouy in the south of France in 1581. His father encouraged and helped him toward the priesthood, to which he was ordained on September 23, 1600 at the age of nineteen. His initial goals, however, were self-centered and avaricious -- to secure a bishopric and a large pension on which he could support his family. Yet all his hopes, even after two trips to Rome, promises of a bishopric and money from a will, came to nothing.

During his search for position and wealth, Vincent was captured at sea and became a slave of four different masters for the next two years. In some ways, his physical trials proved as arduous as his interior journey from self to God.

Empty-handed in his quest for the rewards of a Church benefice, he came to Paris in 1609 where he was to make his home for the next fifty-one years. A spiritual renewal was underway and Vincent became acquainted with the people who were spearheading it, especially Cardinal Pierre de Berulle, whom he took as his

spiritual director and Father Andre Duval who was to be his "wise man" and counselor during the next three decades.

Duval introduced Vincent to the Rule of Perfection by the English Capuchin monk, Benet of Canfield. It was from Canfield that Vincent learned the deepest meanings of doing the will of God and the importance of waiting for God to lead. It was from him that he learned the words "Do not tread on the heels of Providence." Finally, Vincent met (later Saint) Francis de Sales who captured his heart with his gentleness and love.

Vincent's arrival in Paris was a turning point in his spiritual journey. Ambition was receding, attention to God and vocation was beginning to grow. He wasn't in Paris long when he was accused of stealing money from the judge with whom he shared living quarters. Vincent was innocent, but did not defend himself. He was accused publicly and put out of the apartment. It was a humiliation to him, yet he remained silent. Some years later the real thief confessed. This episode reveals Vincent's surrender of self-advancement and public image and an emerging resemblance to his silent Master.

Though Vincent was always serious, joy and happiness flooded his life when he became pastor of a parish for the first time in 1612. He was sent to the church of Saint Medard in Clichy, a poor parish northwest of Paris. He loved the pastoral ministry, because the poor people of the parish touched his heart. He called forth a new life of faith and practice from the people, and for himself he experienced the priesthood in a way he had not known. In less than a year, however, he was recalled to Paris to become tutor and chaplain to the de Gondi family and their children. Sad to leave Clichy, he was to find the de Gondis would be important in discovering his true vocation.

In 1617, without knowing it, Vincent preached the first sermon of the Mission on the feast of the Conversion of Saint Paul in the parish church in Folleville. He was led to it by the state of spiritual neglect among the peasants on the estates of the de Gondi family. He preached on general confession. The people were deeply moved and, through the help of Jesuits from Amiens, many received the sacrament of reconciliation.

This experience had an unexpected and dramatic consequence. In the face of the spiritual need of the neglected peasants in the countryside, Vincent could no longer see himself confined to the service of one family as chaplain and tutor. So he fled.

Vincent became the parish priest in Chatillon-les-Dombes in the east of France. The plight of the poor again called him. His ministry there showed forth the maturing shape of his pastoral spirit. He divided his day between visits to the people, especially the sick, and time in the church and rectory. Half the day Vincent spent among the people, visiting in their homes. He was very much the apostle, going about the town. The other half he was at home, studying, reading, and praying. In this time, he learned the dialect of the region and soon he was able to teach catechism in it.

In August 1617, as he was preparing for Sunday Mass, the news came to him of the illness and destitution of an entire family in the parish. He preached on their need during the Mass and the response that afternoon of the people was overwhelming. Vincent called a meeting of women interested in this matter. He urged them to put order into their generosity by taking turns. They decided to establish a group that would be called the "Confraternity of Charity."

His style of working with them was remarkable. He was a collaborator with them, helped them do what they agreed on and drew up the charter. While he made his contribution, they organized themselves with great local autonomy. Vincent exhibited the same style of collaborative leadership later when he assisted and inspired the priests of Paris to organize themselves.

On one occasion he discussed the need for a patron with the women. He advised, "Let us make Jesus our patron." He also wrote in the Rules of the Confraternity that, when the women offered bread and soup to the sick person, they should offer it in the name of Jesus. Vincent in this crucial year of 1617 was getting more and more in touch with Jesus at a personal level.

Vincent was pressured to return to the de Gondi family in Paris. The family agreed that he would no longer be tutor to the children and that he would be free to preach the missions in the towns and villages. Vincent, with other interested

priests, did this for the next seven years. He was also made Chaplain of the Galleys, responsible for the spiritual well-being of the galley slaves.

In late 1624 or early 1625, Madame de Gondi set aside money for a community to preach the missions and asked Vincent to find a community to do so. None could be found that were willing and able. His mentor, Fr. Duval, counseled that the will of God seemed evident: Vincent was being called by God to do it himself. Vincent accepted the call and founded the Congregation of the Mission in April of 1625.

Together with Louise de Marillac, Vincent developed a new form of charity evolved in the way of loving the poor and in recognizing the gift of poor people and the mystery of Jesus in them. The poor, whom Jesus called "blessed" and whom Vincent called "our masters and teachers," were treated as privileged mediators of redeeming grace.

Louise died March 15, 1660 and Vincent followed her on September 27 the same year. After his death, Vincent was honored as the father of his country. The Catholic Church named him Patron Saint of all Charitable Works as well as the Light of the Clergy. Louise was honored by Pope John XXIII as the Patroness of all Christian Social Workers.

Antoine Frederic Ozanam

The historical period in which Antoine Frederic Ozanam spent his short 40-year life span was one of great turmoil, marked by continual civil and social unrest in his native France and much of Europe. The French Revolution occurred in 1789. The structure of society and the principal institutions of Western Civilization were shaken to their very foundations during the post-Revolutionary period that followed.

Ozanam witnessed an "Old Order" crumbling away and a "New Era" ascending. A true intellectual, steeped in the history, literature, language and laws of the Western world, he remained deeply rooted in his Catholic faith and heritage. Shortly after completing his double doctorate in Literature and Law (at age 26) he wrote: "The first, deepest need of mankind and human society is religion - that

which binds man to God. That is the cornerstone for which search must be made among the ruins of the Old World in order to raise up the new."

Jean Antoine Ozanam, father of Frederic, was a member of a prominent and prosperous family from the industrial city of Lyons, Jean Antoine entered the military while the Revolution was at its height (1793). He rose to the rank of Captain in the famed Hussars (cavalry) and fought beside Napoleon Bonaparte in several European campaigns. In spite of numerous commendations for valor, he retired from the military in 1798, thoroughly disillusioned by the anarchy and widespread disorder that accompanied the Revolution.

In 1800, at age 27, he married Marie Nantas, also of Lyons. While the couple had fourteen children, ten fell victim to childhood diseases and the scourges of smallpox, cholera and typhoid fever. Partly because of these experiences and a general desire to address the ills of the age, Jean Antoine gave up his business pursuits to take up the study of medicine. He moved his family to Milan, Italy, where he received his medical training and degree.

It was in Milan, on April 23, 1813, that a son -- Frederic Antoine -- was born. Shortly after Frederic's birth, the Ozanam family returned to Lyons, where Dr. Ozanam worked at the local municipal hospital.

Young Frederic grew up in a loving, caring atmosphere in which traditional Catholic family values were stressed. Nurtured by the example of his parents and the gentle tutoring of his sister, Elyse, he developed early on a deep devotion to the Mass, the Holy Eucharist and the Blessed Virgin Mary. These remained constants throughout his life.

Still, at age 16, he underwent a deep crisis of faith, not untypical of adolescent development. He became assailed by doubts as his studies exposed him to the religious skepticism of the age. He observed few people living the lifestyle of caring for others, which took place in his own family.

Finally, with the guidance of an understanding priest, he emerged from this trial stronger than ever in the faith. He made a solemn promise before the Blessed Sacrament to devote his life to defending the truth and uncovering the harmony between faith and reason.

At the age of 18, he enrolled in the College of France, the Sorbonne, in Paris. He plunged headlong into his studies, fascinated especially by history and literature. In a short time he had mastered ten languages, including Latin, Greek and Hebrew, so as to broaden the scope of his research endeavors.

Plagued by homesickness, the irreligious attitudes of most other young students and the blatant anti-Catholicism of many faculty members, Ozanam was sorely tested during this period. Fortunately, he became acquainted with the brilliant French scientist, Frederic Ampere, who invited him to take up lodging at his own home, and treated him like a son.

To please his parents, who urged him to pursue a career in law, Frederic also enrolled in the school of Law at the Sorbonne. At age 23, he achieved his law degree. By age 26, he attained a double doctorate in Literature and Law. Within five years he was appointed to a full professorship at the Sorbonne. He was (and to this day remains) the youngest person ever accorded such a high position at this prestigious school.

And yet, despite his intense intellectual and academic pursuits, it was at age 20 that Ozanam and six of his close friends formed the first "Conference of Charity." They had come to the realization that, after much intense debate and many brilliant defenses of Christianity, they had not moved anyone at the University to follow the teaching of Christ or return to the practice of their faith. The small group came together and reached a simple and singular conclusion: It is not enough to move men's minds. It is necessary to move their hearts. Ozanam commented simply: *"One thing is lacking -- works of charity. LET US GO TO THE POOR."*

That was the start. One of the small band knew enough to contact Sister Rosalie, a Daughter of Charity whose love for the poor was legendary in the slums of Paris. She agreed to provide the group with lists of families desperately in need of help.

The students began to beg money, food- stuffs, fuel (coal) -- anything of value -- and visiting the poor in their homes or tiny apartments on a regular basis. They visited as friends and helpers.

They met weekly to report on families visited, take stock of their resources and plan their activities. Each of these meetings opened and closed with prayer. This basic structure of a "Conference Meeting" has remained unchanged since.

In 1841, at age 28, Frederic Ozanam wed Amelie Soulacroix, daughter of the Rector of the University of Lyons. Subsequently, a child, Marie, was born to them. Hailed in literary and academic circles as a rising star, called upon to serve his Church on every important issue of the day, Frederic now knew and experienced the loving attention and affection of a wife and child.

Still, he pressed on. Within seven years the original band of seven friends had grown to 600 in Paris alone, and the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, as it was now known, had spread to 15 other cities and towns in France, with more than 2,000 members.

Between 1842 and 1845, Conferences of Charity sprang up all over the European Continent, as well as Ireland, England and Greece. In 1845, just 12 years after its founding, the Society was established in the United States and Mexico.

Ozanam knew that to preserve the basic spirit of the Society -- witness to Christ, fraternal union, and direct, person-to-person assistance to the suffering -- a simple rule was needed for the membership to follow, regardless of the local conditions in which they had to work.

Its founders set out to write the Rule of the Society. The Rule has been called "eloquent in its simplicity" by some and "Christianity pared down to its essentials" by others. At any rate, the Rule and structure of the Society are the enduring legacy to the poor of this great man who claimed: "The poor have called me out of myself. No wonder I love them so."

At the age of 40, Frederic Ozanam died, his body ravaged by tuberculosis, his spirit consumed by love.

Louise de Marillac

She was the niece of Michel de Marillac, Louis XIII's Minister of Justice. Born in 1591, she experienced the pain of being an orphaned and illegitimate child. At

the age of 22, she married one of the Queen's attendants, Antoine Le Gras and had a son, Michel. Widowed prematurely in 1625 and very bereaved, she took an excessive interest in Michel, worrying about him and her own future, while she still yearned for the religious life.

During this time, Vincent knew what he had to do to serve the poor of France: appease the spiritual hunger of the French peasants and care for all the poor and the victims of adversity of the period. This implied tending the wounds of the sick, hospital visiting, organizing soup kitchens with the women's help, preaching, confessing and reconciling.

It was at this time that Vincent met this noble lady, Louise de Marillac. He was to give her moral support and involve her in the establishment of his Confraternities of Charity.

She too had experienced a real night of faith. On the feast of Pentecost 1623, while she was praying in the Church of Saint Nicolas des Champs in Paris, she received a revelation from the Holy Spirit: "His Pentecost light." In no time at all her doubts vanished, and her future became clear; she had the intuition that she would live a consecrated life with the help of a spiritual director.

This priest was to be none other than Vincent de Paul. Their destinies were linked. At a time when the Confraternities of Charity were increasing in number, Vincent had the genius to ask Louise to visit them, supervise their leaders, spur on the teams and strengthen their ties with the parish priests. In sending her out onto the roads of the Ile de France, Vincent de Paul had hit upon Saint Louise's vocation. He was to bring out in her his own qualities; each one was to discover their complementarity.

In November 1633, she welcomed into her house several young peasant women who wanted to consecrate themselves to God in order to serve the poor. They were the founding members of the Company of the Daughters of Charity. Together, Vincent and Louise accompanied, nurtured, guided and organized in the Church this totally new community that had no cloister, no monastery.

The sisters traveled the city streets and the village paths in order to come to the aid of those in need. "The love of Jesus Christ crucified urges us on." This was the

motto that Louise de Marillac gave them. Louise died on March 15, 1660, a few months before Vincent de Paul. Pope Pius XI canonized her in 1934. And, in 1960, the Pope John XXIII declared her patroness of all those who devote themselves to social work.

Sister Rosalie Rendu

Sister Rosalie Rendu, Daughter of Charity from 1802, had been Superior of the house on the rue de l'Epee de Bois from 1815. At the time of the founding of the Conference of Charity grouped around Emmanuel Bailly, which was to become the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul, Sister Rosalie was the guardian angel of the Mouffetard neighborhood and the Faubourg Saint Marceau.

Poverty was commonplace in the Paris of Louis Philippe. Indeed poverty was wide-spread. The terrible 1832 cholera epidemic which devastated these areas made Rosalie Rendu into one of the most representative figures of Christian Charity. She was caring but never possessive.

Her famous "visiting room" permitted her to exercise a real "ministry of charity." More visitors came each day. Priests seeking advice rubbed shoulders with vagrants seeking help. Bishops crossed paths with sellers of second-hand items. The French Marshal's wife met street merchants. Charles X, Queen Amelie, General Cavaignac, Napoleon III, and the Empress Eugenie also frequented her "visiting room."

It only seemed natural that the first members of the Conferences of Saint Vincent de Paul would turn to her. They were novices in the art of helping the poor, the working classes and the sick. In turn, she was all the more efficient as a teacher by the fact that, as a disciple of St. Vincent de Paul, she was imbued by the spirit of her founder. She pointed out the families to be visited, provided them with a little money and bread coupons, and lavished them with practical and concrete advice without sermonizing or overdoing the encouragement.

Sister Rosalie's influence was a determining factor in the development of the spiritual, charitable and social vocation of the newly formed Society of which she can be considered to be its co-foundress.

Sister Rosalie died in 1856, three years after Frederic. Pope John Paul II declared her Blessed in November of 2004. Her feast day is February 7.

ORGANIZATION

HELPING PEOPLE WHERE THEY LIVE

The Society of St. Vincent de Paul (SVdP) is an international organization of lay persons, Catholic in character, who seek, in a spirit of justice and charity and by person-to-person involvement, to help those who are suffering. To provide this personal and neighborly help, Vincentians organize themselves into small working groups or chapters, known as "Conferences," which are the first line of action. The name "Conference" is derived from the French word "confrère" which means "colleague."

Vincentians regard the Conference as the paramount unit of SVdP life. It is at this grass-roots level that the great majority of Vincentians find themselves engaged in the person-to-person service to those in need. Members may and usually do recognize the importance of higher Councils in organizing diocese-wide person-to-person services (for example, dining rooms and thrift stores) and in developing special works. But for most, the fundamental Vincentian action is their own and their Conference's involvement with troubled persons and families in their immediate neighborhood.

THE PARISH CONFERENCE

A SERVANT SOCIETY IN A FAMILY PARISH

For Vincentians, moreover, this person-to-person work is associated with not just any kind of grouping, but almost always with a Conference established at their local Catholic Church, or "parish." A strong case can be made for the traditional, neighborhood parish as a logical and desired base for serving people. The trend today is toward decentralization in the providing of social services. This is a move propelled by the anguish of troubled people who so often feel that nobody really cares. Today, many individuals experience a sense of powerlessness in relation to the forces that shape their lives. Bureaucracies often seem just too big and

distant. So community welfare planners are increasingly accepting the necessity for getting closer to people, individualizing them and their needs, and offering "nearness" to those wanting help.

In the past, even the Church's social services tended to be centralized in diocesan offices and this created a certain bureaucratic way of thinking. More and more, today the parish offers some answers to the remote and impersonal nature of service that sometimes accompanies the centralized approach.

The "neighborhood" nature of the parish solves some of the problems involved with the delivery of help to those in our immediate community:

- 1) A lack of adequate assistance for persons in need;
- 2) Recipients being stigmatized -- rightly or wrongly -- when they are seen seeking assistance from government social service agencies;
- 3) Lack of information or transportation sometimes effectively denies some people access to rightful government aid, especially if they are uneducated or poor; and
- 4) Manpower shortages in the social service field are serious.

The parish -- as a community of concerned people who volunteer and share their different competencies -- can be at least a partial solution to these problems.

It is a logical step from the concept of parish-centered services to SVdP parish Conferences. Conferences are often ideally structured and equipped to handle major parochial responsibilities. The case for the Society is persuasive. SVdP is an organization with a record of consistent and effective service. It has history on its side. It is accurate to think of the Society as the most widespread and best established group in a parish to provide socio-economic services with a religious orientation consistent with the Gospel message, "Love one another."

The Society, moreover, has dimensions which extend beyond the individual parish and which provide additional strength and resources. Thus, through the Society's District and Diocesan Councils, opportunities are offered for training,

consultation, guidance, information exchange, development of helping skills, and joint action on problems beyond the resources of individual parish Conferences.

THE DISTRICT COUNCIL

(NOTE: you may not have a District Council in your Diocese. Three Conferences are needed to create a District Council and three District Councils are needed to create an Archdiocesan/Diocesan Council. Archdiocesan and Diocesan Councils are effectively the same.)

COOPERATION AND STRUCTURE

The primary purpose of "upper Councils" (District or Diocesan) is to help the Conferences achieve their objectives. To best serve those in need, it is helpful for parish Conferences to gather together in District Councils to share common problems and solutions in a roundtable fashion. Information is exchanged and discussed.

The District Council is also a conduit where Conference representatives are informed of actions of the Diocesan Council, of special opportunities to serve, and where coordination begins on Diocesan-wide programs such as the annual food drive.

The Society needs such a structure to enhance communication among the local parish Conferences and as a communication link with the Diocesan Council (if one exists). The parish Conferences elect a District President to help coordinate activities within the District and to serve on the Diocesan Council.

The District Council may also provide the structure, resources and management for activities which are beyond most individual parish Conferences to accomplish such as thrift stores, dining rooms, and other neighborhood services.

THE DIOCESAN COUNCIL

(Three District Councils are needed to create Diocesan Council. The term "Archdiocesan Council" is used with equivalency to Diocesan Council. Within the

Catholic Church, some dioceses are designated as archdioceses; but, within SVdP, they are equivalent in function and purpose.)

SERVE CONFERENCES AND COORDINATE DIOCESE-WIDE PROGRAMS

The Diocesan Council exists to serve the Conferences with resources and management expertise for activities which would be beyond individual parish Conferences or even difficult for District Councils to accomplish such as a medical-dental clinic, a food bank or reclamation center, homeless shelters, and the like.

A Diocesan Council is made up of an elected President and President-appointed Vice President, Treasurer, Secretary, and Spiritual Advisor. District Council Presidents make up the rest of the Diocesan Council. The Diocesan Council sets strategy for the Society within the diocese, and keeps District Councils and Conferences informed on important Society matters.

The Diocesan Council recommends to the membership diocese-wide programs, budgets for Diocesan Council operations, and provides training (or assists District Councils) for Conference members and leaders. The Council President represents Conferences of the diocese as a member of the National Council of the United States, Society of St Vincent de Paul and votes on national resolutions (as guided by the votes of District Council Presidents). The Diocesan Council President uses the recommendations from District and Conference members, combined with new information or further clarifying explanation of issues received at the Mid-Year or National Assembly meeting(s) in order to make an informed final vote for their Diocesan Council. In some cases, the Diocesan Council President may desire to call/email their District/Conference Presidents with the additional or clarifying information for input and agreement – then vote accordingly.

The above paragraph describes the role of National Council Member (NCM). The President of the Diocesan Council typically is the NCM for the diocese. However, in those dioceses where there is no Diocesan Council, the President of the oldest Instituted District Council becomes the NCM. If your diocese does not have a Diocesan Council, please understand the above paragraph as revised for this situation.

NATIONAL VICE PRESIDENTS FOR THE REGIONS AND NATIONAL COUNCIL

GROWTH, COOPERATION AND EDUCATION

The National Council exists to further the work of parish Conferences by establishing a communication link between all Diocesan and District Councils. The National Board of Directors consists of the eight elected National Vice Presidents for the Regions, the National Officers, and other members appointed by the National Council President.

The National Council assists Councils and Conferences by providing standardization of information, committee input, national meetings, workshops, resources for information, disaster assistance and international twinning. Through Vincentian committees, the National Council helps to establish acceptable standards for our service to the poor.

The National Council is also our link with the worldwide Society. It assists in the Aggregation of Conferences and the Institution of Councils to the Society of St. Vincent de Paul. The President of the National Council is also a voting member of the Council General International (CGI).

There are National Vice Presidents who represent each of the eight regions that make up the National Council. The National Vice President helps facilitate communication, extension, formation and training by making meetings, workshops and other resources available closer to home for most Vincentians and their Conference and Council leaders than many national functions. The National Vice President makes it easier for lower Councils to quickly assist one another.

THE COUNCIL GENERAL INTERNATIONAL (CGI)

UNIFORM STANDARDS AND COMMUNICATION

The Council General International, located in Paris, France, strives to set standards throughout the world to preserve and promote our mission to serve the poor in the tradition of Blessed Frederic Ozanam and Saint Vincent de Paul.

CGI evaluates needs and abilities of Conferences needing funds from international twinning. It maintains all records and artifacts that compose the history and heritage of our work.

CGI counsels with various National Councils and holds international meetings to promote knowledge, understanding and cooperation among our worldwide members.

CGI gathers a summary of our work, worldwide, from parish Conferences, to present annually to the Pope for his information and support.

CONFERENCE-PARISH SETTING

We should regularly pause to express our gratitude to God for the great work that has been done for the poor, hungry and homeless. God is good.

What we enjoy today is the result of a marvelous spirit of cooperation between the Society and the parishes where we have taken root. There are many to whom we are indebted, from Pastors to Vincentians, whose generous gifts of time, counsel and resources have enabled God's needy to be served so well. It is fitting we remember that God works best when our efforts exhibit a spirit of harmony.

Our Society calls us to *"adapt to the changing conditions of the world"* and we must acknowledge that the world today is quite different from what it was in the mid-1900s.

For many of its early years, Pastors were almost always our Spiritual Advisors. Pastors and Presidents saw each other often and shared the problems of the Conference and those it served. Often just by being present at our weekly meetings, Pastors came to know as much about the Society as members did (many, in fact, had been Vincentians themselves before entering the Seminary and/or while in the Seminary).

As we moved into the Twenty-first Century, we found all of this had changed. Today a Pastor is often a one-man team, facing a growing number of increasingly complex problems in his parish with decreasing resources and too few hours to deal with them.

While we are now blessed with Spiritual Advisors who are Deacons, Sisters or lay Vincentians, some may have lost that regular contact with their Pastor, and pastors may have lost that intimate glance into the workings of the parish Conference.

We need to do a better job of maintaining that relationship.

SITUATION

- The Society is a voluntary association of lay persons, fully approved by a succession of Roman Pontiffs. A member drawn to the phrase *“Independent of Ecclesiastical jurisdiction”* misses the more important second part of that charge, *“the Society is, at the same time, part of the life of the Church.”* Conferences have always been closely identified with their parish communities. Fulfilling those responsibilities requires goodwill, respect and filial devotion by Conference members and their leaders.
- Every Conference has the right to grow where it was planted; that is, within its own parish community. With that right, however, comes serious responsibilities.
- Each Conference must work to become a recognized presence within its parish. Servant leadership is what we claim to provide, and we are judged by our actions, not by our titles.
- A good working relationship with the Pastor, with his parish staff and with other ministries is essential. It is our responsibility to make this work.
- The Conference and its members must enter into the Life of the Church fully, generously and enthusiastically! This implies active involvement in parish life beyond the works of the Conference. We are not a stand-alone organization within our parish community.

OBJECTIVE

Attain the highest level of cooperation with and respect for the Pastor, the parish staff and other ministries.

The relationship you have with your Pastor is critical for the success of the Conference and its Mission. The Pastor is not obligated to support the Conference financially. You earn his support as you help him minister to the needs of those within his parish boundaries and as you lighten his load and enable him

to spend more time being shepherd, priest, counselor and confessor. If you are always looking for more of his time or money, he may not be there for the Conference.

A simple cordial relationship is adequate, but hardly what we want since it will leave many opportunities unrealized. An active, positive working relationship is to be sought, one that is mutually-beneficial. Such a relationship will utilize the strengths each party brings to the parish and to the community it serves.

STRATEGIES

Understand the Pastor's role and responsibilities.

The Pastor is responsible for both the spiritual and material welfare of all the people living within his parish boundaries. This is an enormous responsibility, obviously beyond what he can do by himself. He is, therefore, dependent on a wide variety of people and organizations to fulfill this responsibility as best he can. These include other clergy assigned to his parish; parish employees; the parish Council; and people serving in various unpaid ministries.

Almost all Pastors make some provision to help the poor. This may take on varying forms -- a "*Paz de Cristo*," "*Good Samaritan*," or "*Helping Hands*" ministry, or simply having the housekeeper make sandwiches in the rectory kitchen for those who appear at the door. Some Pastors give cash to those needing shelter (often out of their own pockets), write parish checks to repair vehicles, and make calls to well-off parishioners asking them to help families he finds in desperate straits.

Understand the Conference's role in the Ecclesiastical Plan.

The SVdP Conference is a voluntary apostolate organized by lay people who want to serve God by serving His poor. Despite what the Rule suggests, the Society today simply does not start a Conference without the Pastor's permission.

When a Conference is created, it is essentially asking that it be given the primary responsibility for taking care of those who are in need locally. It offers the Pastor

its help, “*trust us, we will take care of the poor.*” Because we are a “proven commodity” within our church, Pastors usually are glad to accept our offer. Since 1833, the Society of St. Vincent de Paul has helped the most fragile and vulnerable in a quiet, efficacious way.

It is an act of great faith when a Pastor gives a part of his ecclesiastical responsibilities to a group of lay people who have organized themselves and elected their own officers. The Conference should feel complimented and work hard to retain their Pastor’s confidence.

Be realistic about the level of understanding everyone has.

In the Society, Council leaders regularly have to contend with members who do not know the Society’s Mission, with Conferences who fail to follow the Rule of the Society, with guests who think we simply hand out government entitlements. This is because we have often failed to communicate *who, why, where, what, and how* of our ministry.

Why does it surprise us, then, when we find Pastors who see us as “through a glass darkly”? And, upon finding them unacquainted, do we lead them to knowledge by our works, or do we try to educate with words? Frederic Ozanam himself found that actions, not words, bring people to the truth.

We have an obligation to our Pastors and their staffs to help them understand the Society and how it works in the parish environment to serve the parish and the poor, so that knowledge replaces misunderstanding.

Pastors have a natural desire to know as much as they can about their parish, its people and organizations. You should have the same curiosity about parish goings-on. Relationships work both ways. Provide information in small amounts, slowly at first. Constantly show by *doing*, by following our Mission, by living out your faith in your parish community.

Understand how our actions today can have long-term consequences.

The Pastor who trusts SVdP to serve the poor is then free to go on to another one of the many things he has to do. He will depend on the Conference to do what it

promised. Nothing is more destructive of the relationship between Pastor and Conference than the failure of a Conference to do its job. This forces the Pastor to reassume responsibility for the poor and to reestablish some parish system to do so. It increases his workload, his financial burden and his stress level. He loses confidence in more than the Conference; he loses confidence in the Society.

A Pastor who has been misled or left out of the loop will often be cynical about the Society and even unsupportive of the Conference. He will carry this attitude with him as he is transferred to other parishes in the diocese. This will require us to work twice as hard to repair the damage his past experience(s) with the Society may have left him. We must show ourselves both capable at the moment and committed over the long haul to being there.

Understand the potential conflict inherent in our situation.

The Conference needs the parish for its meeting rooms, office and pantry space, as its primary source of new members and for much, if not all, of its income. It often provides the Conference's Spiritual Advisor, and is the principal source of its sacramental spirituality and sense of faith community.

Yet the Society, as a Catholic association, is a lay movement, founded by lay people, led and managed by lay people. It is an ecclesial spiritual organization, established by the Church and officially recognized as an instrument of the lay apostolate, through the witness of charity.

It is sometimes difficult to understand the "*dynamic tension*" that flows from this duality. We have the formality of our independence from direct ecclesiastical jurisdiction coexisting with the reality of our near-total dependence on our Pastor and parish community.

Some Conferences may place too much emphasis on "independence," even flaunting its identity as an independent lay organization. It forgets its role as part of the Life of the Church, and that its members are all part of their parish community and must act as such.

The Conference should work to become an intrinsic part of the parish community. In the best Conferences, members also serve their parish in other ways, including

being extraordinary ministers of the Eucharist, lectors or greeters, members of the Knights of Columbus or Sodality of Our Lady, teaching Religious Education or RCIA classes, serving on the parish Council, finance board or festival committee.

STEPS TO TAKE

Communication is Essential.

The relationship between the Conference and the Pastor requires continuing communication between the two.

- ◆ The Pastor needs to know what Conference activities are being planned and what is being accomplished within his parish. Conversely, the Conference needs to know what the parish is planning that might impact its ability to serve those in need.
- ◆ The best way to nourish a healthy relationship is to have the Pastor or his appointed staff member attend the Conference meetings. If this is not possible, the president should meet regularly with the Pastor, monthly if possible, or at least quarterly, to keep him updated as to Conference activities. It is best to have a regular set date so that the communication will be ongoing.

Face up to Problems.

We sometimes hear stories of “problems with the Pastor.” When investigated, these are usually the result of simple personality conflicts and only rarely serious authority disagreements.

- ◆ *Personality Conflicts* are common everywhere in our world today. Perhaps the Pastor has difficulty communicating with the Conference President or seems to rub members the wrong way. Try minimizing the number of Vincentians who try to meet with him by designating the Conference Secretary as the sole contact with the Pastor.

On the other hand, *perhaps you, the Conference leader, are the problem.* Are you aggressive when you deal with your Pastor, rather than supportive?

Do you hate change, and are you critical of his new ideas? Are you inflexible in your plans, wanting others to change their plans for your convenience?

The issues surrounding personality conflicts can be many and difficult to overcome. They require a concerted effort by all the individuals involved in order to work out a solution.

You are responsible for working out a personality conflict with your Pastor, not vice versa. Remember that the Society exists and operates in the parish only with the permission of the Pastor. Keep in mind that it is not the Pastor or the SVdP Conference that will be impacted by a failed relationship. It is those in need who will suffer. It is the parish community that will fail in its witness to see Christ in the poor.

- ◆ *Authority Disagreements.* Since we use church facilities and regularly collect money during church functions, SVdP can easily be perceived as not only part of the parish church, but under the immediate control of the church's Pastor.

However, the Society is governed by its own rules of operation. These have proven themselves over the years and must be followed. The Conference makes the decisions it feels are best to assist people in need, not those the parish staff feels should be made.

Should the same, rigid rule be applied to our Pastor? Both logic and reverence say, “no.” No one would deny the Pastor the right to assist someone at his door at a late hour or on a holiday when the Conference is unavailable, and to be reimbursed for any costs he expends. It is the exception that often proves the rule, and the love and respect in which we hold our Pastors moves us to grant him that privilege.

We generally counsel a Conference to respect the request of a Pastor to help someone, within reason, but to ignore any order that assistance be denied someone. That decision rests alone with the Conference after a Home Visit.

There are serious conflicts which could arise over the issue of authority and, if not resolved, destroy the Conference or be a major violation of the Rule of the Society. The Conference leader is expected to give ground when trying to resolve a personality conflict with the Pastor, to honor as best s/he can the Pastors' wishes regarding helping individuals and families, *but is expected to hold her/his ground on serious matters involving the points below.*

Maintain rules for independence.

1. SVdP funds should not be co-mingled with parish funds. However, under Diocesan rules, a collection taken up by the parish for the Conference may be counted by the parish, accounted for by the parish (contributions of \$250 or more acknowledged by the parish according to IRS regulations), and the amount from the collection issued promptly to the Conference by parish check.
2. The Conference must have its own bank account, separate from the parish's account(s).
3. Members of the ordained clergy (priests or deacons) cannot be Officers of a Conference, although they can serve as Spiritual Advisor. Members of the clergy cannot be authorized signers on the SVdP checking account.
4. The Conference does not need the approval of the Pastor, of any other member of the clergy, or of the parish staff before helping an individual or family. That decision is made by the Conference itself, usually after advisement by one of its Home Visit teams.
5. Parish staff should not verbally or otherwise commit the Conference to assist certain people. The decision to help or not help is made solely by the Conference itself or by one of its teams after a Home Visit. The Conference, however, will likely give special attention to the recommendations of staff since it recognizes we are all common servants of the poor in the parish.

The Conference honors their Pastor by paying bills he has incurred or reimbursing him for expenses taking care of the hungry, homeless or otherwise in need when no SVdP volunteers were available.

Finally, some Conferences provide parish office staff with food bags, bus tickets, gasoline vouchers and referral forms for the homeless and desperate who walk in off the street when SVdP teams are not available. We work together to serve God's poor. Eventually, however, parish offices typically decline such things because they draw increasing numbers of supposedly homeless to the parish, and tie up staff doing what we should be doing. We make home visits and that enables us to separate the conmen, greedy and lazy from those with legitimate needs.

Use understanding, cooperation and prayer to solve all conflicts.

Issues of conflict should be approached in a humble, prayerful manner. If a resolution cannot be reached between the Pastor and the Conference, there may be a need to raise the issue to a higher level. Contact your District Council President to begin the process of involving others to mediate the disagreement. The District or Diocesan Council Spiritual Advisor will initiate contact with the Bishop's office and those individuals assigned by the Bishop to address such conflicts.

Never, ever call outsiders such as the news media!

Resolution to any conflict lies in the truth and the truth will prevail. Hopefully, the ongoing conflict will not cause irreparable damage to the relationship between the Pastor and the Conference. Once the authority issue has been satisfactorily defined for both parties, it is assumed that the Conference will continue its efforts to serve the poor and will be able to work cooperatively with the Pastor.

Become part of the parish community.

Take four simple steps to develop a beneficial relationship with your Pastor.

1. Help him. Do more than help him take care of the poor. Be there promptly when he calls a meeting, or send another Conference officer. Be reliable when he asks you to do something. Meet his deadlines. Agree to speak to the RCIA, Religious Education, new parishioners, etc. when he requests that be done. If you are in a District that publishes a "Caution" list for Conferences, provide him and parish staff with that list. It will save him time and money over the long run.

Remember that a "Caution" list is exactly as it is titled. It means that you should take care in assisting this person or family because of other circumstances that have come up in the past. It is NOT a "Do-Not-Help" list.

2. *Get his permission.* Ask before you pass out anything in or around the church. Give the Pastor a final version (not an outline or draft) of what you would like to print to insert in the parish bulletin or pass out at the church doors. Ask his approval. Give him at least two weeks or more to review it. This may seem tedious at first, but the Pastor will gain confidence in your work and eventually approve it quickly. And you will have won his confidence and respect.
3. *Don't make more work for him.* Remember, the Pastor may give permission, but *you* do the work. Don't ask him to write letters or articles. You write them and submit them to him for approval, rewrite or signature. If the Conference wants to do something, get the Pastor's permission, but then the Conference should do the work. Don't dump it on parish staff. This includes everything from stuffing fliers into the church bulletin to setting up tables for a food or clothing drive, from cleaning up after Conference meetings and activities to being good stewards of parish facilities and utilities.
4. *Whenever possible, tie Conference activities to the natural rhythms of parish liturgical life. Our SVdP ministry is an extension of Eucharist.* Be in contact with your Liturgical associate to find out what is coming up and how the Conference might be a part. Have your table outside the church the week when the Gospel is about the Widow's Mite. Offer to run Bread

and Soup suppers on the Fridays during Lent. Be a part of the Parish Festival with a booth raising funds for whatever the Festival's purpose is.

You are a part of your parish. Be parishioners. *Be a visible part of the parish!*

Actively seek out the Pastor's suggestions and listen to his ideas.

A good Pastor is often also a good manager, a wise fund-raiser, a shrewd judge of people, and the most knowledgeable person about what is going on in the parish and neighborhood. Tap into that knowledge! People are supportive of things they helped create; get Father on board early, and he'll be an enthusiastic supporter of your activities!

The odds are fairly good that your Pastor has moved around and served at several parishes, many of which had SVdP Conferences. If that's true, he may well have seen and participated in many successful SVdP efforts, including membership and fund-raising campaigns. He might be the Conference's best information resource!

A good relationship with your Pastor can bring untold benefits to the SVdP Conference, including his permission:

- ◆ for several second collections a year (perhaps moving from the typical "fifth" Sunday collection to the very generous monthly collection!);
- ◆ to distribute brochures and pamphlets which bring in new members and contributors;
- ◆ to permit Vincentians to address all the weekend Masses during the "Invitation To Serve" membership campaign;
- ◆ to place SVdP envelopes in the pews or at the back of the church (or even in the parish's regular envelope package);
- ◆ to stage events and activities involving parish facilities;
- ◆ to give SVdP the donations from the Poor Boxes (or to let SVdP install poor boxes in the church);
- ◆ to provide space for a generous pantry, perhaps an office and phone; and even printing access.

ADDENDUM

The material on the next several pages is from the 1995 **United States Manual of the Society**, pages 276-278, authored by Amin A. de Tarrazi, former President-General of the International Council of the Society, and from **The Code of Canon Law: A Text and Commentary**, commissioned by The Canon Law Society of America.

The Lay Character of the Society

by Amin A. de Tarrazi,

former President-General of the International Council of the Society.

The Council General is often questioned about the lay character of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, a matter which had been debated in their own time by Frederic Ozanam & his companions.

Considering this aspect constituted one of the original fundamental features of their newly created institution, our pioneers stood firmly for the recognition of this particular status within the Church.

This reflection may help to better understand the genuine significance of our organization. Living testimony of the Church's charity, it is in its (the Church's) very heart that the Society draws its inspiration, its justification and its aim.

Founded in Paris, in 1833, the Saint Vincent de Paul Society is not a clerical organization subject to any religious hierarchy. Instead, it is an ecclesial spiritual fraternity, encouraged by the Church and officially recognized as an instrument of the lay apostolate, through the witness of charity.

The Society of St. Vincent de Paul, as a Catholic association, is a lay movement, founded by lay people, led and managed by lay people. Since its origin, it has been recognized as such by Papal authority.

Successive Popes have issued Briefs confirming these original and specific characteristics.

During a general audience held in the Vatican on Feb. 7, 1968, Paul VI made such a declaration, which was significant in the particular character which it attributed to the Society. He placed it somewhere between an "individual apostolate" and an "organized apostolate": "*apostolate through friendship.*" (See below, extract from "*Osservatore Romano*," Feb. 16, 1968.)

Vatican II resolutely laid claim to this approach about laity, clearly expressed through various Council and post-Council texts.

At the international level, through the intermediary of its Council General, the St. Vincent de Paul Society has continually maintained close, faithful, confident, respectful and regular relations with the Vatican: Secretariat of State, Pontifical Councils (notably with *“Cor Unum,”* *“Justitia et Pax,”* *“Pro Laicis”*) and various other dicasteries in Rome.

The same applies, in various countries, at national and diocesan levels. Reciprocal ties of friendship and esteem unite our leaders with Bishops’ Conferences, of which their Pastoral recommendations receive our full support.

It often happens, moreover, that the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul also enjoys a sometimes privileged civil status as, for example, in France, where it is officially approved by the government as an “authenticated public utility.”

In the *Code of Canon Law*, there is no arrangement, relative to the “Private Associations of the Faithful” (Book H, Section V, Chapters 1-4), for their leaders to be appointed by Bishops’ Conferences.

In Council texts concerning the laity, it is the spirit, rather than the letter, which recognizes lay responsibilities & initiatives in a truly “adult” Church.

Work, undertaken by the Synod of Bishops in 1987, on the *“Vocation and Mission of the Laity in the Church and in the World, Twenty Years after the Second Vatican Council,”* confirmed this tendency. Pope John Paul II’s post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *“Christifideles Laici,”* strongly emphasizes the present-day role of lay Christians.

We finally make reference to the especially enlightened and valuable advice of Fr. Jean Passicos, President of the International Society of Canon Law & Comparative Religious Legislation, and Dean of Canon Law at the Catholic Institute in Paris. He played an important part in the reform of Canon Law and in devising the most recent *“Code of Canon Law.”*

As an authority on the subject, he stated that leaders of *“Private Associations of the Faithful,”* such as the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, are chosen in accordance with the statutory arrangements which have been freely agreed within each association.

But, over and above compulsory arrangements of a legal nature, the essential factors remain the kinds of motivation which inspire us. Indeed, after more than 160 years of existence, our Society is most intimately attached to the Church, not so much by conventions, protocols or regulations, as by love, fidelity and affection.

We live, thanks be to God, in a Church which has been renewed, rejuvenated and freed from conventionalism and which is open to dialogue. At the heart of the Church, the hierarchy, inspired by the Council, wishes to promote a laity full of life, active and dynamic, with a sense of responsibility and fully aware of its ecclesial mission.

The strongest bond uniting clerics and lay people, within the fraternal ecclesial community, is far more Charity and mutual confidence, than Law and legal arrangements.

The Code of Canon Law: A Text and Commentary
commissioned by The Canon Law Society of America

Association, Assembly and Apostolic Activity

The emphasis in the 1917 Code was on the role of ecclesiastical authority in erecting or approving associations (*see CIC 684, 686*). In the 1983 Code, the emphasis has shifted to the right of Christians to take the initiative. Although this may result in a multiplicity of associations, it is within the rights of a Christian to organize or join associations as each may desire. It would be a violation of this right to prohibit membership in associations that are established in keeping with the law, even though they are not organized by or under the direction of a pastor or bishop.

This is a new way of thinking in some situations, but it reinforces such long-standing organizations as the Saint Vincent de Paul Society.

Apostolic Activity

Canon 216 — All the Christian faithful, since they participate in the mission of the Church, have the right to promote or to sustain apostolic action by their own undertakings in accord with each one's state and condition; however, no undertaking shall assume the name Catholic unless the consent of competent ecclesiastical authority is given.

Apostolic activity is discussed in detail in *Apostolicam actuositatem*. Three major forms of the apostolate are indicated therein.

The first is that individual apostolic activity is an obligation to which each Christian is called, no matter what condition the person may be in...

Working together in communities, whether parochial or other-wise, is a second form of apostolic activity...

A third type is an association in which apostolic activity is directly and purpose-fully carried out...

These initiatives are not dependent on the approval or authorization of the hierarchy, whether it be local clergy or the bishop. It is a right that arises from Christ's action in baptism and frequently is reinforced by the reception of charisms which themselves give rise to rights and duties in the Church and in the world. (AA-3)

CONFERENCE MEETING

The Conference meeting is of extreme importance to the life of the Vincentian. The meeting is one of the only times when all three objectives of the Society (spirituality, fellowship, and service) come together. It is in the Conference meeting that members are exposed to and reflect on the spiritual values promoted by the Society. It is in the Conference meeting that the members build friendship and fellowship as they develop their community of faith. It is in the Conference meeting that members discuss, evaluate and plan their works of service. This is truly where the Conference members can grow.

MEETING FREQUENCY

The Rule of the Society calls for Vincentians to meet weekly. This is the ideal. However, the Rule does allow for twice monthly meetings (every other week or semi-monthly). This frequency is important for various reasons:

1. As mentioned in the introduction above, the meeting is where the Society's objectives come together.
2. Attendance at meetings is one of the requirements for being an Active Member of the Society.
3. The meeting is where decisions are made as to the types of service that is to be provided and the guidelines to be used in providing that service.
4. This is where decisions are made about services to be provided to individuals or families seeking assistance.
5. This is where all of the business of the Conference takes place.

In April, 1838, Frederic Ozanam counselled members to meet often because coming together “more frequently we love each other more. The more numerous our meetings in the name of Him who promised to be in the midst of those who should come together in His name, the more clearly do we seem to realize the fulfillment of His promise.”

Meetings taking place monthly or less often will not be able to fulfill what is required. Keep in mind that the minimum requirement for meetings is only fulfilled when the conditions below exist:

1. The meeting must consist of the three components (spirituality, fellowship, and service);
2. All members (at least, all Active Members) must be informed of the meeting and invited to attend; Associate Members may also attend meetings but are not counted in the quorum and are not permitted to vote;
3. The meeting must be attended in-person by the members;
4. All decisions of the Conference are made by the members (not by the officers or any select small group of the members); and
5. A quorum must be fulfilled (50% +1 of all Active Members in the Conference).

MEETING AGENDA

Part III of the Rule, Statute 7 contains the recommended meeting agenda. A Conference meeting includes the following components:

1. A punctual call to order
2. Roll call
3. Opening prayer (which should always include a prayer to the Holy Spirit, the Lord's Prayer, the Hail Mary and a prayer for those whose suffering they wish to share)
4. Spiritual reading (or meditation, address) on which members are always invited to comment as a means of sharing their faith
5. Approval of Minutes of previous meeting
6. Home visitation reports
7. President's report
8. Secretary's report (including correspondence received, information about the Society or training points)
9. Treasurer's report
10. A review of one or more parts of the Rule
11. Committee reports (including Formation Committee report)
12. Membership reports
13. Resolutions
14. Special Works reports

15. Old Business
16. New Business
17. Time and Place of next meeting (the calendar should include Festival meetings and Conference Liturgies)
18. Secret collection
19. Closing prayer
20. Adjournment

Not all of the components of the meeting require special explanation. However, some do.

Opening/Closing Prayer (3, 19): There is a standard prayer card published by the National Council office which has the prayers to be used. They can also be found in the Manual.

Spiritual Reading (4): The National Council provides the “Vincentian Reflections” which are based on the upcoming Sunday readings in the Church calendar. The Spiritual Advisor may choose to use other appropriate materials, but this should be followed by a discussion by members of the Conference.

Home Visitation Reports (6): Each of the members (visiting teams) is encouraged to briefly discuss the calls they went on since the last meeting. It is especially important to discuss those calls that are still pending decisions, those calls that have unusual circumstances, and those calls that have significantly affected the visiting team. If there have been a significantly high number of calls, then only discuss those of special importance. These discussions are beneficial to new members since they can see how case situations are or can be resolved.

Treasurer’s Report (9): A Treasurer’s report is required at all meetings. This consists of the beginning balance of ALL accounts of the Conference, a summary of debit and credit activity, and the ending balance of ALL accounts since the last meeting. The Treasurer must be prepared to answer any questions from the members that relate to the report, including details of transactions. The Conference members are the ones who make decisions and they must have current and clear information about their funding status. The Treasurer’s Report needs to be approved by the members and the approval must be entered into the minutes.

The other items on the agenda are pretty self-explanatory. Some of the items may not be used (i.e. there may not be any currently active committees or special works).

DECISION MAKING

Decision making in the Society is by consensus. The members of the Conference should discuss matters and come to a general agreement about what is correct and true, and what action should be taken without having to formally vote. This decision process (consensus) holds true at all levels of the Society.

However, there are times when there is sufficient disagreement that a vote needs to be taken. In order for any vote to be taken and be valid, there are a few considerations that come into play:

- Only Active Members are given a vote.
- Ordained ministers (Priests and Deacons) are not allowed to vote.
- All votes must be cast in person at the meeting (proxies and electronic voting are not allowed).
- A quorum of Active Members (50% + 1) must be present for the vote to be valid.
- A secret ballot may be used but is not required except under special conditions (election of President or a very sensitive matter).
- A majority of the voting members present is required for a decision to approve the matter being voted.
- All members must abide by the decision of the Conference whether they agree with it or not.

Decisions are made by the Conference as a whole. There is no person or group who makes decisions for the Conference. The President is the spokesperson for the Conference but does not make decisions for the Conference. The officers (sometimes referred to as the Board) do not make decisions for the Conference.

SUMMARY

The Conference meeting is essential to the life of the Conference and the individual member. Every attempt should be made by all Active Members to attend all meetings.

SERVANT LEADERSHIP

Within the Rule of the Society, Servant Leadership is identified as a scripture – based method of leadership which all Vincentians aspire to practice. The following quotes are from the Rule.

Rule: Part 1, 3.11: Following Christ’s example, the Presidents at all levels of the Society endeavor to be servant leaders. They provide an encouraging atmosphere in which the talents, capacities and spiritual charism of the members are identified, developed and put to the service of the poor and the Society of St. Vincent de Paul. The President of the Conference or Council will have special responsibility for promoting Vincentian spirituality.

Rule: Part 3, Statute 11: Leadership positions in the Society, at any level, are always to be accepted as service to Christ, the members and the poor. Servant leadership is done in imitation of Jesus who said: “For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and give his life as a ransom for many.

The passage below is an excerpt from the Newsletter of the Australian National Council by Livia Carusi and Jenny Papps. The article is entitled “Vincentian Leadership – Is There Such a Thing?”

“You say you experience great difficulty in the mission. Alas! Monsieur, there is no lot in life where there is nothing to be endured.” (St. Vincent de Paul)

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 organization 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.

Like other community organizations 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 organization 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 organization; 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 part of our DNA.

One of the topics that comes up very often related to Conferences (as well as Councils) and the role of the President is focused around a statement that has been made for years in our writings as well as our training sessions. That statement is: *the Conference as a whole makes all of the decisions*. Some people have a tough time grasping what that means; and that is very understandable since it is not a simple and straightforward statement. There are a few embedded qualifications.

Those two articles from the Rule (shown earlier) make it very clear as to how the Conference should be run. There is no place in the Society for a Conference dominated by one or two individuals. The Society does not support a small group of people making the decisions for the whole. Conference members should be made aware of all aspects of the item to be decided. And, for all practical matters, the decision should be made by the Conference simply through consensus. That means the members are in agreement with what should or should not be done. Formal voting on any topic should occur only when there is reason to believe there is a significant difference of opinion.

The President, as well as all members, needs to be an excellent listener and a good facilitator. This most likely means that some of us have to fine tune our listening skills. The President must listen to what the Conference wishes to do (not tell them what he/she wishes to be done). Then the President must help (through guidance and facilitated dialogue) the Conference to make it happen. The President must serve the Conference - not the other way around.

There are times, however, that the democratic process is inappropriate. This is because the Conference is not totally autonomous. All members of the Society must be faithful to the Rule and spirit of the Society. No decision can be made at any level of the Society that contradicts the Rule. This holds true also for bylaws, standards of affiliation, or any other standards set by the general membership or by Councils.

The spirit of the Society is determined by the traditions of the Society on a global scale. As it is, the current Rule is very explicit about most things. Our focus in our decision making should be on ways to enhance the spiritual growth of our fellow Vincentians as well as improve our service to those in need. There are many

official writings of the Society, both current and historical, which can help define what is proper for Vincentians if it is not explicitly defined in the Rule.

So in summary, the statement “*the Conference as a whole makes all of the decisions*” is very true within the constraints described above. Our servant leaders must be geared up to serve the members rather than dictate to them. It's all part of being Vincentian.

Part 2: Essential Objectives



SPIRITUALITY

Spirituality -- “Holiness of Life” -- is the *first* objective of the Society – for Vincentians to “grow in holiness.” The goal is not to bring help to the poor, at least when defined as material or financial assistance, but to bring the love and peace of Christ to those who are suffering. Vincentians enhance their own spirituality by finding their Master, Christ, in their fellow Vincentians as well as in the person of those they serve.

Spirituality -- the essence of the healing presence of God-- serves as the life of a Conference, its vitality. Vincentian spirituality is based on the very real presence of Christ in fellow Vincentians and in those whom they serve. God became man through his Son and in doing so He brought great dignity to all humankind. He also brought good news to the spiritually and materially poor, hungry and oppressed; as such He took them to Himself and put on their mantle. Vincentians understand and believe this, and also know that when they come to the aid of poor friends or neighbors, they are serving Jesus, their friend and neighbor. This is the heart of Vincentian Spirituality.

If the Conference is the building block of the Society, then it must follow that spirituality is the mortar, the glue. Without spirituality, a Conference becomes just another welfare organization dispensing food, clothing and money. By bringing God into this picture, the dispensing turns into loving help and concern for the individual every Vincentian is trying to assist. This brings about a twofold blessing, on both the giver and the receiver alike.

The famous quote of St. Vincent de Paul is puzzling without an understanding of our primary purpose in that light:

"You will find that charity is a heavy burden to carry, heavier than the bowl of soup and the full basket. But you will keep your gentleness and your smile. It is not enough to give bread and soup. This the rich

can do. You are the servant of the poor ... It is for your love alone that the poor will forgive you the bread you give them."

Vincentians share a marvelous vision of the love of God extended to all, both rich and poor. Vincentians are thankful for their good fortune to be a part of that process, serving the poor and finding the face of Christ, often disguised in so many ways, in the faces of those in their Conference and in those they serve.

In St. Matthew's Gospel, Jesus said it best:

*"You are the light of the world.
Men do not light a lamp and then put it under a bushel basket.
They set it on a stand where it gives light to all...
In the same way, your light must shine before all men
So that they may see your good works
And give praise and glory to your heavenly Father."*

Please reflect and pray with the Rule and Manual to better understand Vincentian Spirituality, as well as information presented in the Ozanam Orientation, along with the *Serving in Hope* series, and other Vincentian materials available through the National Council Office. Many of these materials are also available on the National Council Website, www.svdpusa.org.

YOUR SPIRITUAL ADVISOR

A Spiritual Advisor is what the word implies. Besides leading the prayer, the reading and discussion at meetings, s/he is the person who constantly "brings you back" to the Spirit of Vincent and Frederic during your discussions and interactions. A person who leaves the meeting after the reading should be considered only a reader - not a "spiritual advisor." The Spiritual Advisor should take an active part in the Conference meeting, observing and making recommendations in order that the Conference stay focused on its mission.

Every Conference should have an active Spiritual Advisor. Your Conference may be blessed to have a priest or deacon serving your Conference as a Spiritual Advisor at each meeting. If not, please seek a Catholic lay man or woman Vincentian to be your Spiritual Advisor in the tradition of Emmanuel Bailly. A non-Catholic may not serve as a Spiritual Advisor.

The role of Spiritual Advisor is a key role in the Society. Besides leading the opening and closing prayer in the meeting, the Spiritual Advisor should bring to the meeting the spiritual item to be read and discussed by the Conference. This is not a time for the Spiritual Advisor to present a sermon. This is a time for the members of the Conference to reflect on their faith and share their thoughts with the other members of the Conference. The Spiritual Advisor is a guide through this process. After the spiritual reading, the Spiritual Advisor participates in the other discussions of the Conference ensuring that the activities of the Conference are in line with our spiritual values. Additionally, the Spiritual Advisor is tasked with the responsibility of informing the Conference members of the many spiritual growth opportunities they have within the parish and diocese and encouraging them to participate.

The Spiritual Advisor's Handbook, Vincentian Reflections, and Vincentian Celebrations are resources available to your Spiritual Advisor. They can be found on the National Council website (www.svdpusa.org).

Encourage your Spiritual Advisor to make home visits in order to obtain the feeling of contact with the people you serve.

AT MEETINGS OF YOUR CONFERENCE

It is essential that all Conference meetings open with a prayer, a "Vincentian" spiritual reflection and/or reading and a spirited discussion. Conference members need to be constantly reminded that they bring God's love to people that they visit and serve. Discussion should be encouraged, with everyone participating to the level of their comfort. The normal time for this part of a Conference meeting is 15-20 minutes.

The readings may be from any number of sources, including but not limited to:

- The Vincentian Reflections - weekly prayers prepared by the National Council staff - these can be downloaded from the Society's website at: www.svdpusa.org/members/Programs-Tools/Tools/Spirituality-Formation.
- The "Serving in Hope" program
- The Scriptures

- The writings of St. Vincent de Paul
- The writings and reflections of Blessed Frederic Ozanam.

EXAMPLES OF SPIRITUAL READINGS

"I ought not to consider a poor peasant or a poor woman according to their exterior nor according to what appears externally in their demeanor ...or situations. But reverse the medallion and you will see by the light of faith that the son of God, who wished to be poor, is presented to us in those poor, that he did not have the appearance of a man in his passion, and that he passed as foolish in the minds of the gentiles and as a stumbling block to the Jews; and, with all that, he calls himself the evangelizer of the poor: evangeliare pauperibus misit me (He sent me to evangelize the poor). O God, who makes the poor appear beautiful if we consider them in God and the esteem that Jesus Christ gives them! But, if we regard them according to the feelings of the flesh and the spirit of the world, they will seem contemptible...and worthless."

(St. Vincent de Paul)

Evangeliare pauperibus misit me translates to "He sent me to evangelize the poor" and this is the Vincentian motto which dates to the time of St Vincent and is based on Luke 4:18. As Vincentians we are to go the poor – evangelization comes from our witness to the Gospel message. Romans 15:7 Paul writes that we are to "welcome one another then as Christ welcomes you".

"God loves the poor and as a result He loves those who love the poor; for, when one loves someone well, one has affection for his friends and his servants. Now, the Little Company of the Mission attempts to devote itself with affection to serving the poor who are God's well beloved; (NOTE: The rich are also loved and called, but often find it difficult to respond.) and thus we have reason to hope that, for the love of them, God will love us. Let us go, my brothers...and sisters, and let us employ ourselves with a new love to serve the poor, and let us even seek out the poorest and most abandoned; let us recognize before God that they are our lords and masters and that we are unworthy to render them our small service."

(St. Vincent de Paul)

After the Conference business meeting is concluded, a closing prayer is said. This can be from the standard Vincentian prayer card or the Conference can innovate. Some Conferences, for example, pray a decade of the Rosary (with each member reciting a Hail Mary) or pray the *Memorare* (in support of the pro-life cause or for peace or for Christian renewal).

OUTSIDE CONFERENCE MEETINGS

The spiritual life of the Conference should not be limited just to its meetings. Each of the following should be considered.

- Daily Mass or twice weekly, when possible. Participation as a group makes for solidarity.
- Make an annual retreat.
- Sponsor a Mass or Rosary and Benediction on the festival days of the Society – identified in the Rule and the Manual.
- Make your clergy aware of spiritual hardship cases within your own parish community, including those who might need the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick.

SPIRITUALITY ON HOME VISITS

Teams should always pray for guidance before making a home visit. We always recommend asking those we serve if we can pray with them at the conclusion of the home visit. Afterwards, teams should say a short prayer and discuss the case before making any decision as to what help the Conference will provide. The result is often a compromise of each member's thoughts and feelings, but enlightened by the wisdom of the Holy Spirit.

PRAYING WITH THOSE YOU SERVE

What is prayer? Prayer is placing ourselves in God's presence and allowing him to touch our lives.

Why do we pray? We pray to open up ourselves to God to meet the Spirit, and to give God's loving presence to ourselves or to someone else.

If your primary goal is to bring the love and charity of Christ to those you visit, what better way of doing so than to say a prayer with the people you are visiting. God's love is meant to be given away along with the food, rent or utility check. This is what makes you different; this is what makes you a Vincentian.

Some Vincentians are uncomfortable doing this at first. But over time, Vincentians find that, the more they do it, the easier it becomes and the more "right" it seems. A simple prayer (the *Our Father* is well known) can be helpful. Ask the person visited if s/he would like to pray with you, or, even better, if s/he would like to lead you in prayer. You may be amazed at the faith many poor families have. You will find that oftentimes you are evangelized by the poor.

However, NEVER impose yourself on them.

General Guidelines for Praying with Those You Visit

1. Be aware of what the individual being visited says to you during the interview and pray for that intention (health, employment, strength to overcome an addiction or be firm with wayward children, etc.).
2. Ask the person and their children, "Would it be all right if we pray with you now? Or would you like us to remember you in prayer? Or would you like us to pray for your intentions at our Conference meeting? "Explain: this is a place where people pray 24 hours a day for the intentions of those placed in the prayer basket." This allows the person we are visiting to remain in charge of the visit. If they agree that they would like to pray now, ask them if they would like to "lead us in prayer." If they decline to lead, start with the "Our Father." If it makes you feel more comfortable try some of the options below:
 - a. Pray spontaneously for whatever need is obvious.
 - b. Pray to lift up their spirit. Mention that they are a special child of God and that God will hear their prayers.

- c. Pray for hope. Ask God to come into their lives, give them hope and grant them forgiveness and peace as well.
- d. Give thanksgiving to God for allowing you to serve (guest names) and for the opportunity to come into their lives.

Recruiting a Spiritual Advisor

The following is a good resource to help recruit a Conference Spiritual Advisor - written by Mike Murphy, Spiritual Advisor for the North Central Region.

Why YOU ought to consider becoming a Conference Spiritual Advisor

- A CONDUIT of Vincentian Spirit
- A CHAMPION for charity and justice
- A DRUMMER for discipleship

Without a leader, people easily move in individual directions, whereas St. Vincent de Paul urged all Vincentians to journey together into holiness.

It's easier to reach one's destination by following road signs. A Spiritual Advisor is a road sign of information and encouragement for the other society members.

The Society offers training, materials and resources to help Spiritual Advisors carry enough spiritual water to offer everyone around them a drink. This spiritual refreshment/encouragement/reminder helps the other members grow in their love for Christ, for one another, and for the poor.

The message Spiritual Advisors share is as timely as the village church bell which rings each day reminding those within hearing to stop for a moment and pray the *Angelus*.

What are some of the things fellow Vincentians need to hear from their Conference Spiritual Advisors?

- A reminder from St. Vincent himself: "It is necessary to give yourself to God. . . in order to serve the poor"
- It's one thing to open your HANDS to the poor; it's another thing to open your HEART to the poor

- It is necessary to tend the spiritual fire inside ourselves: with the Mass, the Eucharist, daily prayers, Vincentian reminders – so that the spiritual fire inside each of us will warm all others through our actions, and then through our words
- Our Vincentian mission is to meet God – find God – in those you and I meet at Conference Meetings and in Home Visits

People who look for GOLD usually mine for it, dig beneath the surface for it. Vincentians must also look beneath the surface of things to find God, and this begins with prayer.

Perhaps best of all, none of us has to grow spiritually all by ourselves. It's hard to barbecue anything with only one briquette of charcoal. But put a half dozen or more briquettes together, and suddenly there's heat and light to do the job. A Vincentian belief is that we journey together into holiness.

Pope Francis suggested that we Catholics ought not to wait any longer for Christ to knock on the door of our hearts. What we need to do is knock on the door of our hearts from the INSIDE, asking the Holy Spirit to give us the courage and generosity to open our hearts so we can come out of our human shells – rather like a BUTTERFLY coming forth from his/her CHRYSALIS transformed – ready and willing to bring the LIGHT and LIFE of CHRIST to the world around us; each in our own individual and unique way.

It is the Conference Spiritual Advisor's task to remind each Vincentian that:

- Our own POVERTY OF SPIRIT must be gradually eliminated until we are enriched and strengthened and able to help eliminate the spiritual and material poverty of those we serve.
- We are not asked to give a dime or a dollar to one another or to those we home visit. We are asked to share the WELCOME and WARMTH and HOPE of CHRIST – spiritual riches that never run out.
- In these spiritual encounters with others, both in Conference Meetings and Home Visits, it is not enough to tell someone what God will do for them. Tell them first what God has done for YOU.

Our work as Conference Spiritual Advisors is to be a facilitator, reminding members to pray – to hope – to believe strongly in Christ Jesus and our Blessed Mother Mary – and to love and serve the Lord through our Mission to the Poor and its suffering, and our advocacy on behalf of them.

Our Vincentian work is really a two-way street: first, allowing ourselves to be evangelized/purified/humbled- by all those we meet; and second, by our offering all others the evangelization and witness to the welcome and hope of Christ Jesus. The Society is not looking for geniuses or saints to be our Conference Spiritual Advisors. The Society is looking for men and women who have open minds and open hearts. We need Conduits – Champions – Drummers. We need YOU!

FELLOWSHIP AND FRIENDSHIP

Fellowship and friendship is our second objective. We create an environment where men and women can work and associate with others who share their Christian ideals and values. We both provide and receive support during the difficult times in each other's lives. Our work includes many group activities where members, whose work or family responsibilities prevent them from making a fixed weekly commitment to the Conference, may contribute their available time and be welcomed as Associate Members of the Society.

EXPECTATIONS

- ◆ Bring together men and women of good will and assist them, by mutual example and true friendship, to draw nearer to their Divine Model, Christ.
- ◆ Build and strengthen the spirit of fellowship (camaraderie) in our Vincentian family by encouraging participation at Conference, District Council, and Diocesan Council meetings and events.
- ◆ Help create a setting where a bonding process takes place among members, drawing them closer together, in the Spirit of Christ, to perform their duties, share their experiences, and grow in their love and spiritual maturity.
- ◆ Meetings and events held in a spirit of fraternity, simplicity and Christian joy. All the special gifts and powers from God will someday come to an end, but love goes on forever.
- ◆ Meetings and events which provide for consideration in common of the experiences of each member and the problems encountered in the pursuit of a better service.
- ◆ Foster a spirit of friendliness during meetings and events. Friendliness is the outward effect of charity in the heart. It springs from the heart and shows

how very glad you are to be with a particular person. It is the joy you feel when you see a person you love and it shows in your face. For when someone has joy in their heart, they cannot hide it; others see it clearly on their face.

SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES

CONFERENCE MEETINGS

- ◆ Hold occasional meetings in conjunction with some other activity (e.g., after attending early morning Mass together on a weekday, or Benediction and the Rosary on Sunday evening).
- ◆ Continue fellowship after a meeting by serving coffee, cold drinks, snacks, etc.
- ◆ Show St. Vincent de Paul or Blessed Frederic Ozanam videos for training, information and discussion purposes.
- ◆ Send the meeting agenda to all members in advance to encourage attendance.
- ◆ Prepare minutes of each meeting and mail to all members (careful to observe confidentiality).
- ◆ Celebrate member's birthdays, anniversaries, and other special occasions. Some Conferences have a "corresponding secretary" who sends out greeting cards on these dates, get-well cards to those who are ill, and sympathy cards when parishioners die. Others have a "sunshine committee" which performs much the same duties.

OTHER CONFERENCE ACTIVITY IDEAS

SPRING

- ◆ Schedule a picnic, a cookout or a get together at a park or at a member's cabin in the mountains.

- ◆ Have an ethnic potluck (can be expanded into a fund-raiser).
- ◆ Celebrate the founding of the Society, Frederic Ozanam's birthday (April 23rd) and St. Vincent de Paul's birthday (April 24th) with a group Mass on the closest Sunday, followed by coffee and donuts together. The Society also formally promotes the last Sunday in April as "Ozanam Sunday."
- ◆ Conduct a Spring Food or Personal Hygiene Drive.

SUMMER

- ◆ Have someone host a BBQ and poolside party
- ◆ Conduct a retreat
- ◆ Run a back-to-school K-8 Clothing drive (a fun way to spend time together!)
- ◆ Attend the National Assembly (normally at the end of August)

FALL

- ◆ Attend a Mass/Communion/Breakfast on a Saturday or Sunday close to the Feast of St. Vincent De Paul (Sept. 27), Blessed Frederic Ozanam (Sept. 9th), or the Feast of the Immaculate Conception (Dec. 8th).
- ◆ Conduct a Fall food drive
- ◆ Walk together in the Friends of the Poor Walk
- ◆ Organize a Thanksgiving Holiday Food Basket distribution to the neediest families in your area

WINTER

- ◆ Sponsor a Christmas Party for shut-ins at an area rest home

- ◆ Schedule a Christmas food/clothes/toy box delivery to families

SPECIAL EVENTS

- ◆ Attend Annual Region Meeting and/or National Assembly, or special Diocesan / District Council events (like the Annual Membership Meeting or Recommitment Mass)
- ◆ Occasionally schedule a joint meeting with a neighboring Conference/ District/ Diocese. The exchange of ideas results in the betterment of all. Misunderstandings may also be resolved.

**Friendship is the strong and habitual inclination in two people
to promote the good and happiness of one another.**

(Eustace Budgell)

GUIDELINES FOR DEEPENING FRIENDSHIPS

As you meet other people, some quite easily and naturally become more than acquaintances and colleagues -- they become good friends. For friendships to grow and deepen, they need attention and nurturing. The acronym FRIEND is a good way to think about the ingredients that "grow" a friendship.

- F** is for *fellowship and fun*. Friends spend time together and know how to enjoy that time. They celebrate one another's special days and commiserate when days are not so good.
- R** is for *readiness to listen*. When friends experience problems -- personal or professional -- they lend one another a sympathetic ear.
- I** is for *interesting*. Friends will stimulate one another. They can talk about books, politics, religion and movies, and grow as a result of the conversations.

- E** is for *encouraging*. Not only are good friends good listeners in tough times, good friends are also solid sources of praise and encouragement.
- N** is for *nurturing*. Good friends nurture their friendship by celebrating birthdays, graduations, promotions and other achievements.
- D** is for *dependable*. True friends are loyal and reliable. Good friends see one another at their best and at their worst and still remain friends.

Over the course of a lifetime, you will meet thousands of people. Only a few will become good friends. For those few, you must always express thanks to God. When you have good friends, you can more easily "sing a hymn of thanksgiving" to God.

SERVING THE POOR

No work of charity is foreign to the Society. Its work, through person-to-person contact, encompasses every form of aid that alleviates suffering and promotes the dignity and self-respect of our fellow men and women. The Society strives not only to alleviate need but also to discover and redress the situations which cause it, serving everyone regardless of creed, color or national origin. This is the third objective of the Society – service.

Members of the Society are united in the same spirit of poverty and sharing. They form, with those they help, one and the same family throughout the world.

The basic principles of the Society make evident that the Conference should have, as a constant objective, the frequent and regular involvement of members in one-on-one works of mercy. "An association of doers" is a phrase which fairly well describes a functioning SVdP Conference anywhere in the world.

ACTION ORIENTATION ...

Vincentians regard the plight of distressed people as a cause for sensitive and informed boldness, rather than timidity. An alert Conference will come to realize they have the right -- and sometimes the duty -- to provide leadership in attacking the social problems of our society. Perhaps this will mean direct responsibility for coping with uncovered needs. If the task is beyond its own capacity, the Conference may serve as catalyst within the parish, rallying the good will and action of groups better endowed to do something about the problem.

... TEMPERED WITH REALISM

Conferences must be realistic in what can be accomplished. If they attempt too much, they will exhaust themselves in contacts of a superficial sort and will be able to share little of themselves with those who often desperately need human warmth and caring. If Conferences attempt too little, they will become bored

with themselves, and become institutional obstacles in the way of what otherwise might become dedicated and generous parish concern for the poor.

MONEY NOT THE GOAL

Some Conferences do a marvelous job of raising funds from fellow parishioners. Many share these funds with poor Conferences facing needs in their community which far exceed their own resources. However, there is a danger in focusing too much of our efforts on raising funds.

In his book, *HELP IS JUST AROUND THE CORNER*, Virgil Gulker touched on this:

"We took money from parishioners and provided services to the needy. We were 'in between' on the church's behalf. But it eventually struck me that we were also 'in between' as a barrier.

"We were separating parishioners from those in need. (We) shut off parishioners from contact with people in need, even from the very people their money was serving. And the better we did our job, the more effective a barrier we became.

"Our success made it less and less necessary for parishioners ever to have anything to do personally with the needy."

One Conference relates this story each year in their annual report, emphasizing, *"we certainly need your money, but we'd much rather have your hands and time."*

Just writing a check fails to fulfill God's command that we personally involve ourselves in feeding the hungry, sheltering the stranger, clothing the naked, etc. There is no easy way out. The way of the Lord is hard, the journey strewn with obstacles, the road barren and rough. But great is the reward in Eternity.

A PLANNED APPROACH TO SERVING

To avoid the excesses of either too much or too little, each parish Conference must approach its task with head as well as with heart. A vital Conference

employs the techniques that are associated with any well-thought-out charitable enterprise:

- A. fact-finding about community socio-economic needs;
- B. becoming familiar with existing social service programs;
- C. analysis of the Conference in terms of its competencies, available person power, and financial capacity;
- D. determination of appropriate priorities with respect to meeting people's needs;
- E. the organization of work so that the Conference can effectively carry out an agreed upon mission; and
- F. continuing evaluation of Conference activities.

With this kind of approach, the Conference has taken a sensible step toward helping the people of the parish, the neighborhood, and the community in both a realistic and a Christian way.

Many possibilities for person-to-person service exist. Whatever program of charitable action is eventually adopted, Vincentian involvement should possess these characteristics:

- ✝ witnessing of Christ's love for all men and women and
- ✝ personal sharing of time and interest on the part of the Vincentian with those in material and spiritual need.....

.....for Vincentian activity consists in any form of person-to-person service which relieves human suffering, promotes the dignity of the human person, and furthers individual self-help efforts.

Four of the most common types of person-to-person services provided today would be the following:

1. Poverty services
2. Information and referrals
3. Service to the lonely and forgotten
4. The promotion of Social Justice

POVERTY SERVICES

Ask any veteran Vincentian and s/he will tell you that every neighborhood has its poor. Americans, it is true, are not starving to death in the streets, but hunger and malnutrition are not strangers to contemporary USA. Behind the statistics of unemployment and under-employment are people who are deprived, hurting and sometimes desperate. In this land of abundance, almost one in every five lives a pinched existence, their income hovering around the stringent standard we have come to know as the poverty level, their health and vacation benefits often non-existent or a mere fraction of what most of us feel is adequate.

A ROLE FOR SVdP AND THE VINCENTIAN

We have neither the role nor the resources to be the agency which "supplements" the often meager resources of the poor in an attempt to raise them to a minimum subsistence level. That is the role of industry/government and we should insist that it fulfill that role. However, the parish Conference can sometimes furnish modest assistance in responding to the crisis circumstances of some needy persons and families. Only the most affluent Conferences have the resources to sustain an individual family for a protracted period of time.

Temporary financial or other material assistance given to those under economic stress can often not only bring about immediate relief, but also introduce a stabilizing influence useful in reinforcing the family's efforts toward self-management, self-respect and self-support. Emergency aid also has an obvious place in taking care of a family until long-term aid, if required, is forthcoming from public assistance agencies.

“Emergency aid” is a term Vincentians must be careful with. Some Vincentians have used the statement: “We help in emergencies only.” That statement is false. Vincentians have a vocation to help – period. Often we are faced with helping

persons or families that have on-going or repetitive problems. Our Lord asks us to love others as He loves us. That means we must listen, pray, and decide what is the best way to help on each case.

In assisting people, Vincentians and the Conference as a whole take as their aim the fostering of responsible self-help on the part of those who are aided. During a home visit (which should be characterized by intelligent, friendly concern), Vincentians should try to assist those in need to realize whatever potential for self-growth can be extracted from the immediate predicament.

Helping one's neighbor, in the Vincentian concept of service, is seen as the occasion for the enrichment of the giver, as well as the receiver. For the Vincentian, person-to-person involvement with poverty and the poor can instill respect for all men and women, compassion for those who suffer, a deepened sense of social justice, and a way of Christian sharing in the burdens of fellow human beings.

TYPICAL CONFERENCE SERVICES RELATED TO POVERTY

1. Food or limited financial assistance to meet the needs of a short-term crisis.
2. Direct aid, combined with a referral to the appropriate public agency(ies), in situations where eligibility for government assistance is possible.
3. Referral to an appropriate counseling agency when recurrent financial problems on the part of the individual or family point to a need for professional guidance.
4. Regular sharing of manpower and material resources between a more affluent Conference with one less well-endowed financially.
5. Initiation and promotion of new government services when the local community lacks adequate programs to deal with the causes of poverty.
6. Referrals to self-help programs which can limit the practice of recurrent hand-outs. Such "entitlements" may be destructive of human dignity and degenerate into a subtle form of government enslavement. Self-help systems

are such operations as food co-ops, housing rehabilitation, credit unions, repair co-ops, adult education, home services for the aged and shut-in, legal services, and the like.

7. Development of inexpensive recreational programs through arranging for the use, at a nominal fee, of local facilities by marginal income families and special groups like senior citizens.
8. Securing professional and household services at nominal cost for low income families. This type of neighborhood service could encompass a considerable range of specialists: nurses, carpenters, doctors, lawyers, electricians, plumbers, appliance repairmen, etc.

INFORMATION AND REFERRALS

One Conference publishes its mission objective as:

"We provide prayers, understanding, information and caring."

Today, one finds extensive welfare legislation, complex regulations governing the granting of public aid, and a multiplicity of public and private agencies attempting to meet the spectrum of human needs. While one may prefer simpler ways of living and doing, no advanced society, in trying to satisfy the wants of its people, has been able to avoid a high degree of bureaucratization or a myriad of service programs conducted under a wide variety of auspices.

Such complexity is not without some redeeming features. A healthy balance between tax-supported bureaucracies and privately-sponsored welfare programs is useful in a democratic society. Voluntary action means that free people are using their freedom. One group sees a need to be met and organizes to meet that need; another group may take a different approach. Even when several groups focus on the same problem, the resulting overlap may create desirable options for assisting those in need. But, however desirable are aspects of America's diversified approach to meeting human needs, persons seeking help are often disheartened by what they experience. Anxiety and depression are likely reactions when a human being finds her/himself no longer able to provide adequately for her/his family. At this juncture, feelings of ineptness and dejection

may be aggravated by what is perceived to be, and sometimes is, a bewildering complexity of community services.

If someone does not know where to turn, s/he may be unable to make the necessary overtures and will continue to suffer in needless silence. Or, if someone steps into the helping world, they may be frustrated and angered about the searching inquiry into one's background and the "red-tape" of records and verification.

Real help comes from people who are knowledgeable about community welfare and service resources, and willing to volunteer their time. Such people will provide patient attention so that people in need will understand what is available to them and what they must do to establish their right to help. Godsenders are those who, in exceptional cases, will even escort an applicant to the welfare office. Such specially-qualified persons make an important contribution to the distressed and poor. They are an important cog in the delivery of human services.

The importance of Information and Referral in helping people is confirmed by surveys and studies. Many people do not know that they are entitled to help; others, from shame, embarrassment, or fear of rebuff need reassurance before exercising their right to seek aid. A classic case-in-point involves today's food stamp program. The Department of Agriculture estimates that 43 million persons are eligible for food stamps. But 24 million -- close to 60% -- are not getting stamps, and government nutritionists say the majority are almost certainly malnourished.

THE ROLE OF THE SOCIETY

Vincentians are concerned neighbors. With time, experience, and study, the local Conference develops a valued expertise -- its knowledge of community resources and of the conditions under which service is granted to applicants. The Conference, as it becomes effective in these areas, gains acceptance and earns the trust of parish and neighborhood. People in need come to realize that they can consult with the Conference as with a well-informed friend who can tell them where to turn and what to expect.

Vincentians learn to cultivate a sensitivity and alertness to the needs of those who are too timid or too withdrawn to push their own right to be helped, and to stand as advocates for those entitled to aid when unreasonable bureaucratic delays aggravate the hardships of those in need.

TYPES OF CONFERENCE SERVICES

1. Providing information about services related to poverty, medical and emotional needs, family and personal problems, youth counseling and youth activity programs, senior citizens programs and facilities.
2. Advocacy on behalf of those who are encountering delays and obstacles in the providing of services to which they have apparent entitlement.
3. Conducting informational programs to acquaint parishioners with community welfare and counseling programs. Announcements, brochures, speakers -- all such elements might be used to let people know about the latest developments in such programs as Social Security, counseling services, budgeting, household management, etc.

SERVICES TO THOSE IN CRISIS

Every family or individual will, from time to time, come up against unanticipated demands or unexpected crises. Often all that is required is a mature adult who will stand by and handle the routine duties of the affected person while he addresses himself to that which is instantly pressing. Thus, when the mother of a family becomes ill and must be rushed to the hospital, someone is needed to care for the children until a plan for tomorrow can be worked out.

Another type of crisis may call for professional help which the affected person cannot afford. Thus, families facing bankruptcy may need counsel with respect to their rights and budgeting guidance to handle their day-to-day expenses. Ups and downs are part of living and there are few of us who do not need the presence and helpfulness of good neighbors at times of special stress.

THE ROLE OF THE CONFERENCE

NOTE: Most Conferences do NOT consider themselves CRISIS interveners.

A Conference may organize members and recruit additional parish volunteers to provide an 'around-the-clock' crisis availability. On a rotating basis, parishioners would assume responsibility for providing prompt, initial response to any request, some will be considered crisis by the friend in need, others will be crisis as noted by another referring agency.

Operating on a more normal basis, SVdP members could guarantee at least relatively prompt (24-48 hours) service in answer to any request. The Conference is in a position to expand and intensify such people-centered services by recruiting as occasional volunteers those who have professional or artisan skills.

General auxiliary helpers, often the role of Associate Members, could also be enlisted, trained, and called upon as needs arose. Training would emphasize the confidential character of people-to-people intervention, and would make clear the limitations of Conference volunteer services.

TYPES OF EMERGENCY SERVICES

Temporary Homemaker Service. Every family is at some time faced with a crisis illness, hospitalization or death which threatens or impedes the continuity of family life. In family/children cases, Conference services might primarily be required for the care of children and the homemaker functions to keep the family together.

In childless homes, the illness of the normal homemaker might necessitate a household aide to prepare meals and take care of housekeeping responsibilities until the adult or couple can manage on its own. If the need becomes or is seen as long-term and beyond Conference capabilities, a referral to appropriate community homemaker agencies would be undertaken.

Transportation in a Crisis. Escort services and transportation are elements that are essential for any program of home care. The elderly are often dependent upon others to go shopping, to attend church, to visit the doctor's office or to

attend clinics. For the Conference, transportation to meet the crisis needs of individuals and families can constitute a much-to-be-desired service.

Baby-sitting in a Crisis. The first goal is to provide baby-sitting services to take care of unexpected family emergencies. Next, there are needs for baby-sitting when a parent must go to a job interview, a DHS appointment, or some types of counseling. Finally, in order to provide occasional leisure and release for parents who cannot afford baby-sitting services, SVdP volunteer baby-sitting could also be extended to cover these situations of stress and need.

SPECIAL NEEDS SERVICES

Services of this kind are directed to people who need expert help in extricating themselves from problem situations or in order to improve their functioning in family or in work life. Such situations usually call for volunteers who are talented or experienced and know how to communicate effectively themselves.

1. With respect to families and adults, such services may consist in the person-to-person sharing of expertise in such areas as budgeting, nutrition, house-keeping, applying for employment, child care, home maintenance, legal and medical counsel, and the like.
2. Such service may also consist in organizing, within the parish, programs or classes for groups interested in acquiring home management, budgeting or family living skills.
3. Service of young adults is important and the Conference should solicit and encourage the participation of young men and women in person-to-person works of mercy. One sought-for consequence would be having the perspective of young adults on cultural, societal and other events that are observed or experienced during home visits -- occurrences that older Vincentians may find confusing. **In fact, the organization of a SVdP youth Conference should be the goal of every regular parish SVdP group.**

THE LONELY AND FORGOTTEN

Loneliness is the malady of our times. But it is a darkness that can be driven away by those who reach out to let others know they are not alone. It is the kind of reaching out every Christian community can and is expected to make. The SVdP Conference is purposed and structured to be that kind of helping hand within the parish and neighborhood.

Vincentians are frequently older, retired citizens who understand the plight of other older persons. Advanced age is, of course, just one of the conditions that can impair the customary contact of human beings and restrict normal relationships. Whenever someone different, because of inherent or self-made limitations or because of special dependencies, runs the risk of being bypassed by an "on the move" society. When family and friendship supports are lacking, concerned Vincentians may well be the nearest and the logical people-to-people resource for these shut-ins and shut-outs that are to be found in every community.

The enormous demand for constructive human involvement is evident in the social realities of our time. There is, for example:

- * The suffering that accompanies the breakdown of families (in most years, over two million divorces will be granted in this country).
- * Millions of people will die each year. Among them, surely, will be those who depart without the comfort of others who care. And how many will be the bereaved now are left alone in their grief?
- * We read too often of the thousands admitted to state and county mental hospitals or effectively abandoned in penal institutions.
- * Victims of serious crime number over ten million. Is there someone to inquire about their pain and to lend supporting arms?

If needless human suffering and degradation are to be prevented, human beings must constitute a large part of the answer. But establishing the bond between those who care and those who need it is not always easy. Those who need

people are, quite frequently, the least accessible. In such cases, it will be up to concerned Vincentians to make the first, and hopefully sensitive, move.

FAMILIES AND INDIVIDUALS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

THE INCARCERATED AND THEIR FAMILIES

There are many sides to the problem of crime. Approximately 800,000 people will be caught and put into jails and prison systems which do little to reform but rather tend to confirm the offender in a life of crime. Christ asked us to love and visit those in prison.

The 'guilty' serving time leave behind other innocent victims -- their spouses and children who now must struggle for existence without a breadwinner or a parent.

1. Vincentians can serve as friendly visitors to men and women who are in prison. For years, Johnny Cash went in and entertained; Chuck Colson still goes in and preaches; what can we do? Intelligent involvement requires appropriate consultation and collaboration with those officially responsible for those who have been imprisoned.
2. Vincentians can also provide assistance to the families of inmates. This may also provide an effective form of future motivation for those in jail. Knowing there are those who are helping care for their spouses and/or children while they are 'away' can rekindle a belief in the goodness of Society in otherwise cynical prisoners.
3. Vincentians can assist those on probation or parole. Helping these people get back on their feet and find meaningful employment is the best way to prevent their reentry into the life of crime.

INSTITUTIONALIZED AND HOME-BOUND OLDER PEOPLE

1. Regular institutional visits to those who are patients in hospitals, live in nursing homes and who lack family and friends, is important in maintaining the older person's interest in others and creating a vitality in her/his environment.

2. Regular friendship calls on home-bound elderly gives assurance that someone is interested and close at hand in time of need.
3. Home Care Services enable people to remain living at home and can consist of one or a combination of the following:
 - a. Volunteers to assist the home-bound in handling homemaker responsibilities;
 - b. Preparation and delivery of hot meals by volunteers;
 - c. Providing occasional leisure time opportunities for family members who normally take care of an aging relative;
 - d. Telecare services (daily telephoning the elderly to check on them, their needs and for purposes of social exchange);
 - e. Home maintenance services (chore services, minor home repairs, etc.)
 - f. Escort Services (transportation to stores, doctors' offices and church);
 - g. Recreational Services (activity and companionship in the home or at Centers for the Aged to which the older person is transported);
 - h. Special Personal Services (volunteer barbers, beauticians).
4. The use of seniors in meeting social service needs and the recruitment of older people into the Conference is encouraged. Many retired people have abilities and experience which could constitute a valued asset in the service of the less fortunate. At the same time, the retired person who volunteers derives a renewed sense of personal well-being and worth. S/he finds her/himself wanted.

THE HANDICAPPED

The Conference, as the need arises and as members' time and talent make possible, can offer help and companionship to handicapped persons (the blind, deaf, physically disabled, mentally challenged) and services similar to those provided needy older persons.

WELCOMING SERVICES

Through a welcoming committee, particularly parish-based, newcomers are made to feel at home, and are introduced to the neighborhood and parish community.

PROMOTING SOCIAL JUSTICE

In our country, the language of social welfare laws suggests that those who cannot take care of themselves will be provided for in reasonable decency. But often it does not turn out that way.

On the one hand, an assistance program may be insufficiently known, especially to those most likely to be affected -- the poorly educated, those who have difficulty in understanding eligibility requirements, or those who are overwhelmed by these procedures.

On the other hand, assistance programs may be poorly funded or wrongly administered, because the extent of suffering is not fully comprehended or because poor management of the program utilizes funds ineffectively.

Resistance to rising taxes is understandable. But in the legislative struggle, powerful interests have the monetary resources to fight for their rights or what they believe to be their rights. The poor, on the other hand, have no well-funded lobby. An informed citizenry is a "*sine qua non*" if public programs are to measure up to the demands of human decency in the care of the needy and disadvantaged.

THE ROLE OF THE SVdP CONFERENCE

Those who see firsthand the unmet needs of fellow human beings become the logical spokespersons in informing the community-at-large about welfare inadequacies and failures. In working with the poor and with public agencies that have responsibility for those in need, the Vincentian and the Conference gain knowledge about and insight into the workings of the welfare system and social services. This knowledge can and should be articulated on behalf of needy persons.

VOICE OF THE POOR

The "*Voice of the Poor*" is a relatively rapidly growing program of the Society. Its purpose is to increase public awareness of the causes of poverty, obstacles to the poor in their struggle to improve their lot, and injustices which call out for redress.

The role of the Conference in this area is to communicate these conditions in such a way as to gain the attention, sympathy and action of legislators and others who have the power to fix these conditions. For unless we be concerned about and assist, as time and resources permit, in raising these matters to high public attention and awareness, the poor will continue to suffer because the community or responsible officials are not sufficiently informed about their needs and/or the fundamental causes of their distress.

WAYS TO PROMOTE SOCIAL JUSTICE

1. At the parish level, the advancement of social justice can entail informing parishioners of the deprivation and problems of the poor and of promoting the concept that Society is responsible to meet such needs. The Conference can provide a forum to discuss welfare and welfare "reform" issues. In these and other ways, the Conference seeks to form and influence public opinion on social problems and policies.
2. At the community, state and federal level, the advancement of social justice can entail:

- ◆ advocating, as private citizens, the establishment and functioning of public programs, benefits and services that will attack the basic causes of want;
- ◆ working to create among all men and in Society's institutions, a profound respect for human life and human dignity; and
- ◆ fighting to assure that programs for the needy are adequately funded and administered humanely.

Part 3: How We Serve



GETTING STARTED

If everything went smoothly, there would be no challenges in the world. Lest you live in such a boring environment, Providence has arranged for a variety of situations to test your mettle. Accept them with the insight that every problem is also an opportunity ... a chance to learn, develop and grow.

As a Vincentian, especially if you are in a leadership role, you will embark in the task of starting new Conferences, or to revitalize existing ones. In this endeavor, there are four possible situations you can experience.

- 1) No Conference exists and an opportunity presents itself to start one.
- 2) A Conference has, effectively, ceased to exist by no longer functioning, or functioning only marginally.
- 3) A Conference is losing members and beginning to struggle. Existing members ask for help in rebuilding their Conference.
- 4) The needs in the area are great, but the existing Conference doesn't have enough members to meet those needs.

RESOURCES

In order to address the needs of a new Conference, new Conference members, or existing ones, a number of resources are available for you to help in the formation of Vincentians.

NATIONAL WEBSITE

The National Council has a number of Resources that are available on the National Website. Please go to www.svdpusa.org – click on SVDP Members along the top of the home page, then click on Documents along the top of the Members webpage – then click on Council/Conference. Here you will find a section titled Extension/Revitalization. Within this section, you will find many documents that are useful in forming new Conferences or revitalizing existing Conferences. Pay special attention these documents: *Model Extension Plan*, *Extension-Formation-*

Revitalization Toolbox-Expanded, and the documents related to *Invitation to Serve*.

The information provided in this chapter is a summarization of the process simply to familiarize you with it. Please go to the website to get the details more clearly spelled out.

GETTING HELP

There are several avenues of help available to someone who wants to start, assist or rejuvenate a Conference.

- (1) The National VP for the Region/Diocesan/District Council can assist you to start or rejuvenate your Conference. Contact your Council President or National VP for the Region.
- (2) Contact the Presidents of other Conferences in your diocese. They can be an excellent source of practical advice and lessons learned.

GETTING APPROVALS

Before a Conference is started, you must have the *permission* of the pastor. If a new Conference is to be successful in the parish, you must discuss with the pastor how a Conference of the Society is operated. Without the agreement, understanding and full support of the pastor, it would be difficult if not impossible to proceed with these efforts.

Before a Conference is rebuilt, you must have the permission of the existing Conference leadership. Contact the president if there is an existing Conference and discuss the situation. Next, jointly contact the pastor of the church to discuss the situation. If the Pastor agrees with your assessment, explain the "*Invitation to Serve*" program for starting or renewing a Conference.

"*Invitation to Serve*" is the national recruitment program, originally developed in Phoenix. When conducted according to the recommended procedures, the results are impressive, with Conferences reporting from as few as 5 to as many as 65 people showing an interest in the Conference. Following the recommended procedures usually provides very good results from this recruitment process.

TAKE ACTION - PREPARE FOR THE *INVITATION*

After permission is granted, you need to organize a small group of Vincentians to assist in the actual recruitment effort. Refer to "*Invitation to Serve*" material.

- A. You will need people to make a 2 to 3 minute presentation at the end of each Mass on Saturday and Sunday (the presentation is already provided for you). If there are Masses in Spanish, the presentations should be in Spanish. For Masses in English, the presentations will be in English.
- B. You will need to reserve a room for an Information meeting (within a week of the presentation at Mass). Rooms are often scarce in parishes now, so start asking well in advance.
- C. You will need a table or tables set up outside the church entrances where you will collect the names and phone numbers of those who are interested and willing to come to the Information Meeting. Have several members at the table(s) to answer parishioners' questions and provide visibility for the Conference. If the Mass was in Spanish, it is important to have bilingual individuals at the tables.
- D. You will need simple handouts to give to people who stop by a table, as well as a flyer with the time, date and place of the Information Meeting.
- E. You will need a couple phone volunteers who will make a follow-up phone call a day or two before the meeting, reminding and re-inviting each individual who expressed an interest.
- F. You will need Vincentians at the Information meeting to meet, greet and otherwise make the newcomers welcome.

In starting a new Conference, there will likely not be the experienced members needed to show newcomers the ropes and explain the processes. This is where outside help and assistance may be required. Assistance from other, more experienced neighboring Conferences could meet this need ("twinning of people"). Check with the Council President to see if a mentoring Conference has been designated to help the new Conferences get up and running.

IDENTIFY AND SECURE LEADERSHIP

- A. Observe the new members; see who appears to have leadership skills. As soon as possible, ask a few of those individuals if they would be willing to

serve as interim officers -- or if there is a president but no other officers, ask the president to appoint temporary officers.

- B. At your District meeting, ask for volunteer Vincentians from outside the Conference to be available to the new Conference officers during the early period. This commitment might continue for a maximum of up to six months, declining over time, and may include attending several of the new Conference's meetings.
- C. Secure financial assistance to the Conference for getting started (to purchase any work items -- telephones, desk, files, etc.). On occasion it has happened that the Pastor has provided "seed money" for the Conference, but this should not be an expectation. Continue the assistance until the new (or assisted) Conference is established and functioning as a regular Conference.

PROVIDE RESOURCES AND TRAINING

- A. Get all the new members into the Ozanam Orientation training as quickly as possible. Contact either the Region VP or the Diocesan/District Council President to schedule this workshop.
- B. Bring all the new officers to the next scheduled District Council meeting. Introduce them to the Council officers and to the leaders of other Conferences, particularly those in neighboring parishes. Make these new Vincentians part of our Vincentian family.
- C. Ask the District Council for assistance to connect your new President, Secretary, Treasurer, and Spiritual Advisor to experienced leaders who can coach them in their new responsibilities. Officer training workshops may also be available through your District or Diocesan Council.

OFF AND RUNNING

A. SETTING CONFERENCE GUIDELINES

Conference members need to know generally how the Conference wants to handle those who call upon it for help. Everyone may be involved in those decisions since we are a democratic Society. A new Conference may have to go through such a discussion a couple times in its first year, as it adjusts and matches its goals to its financial resources.

Remember, home visits are made by two Vincentians – and Frederic stated the help they provide should be a “spontaneous gift of the heart.” They are the ones

to have heard the story, the plea and the issue, they both need to agree on what is right to do in the given situation.

Be careful not to be too restrictive in setting Conference standards. For example, some members may prefer a "rule" to give food no more than once in a month or year to any guest. What about special situations? A few members may feel they need a rule that they never help with rent. What about the case where a family has been able to come up with \$400 of \$450 needed and only needs help with the \$50 difference? If the Conference sets these "rules," a home visit team may never hear the appeal for help. Remember: our goal is to help people in need (to love them) in the best way we can – it is not to find ways to turn them away.

Every time a Conference sets a "rule" rather than a *guideline*, it risks experiencing a situation where it will turn Christ (in the person of the poor) away at the door without even listening to His request or trying to help. Set a guideline instead of a "rule," allowing for special circumstances. Consider every case on its own merit.

All Conferences should regularly revisit the guidelines it has set regarding food, shelter, utilities, clothing, medical help, transportation and furniture. Guidelines are dependent on the number of Conference members and the Conference's resources (income) -- which change over time. What is important is for members to agree that, while guidelines are used on a day-to-day basis by the home visit team for the average call, nothing should be set in concrete. Leeway on a case-by-case basis should always be given to the home visit team if there are special or unusual conditions. Revisit your guidelines at least annually, or whenever your Conference income increases or decreases significantly.

In the discussions below, we indicate general, common and even unusual guidelines which Conferences have adopted to aid the people they visit. Dollar limits are usually set, as well as the number of times an individual or family can be helped over a given period of time.

B. PRIORITIZATION

Most Conferences work on a first in/first out basis, taking calls and visiting those in need sequentially. Others regularly face many cases requesting help at the same time, with resources to only visit some of them. To handle this, some Conferences use a system of prioritization. A priority for food simply determines how soon you will visit, while a priority for financial help may involve whether you can help at all. One possible set of priorities is (your Conference should create its own):

PRIORITIES 1. single mothers with young children

2. couples with young children
3. those who are ill, disabled or mentally challenged
4. those with children age 14 and older
5. the elderly
6. single individuals
7. couples without children

Others let the urgency of the request govern priority - - for example, a utility shut-off or rent eviction notice within a week.

FOOD

Food is available for individuals and families from most Conferences that have a pantry or a food storage area that is used to take food or household products along on a home visit.

In principle, we do not limit our assistance to a specific number of times during a given period of time.

The point is that any "limit" adopted by a Conference "for practical reasons" must also have an *escape clause*. Every case is different. We must respond to needs, and needs are often as unique as the people who have them. A family does not fit into a preset box or "limit." A factor to consider is the number of other food pantries in the area, and the individual's ability to get to the pantry.

Some Conferences give a food voucher, along with staples from their pantry, so that milk, meat, bread, and fresh fruits and vegetables may be purchased. These vouchers vary in amount – frequently \$25 -- redeemable at a grocery store convenient to the Conference area. It is important that these be vouchers which, by pre-arrangement with the supermarket, limit the guest to milk, bread, meat and fresh fruits and vegetables (and other normal grocery items). We recommend that the certificate have written across the top – NO ALCOHOL OR TOBACCO PRODUCTS.

The Society has an obligation to try to help people to find a long-term solution to their food needs. SVdP should not be a regular or long-term food provider; those we serve should be directed to those agencies which are long-term food providers in the area. Many Conferences throughout the country have their own food pantries from which they take food supplies to families in need. At times, they provide food to families for extended periods of time. Remember: our goal is to ultimately help each family reach a state of self-sustainability. They should not depend on SVdP for on-going assistance.

RENT

Some members feel it is important to restrict rental assistance to fixed amounts or graduated amounts depending on circumstances. Some members would simply pay the full amount that is requested. Remember that, when you pay only a portion of someone's rent, they must then continue their search for help, which may not be resolved immediately. Treat each case on its own merit. Understand what impact your proposed action will have on the requestor.

Here, guidelines are important. They give your home visit teams a general idea of what your Conference can probably provide. Every limit can always be modified to meet the unique needs of a guest or family.

Remember that your procedures must be overlaid on an understanding that Christian charity does not flow from a grueling interrogation, detailed bureaucratic paperwork or whiplashing a guest between several agencies or Conferences –RATHER a “Spontaneous Gift of the Heart.”

RENT - PROCEDURES

Some Conferences require a written legal eviction notice when qualifying someone for rental assistance. Others feel charity does not make people suffer through the anxiety of waiting until the last minute, wondering where their rent will come from. If the Conference has the money, it should consider paying immediately rather than waiting until a guest is five days late (with added late fees) or faces a court hearing (and added court costs). Try to understand the anxiety that someone in that position is living through. *We serve, not at our convenience, but at the convenience of our guests.*

How much can those we serve pay toward the rent? Call the landlord and ask if they will work with the family on the rent or if the full amount must be paid at one time. Ask what the deadline date is for payment.

Since rent is often expensive relative to Conference resources, those we serve must sometimes come up with a portion of the rent payment to combine with what the Conference can pay. Be careful about making a partial payment to a landlord without agreement that they will continue to work with the family (or your payment may be wasted).

Call the County Supervisor of Assessments to verify that the name provided as being the landlord is indeed the owner of the property. If the person is in subsidized housing, the landlord may require you to fax a signed release from the

person being helped giving their permission for the agency to share their personal information (e.g. to verify the amount of rent owed) with the Society.

There may be times when the guest cannot contact other agencies and the Vincentian must do so on the family's behalf. Remember: we are often called to be the advocate of the poor.

If the landlord must be paid in full, the same procedures are followed, except the family must call and have the Conference check issued (directly to the landlord) only after they have secured the balance of the rent. Inform the family of the hours you are open and/or how your Conference can be contacted. Always counsel those we serve to not wait until the last minute.

Remember, we are not responsible for the family's bills. We are here to help them as much as we can. Yet we are stewards of the funds given to the Conference and must handle those funds prudently.

There is a new requirement from IRS we must fulfill related to rent payments. Essentially, we are expected to get a W9 filled out by the landlord before we make rent payments. The Society then must issue a 1099-MISC to each landlord to whom we pay \$600 or more during the calendar year. We have until January 31 to send the 1099s to landlords and copy IRS. IRS fines associated with noncompliance are very high. Check with your Council President or the National Vice President for the Region to get more details on this.

HOTEL RENT

People often come to a Conference in need of temporary shelter. They should be first referred to a local Shelter(s) to find space. This should be their first recourse; however, most Shelters fill to capacity very quickly. Shelters are beneficial because they have a myriad of other services on site which an individual or family in need can utilize if they really want to change their situation. You might find it necessary to place a family in a hotel for one or two days while shelter space opens up.

Remember there are no helping services at a hotel whereas there are services at a shelter. Individuals can sometimes be directed to the nearest YWCA or YMCA in some communities

Some people refuse to go to shelters. They have many excuses, but it is usually just their choice of lifestyle. You are under no obligation to provide shelter to those making this decision.

Those who claim the shelters won't let them in may be telling you the truth. Generally, shelters fill to capacity soon after opening their doors. However, shelters also maintain a list of individuals who violate shelter rules (no drugs, no alcohol, no fighting, and no stealing) and will refuse space to those who have violated those rules more than once.

Those seeking help to bail them out of a hotel bill that they have run up should be counseled but not aided. Giving them money only helps the hotel, not the family.

When the Conference decides it is appropriate to place their guests in a hotel, it is important to check the National Council website (www.svdpusa.org). Sometimes the Society establishes a working relationship with a hotel chain (like Motel 6) that will provide discounts to SVdP Conferences and Councils.

It is also recommended that a Conference or Council contact several hotels in their area. Some hotel owners or managers may be willing to work out a deal with the Conference once they know who they are. Other times, they at least may decide to accept payment by check or some other form that is more convenient for the Conference.

UTILITIES

Utility assistance will usually be for electric power, water and gas. When funds like Energy Assistance, or other community resources are available, it is best to first refer families to Salvation Army, Community Action Agency, or Township Relief. Frequently, however, these funds are quickly depleted and the only source for assistance may be the Society.

After these agencies have done what they can, your Conference may be asked for additional help. Get the family's account number and call the utility to verify how much is owed, how much is needed to reconnect (*Some utility companies will not disclose any information to a third party, unless the person named in the account is also on the phone. Three-way calling may help in these situations*). In some cases, you can make a partial payment and get the family on a payment plan (assuming they have sufficient income to pay both the payment plan monthly amount and their normal monthly utility usage fee).

Again, the emphasis is on *guidelines* instead of limits. Each request is unique. Start with your guideline and move up (or down) depending on the circumstances of the case. For example, recipients of a HUD Section 8 Certificate must maintain their electricity or their Certificate can be revoked. An electric shutoff can mean homelessness, so special consideration might well be given to such request. By

law in some parts of the country, the utility company cannot shut off heat during the winter months (December – March).

Conferences rarely pay telephone bills. This is not an "essential" need for a family, although individuals will attempt to make you think it is -- pleading a medical condition, or the need to check on the whereabouts of their children or talk with "sick or dying relatives" in some foreign country. You will be told they are under court order to have a cell phone. Ask for proof of the serious and unusual "need" (the written order of a judge, letter from a doctor, etc.) before you pay one of these. If a judge orders someone on probation to get a phone so their whereabouts can be checked, that does not justify \$100 in long-distance calls (*or plans higher than \$20-\$50/month with internet access, etc.*).

Pagers, phones and cable television bills are also not essential family expenses – yet in some cases in order to get work or due to medical issues – the phone maybe a necessity. We serve the poorest of God's poor, not those with the greatest "wants." Internet services vary in "necessity." Some schools require children to do homework by accessing internet sources. Ask questions that identify the need for whatever bills the family has at the time.

It may be possible for someone receiving public aid like SNAP (food stamps) or TANF to get a free cell phone with 60 to 250 minutes a month from SAFELINK.

Many Conferences decline to pay "deposits" for utilities or rentals. Deposits are refundable in cash to the guest if s/he leaves a month later. Consider deposits only if you know the guest and their situation well. Some Conferences will pay deposits only to help families they know move from costly weekly rental units into monthly rents in HUD housing.

CLOTHING

Clothing can be provided if your Conference collects donations from parishioners. Since sizing can be a problem, it is often best to focus on specific seasonal items like hats and gloves/mittens during the winter.

Get to know what other clothing systems are available in your area. Does your Council own a thrift store that can provide this service? Does the school district offer any programs for new or quality used back-to-school clothing to children in grades kindergarten through 8 (and often is able to outfit younger and older family members at the same time). Since almost every youngster is or should be enrolled in school and therefore eligible for this program, let this school program provide the basic clothing aid first, then the Conference can help with what remains. Find out if other agencies in the area offer work-related clothing for

those seeking jobs.

FURNITURE AND APPLIANCES

Whether furniture or appliances are provided varies significantly from Conference to Conference depending on their financial condition, availability of storage space, and trucks/men to move, Conference/District/Diocesan SVdP Thrift Store, etc. In some cases, a real family crisis (e.g. a fire) is the determining factor.

Poorer Conferences usually provide furniture only for children needing beds (including a linen pack). Others will simply purchase an air mattress.

Furniture or appliances are rarely an immediate need (with the exception of a refrigerator for storing food). Conferences often put out the request through a variety of methods: to their store if they or the District has one, the parish organizations, Knights of Columbus, or other organizations. Frequently, providence provides (a family replacing items with new, is interested in getting rid of their used items).

Very few Conferences have the means to help families pick up and bring home these items. Most see this as a responsibility of the family to take some part in helping themselves and maintaining their own dignity and self-respect.

Many of the people we work with have isolated themselves from family and friends. They don't want to know or talk with their neighbors or co-workers. They live a life of isolation which is neither mentally healthy nor productive. By encouraging our friends in need to reach out to neighbors and co-workers for help, we help them open up new avenues in their lives, establish friendships, become part of their neighborhood or living complex. And, as they accept help for themselves, they may learn to help others in return.

Many of those we serve need to reestablish contact with their family, from whom they have been estranged for years. Family is the first support system for anyone. For some living in poverty, reestablishing the family relationship may not be possible.

TRANSPORTATION

Requests for travel assistance to go out of state or out of the area need special care. We recommend that only non-refundable bus tickets in the name of the individual are purchased.

Many Conferences provide city bus tickets to get families to work during the week or two before their first paycheck, or to get to doctors' appointments. In special cases, some Conferences purchase a monthly bus pass for a specific person who needs assistance for a longer period (job training, etc.).

For individuals needing gasoline, it is recommended (time permitting) that the team meets the person at a gas station to fill the tank (or add the \$ amount desired). You can get a receipt from the pump for your Conference.

Some Conferences pay for vehicle repairs if they know the guest well and can verify a crisis situation which requires the use of the vehicle as opposed to public transportation.

Physically transporting guests is generally not a service of most Conferences at this time. A few home visit teams will, on occasion, drive a person to the DHS office, to a doctor's appointment, or even to the grocery or drug store. **Never do this alone.** Vincentians **always** do their works of charity in pairs.

MEDICAL AID

Financial assistance for medical needs by Conferences is mostly limited to filling a few prescriptions on an emergency basis, and may include transportation/gas voucher for medical appointments.

HANDLING EMERGENCIES

These may confront home visit teams, particularly at the time of first contact with a family. In order to take care of an immediate crisis, whenever possible, home visit teams should meet the basic need for food – many Conferences take a generous box of food on a home visit to a new family.

Next, a team should know the amount they can commit to without Conference action. Conference Guidelines are therefore essential. By setting up sensible guidelines on the amount of financial aid that will be allowed, the Conference enables the home visit team to plan realistically with those we serve, especially in emergency situations.

Excessive restrictions by the Conference can make any planning ahead uncertain and can work against the helping relationship by intensifying the anxieties of both the guest and the home visit team. Realistic planning with those we serve may only be accomplished after their basic need request is addressed.

Cash or Check? Questions are sometimes raised about whether help should be given in cash or by check. Experience over the past decade has provided us with clear answers:

- Never provide cash, under any circumstances, to those we serve.
- Never give a check to those we serve either. With today's technology in computer scanners and laser printers, identity theft and altering a check has become both easy and commonplace. Give your check directly to the landlord or utility company.

Vouchers tend to limit families; but, in many situations, these vouchers may better safeguard the interests of them, their family, and contributors to the Society.

Amount. Give help in an amount closest to what is needed to solve the problem, commensurate with what your Conference can afford. Be sure it is relevant to this present need. Too many Conferences limit their aid to a food box (and, sometimes, an insufficient one at that) and a food voucher even though the immediate problem is the rent or the electricity bill.

If your Conference considers itself "poor" and gives just \$50 towards rent requests, consider this instead: give \$300 to the first family and say "sorry, we're out of funds" to the next five. We are not called to help everyone (*it would be a terrible vanity to think the Lord hears the cry of the poor only through us*), but we are called to give meaningful help when we have it.

Quality, not quantity, is the goal. Help those you help the best you can, and put the other cases in the hands of God. Could you put them in better hands?

Your time. There are some families for whom the best aid is a generous food box, supplemented by a voucher for milk, bread, meat, fresh fruits and vegetables. Be sure that the supermarket that handles your vouchers understands the Society's mission and does not embarrass families using the vouchers.

The most important thing to remember in getting your service started is that we are called by Our Lord to love those in need in the best way possible. We are not called to help everyone in the same way. We are not called to search for the "takers" and remove them from our lists. We are not called to limit our assistance so we have something left for someone who "might" come tomorrow. Our Lord

wants us to see Him in the face of those who come to us and discern the best possible way to assist. Remember: He is using us to respond to cries of the poor.

ORGANIZING YOUR SERVICE

Conferences are often urged to "seek out the poor," yet the fact is more often the poor will seek you out. Your Conference does its part in meeting this challenge by making its Conference phone number widely available in the community.

Whenever food boxes, clothing, furniture, etc. are distributed, members should also leave a business card with your Conference name and phone number (but NOT address).

PHYSICAL NEEDS

The very first question, therefore, is HOW your Conference will be contacted by those in need. There are many systems in use, but the most common are:

A. TELEPHONE.

After considering your Conference's financial situation and discussing the subject with your fellow Vincentians, you should meet with your pastor to discuss these options:

1. Have the parish secretary/receptionist take all calls and then refer the calls for help to the Conference. This is the easiest and cheapest for the Conference. However, it is also the heaviest burden for the parish and its staff. The more your pastor does for you, the more it is possible he may want to exert some control over how the Conference is run. If the pastor controls the "input" through the parish secretary/receptionist (his employee), he may end up involved in decisions regarding some cases.
2. If the parish has a phone system, ask the pastor for a mailbox – no additional cost to the parish and free to the Conference. Learn how to get your messages off and delete them each day.

3. Ask the Pastor to assign an existing church office phone line to be answered "St. Vincent de Paul" (perhaps as may be done for the youth, music or religious ED minister's phone) by the parish receptionist. The Conference could reimburse the parish for the cost of this line, or pay for a new, additional line to be installed in the church office for Conference calls. The problems are potentially the same as #1, above.
4. Have the Conference secure its own phone number and install it either in a church or District/Conference/Diocesan SSVdP office assigned to your SVdP Conference, or ONLY IF ABSOLUTELY necessary in the home of a Conference member. Having your own phone number has both positive and negative points:
 - You have control over what you add or delete - - call waiting, call forwarding, caller ID, etc. -- to your line. Depending on what you add, having your own line can cost from \$50 to \$75 a month.
 - Unless you pay not to be listed, your SVdP Conference will be listed in the white pages and possibly yellow pages. Since you are now "easier" to find, more poor people will call you (and some will show up on the church office doorstep since your address will also be listed).
 - A separate line reduces the burden on the church office staff, and often increases the Pastor's perception that the Conference is more help than burden to him. Nonetheless, it requires that Conference members be assigned to answering the phone on a regular basis. This is a significant commitment.
5. Consider the possibility of a cellular phone as the Conference phone. This gives you the added flexibility to rotate the phone to various call takers as may be necessary. Also, call takers aren't locked in to a specific location. The pros and cons are similar to #4 above.

B. ANSWERING MACHINES.

Answering machines run from solid-state digital units for \$50 at an office supply store to top quality audio tape units at \$150. These enable you to provide a contact system for the poor 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Most machines also enable authorized Conference members to check for messages from their homes.

Solid state units are simple, cheap and come with many "bells and whistles" (such as the ability to retain several different outgoing messages). They are currently limited to 15 to 30 minutes of "messages", depending on what you pay (or 15 to 30 messages of any length, whichever is less). Some Conferences find this inadequate unless the phone is checked and the messages written down and cleared daily. As technology improves, the available recording length will surely increase (and the sound quality will improve). Then solid state units will be a better choice.

Audio tape units record for a much longer time and, initially, have a better sound quality. However, as the machine gets used constantly, the tape head gets dirty and sound quality suffers. The head must be cleaned monthly (follow the instructions) and the tape replaced every six months. The better machines cost about \$100 or so and are worth it over the long run *IF* you take care of them and their tapes.

RELATED DECISIONS

- a. *Where to locate it.* At a SVdP office where several people can share answering it? At the home of the president or secretary where the burden falls on one person?
- b. Whether to answer it every time it rings or use a pre-recorded message.
- c. Whether the message asks the guest to call back later when the phone is answered "live", or
- d. Whether to permit the person to leave a message with a promise that someone will call them back.
- e. What the pre-recorded message(s) will say.
- f. Training on how to answer the phone.
- g. Who will have the authority (and ability) to call in and take the messages off the machine.
- h. What will be the promptness of response to callers (how often will the machine be monitored).
- i. How will the response (home visit) be scheduled by the person(s) taking the message or monitoring the machine.
- j. The design and printing of forms for recording calls, home visit assignments and results from each case.

Some of these decisions (at least f, h, i, j) will have to be addressed even without an answering machine.

C. VOICE MAIL.

Phone service providers can also answer your calls, record messages and allow you, from any location, to play them back later. Quality is generally very high, and costs are not significantly higher than the other systems described above. Many Conferences have accepted this as the best alternative.

D. OFFICE SPACE.

Tied to the issue of answering the phone is the issue of where the Conference will have its "office." Because the records you create must be treated with confidentiality, they should be kept in a secure, central location under the control of the Conference, not parish staff. That "office" can be anything from a closet in the Secretary's home to a room assigned to it by the Pastor in the church office, rectory or parish hall or in your Conference/District/Diocesan SVdP Thrift Store. Some Conferences have a desk in a room they share with other parish ministries. This is fine as long as your records can be locked away from access by non-Vincentians.

Many Conferences keep their records at the President's or Secretary's home. The ideal (but rarely attained) is when a Conference can secure a room for itself immediately adjoining its pantry or food storage area. That arrangement permits home visit teams to easily check case records should they have any questions about family size, street location, past history, etc.

E. YOUR PANTRY.

Diocesan and District Councils around the country provide a wide variety of services to the poor. Housing, job training, addiction recovery, medical care and food are just a few. What each Council does is usually a reflection of geography, weather, historical beginnings, the needs of the community, the talents of its founders and successive leaders, and the resources it found available to it. Food is a most basic need for those we serve.

As a result, a large part of your Conference's work may involve providing food to those in need. If so, it is very important, if not essential, to have a pantry or storage area where food can be collected, sorted, stored, boxed and dispensed.

HEALTH REGULATIONS

Operating a pantry brings increased responsibilities to the Conference. Each county has Health Code Regulations derived from the U.S. Dept. of Agriculture. It is important that we respect these regulations even though we are truly a food bank (a food storage location) rather than a true food "pantry" (which typically serves an operating kitchen where food is prepared and served). However, the law may not make this distinction.

SPECIFICATIONS

Size. You probably will have little control over this initially. Your Pastor will likely give you what he has immediately available, which may be little more than a closet. As your Conference grows, earns parish support, and the Pastor can see the work the Conference does with the poor, he will probably try to get you more space. A room 16' by 10' -- when properly configured -- can support two upright freezers, two refrigerators, and enough shelving to handle a monthly food allotment from a local Food Bank. This is enough to provide at least 60 individuals or families a month with generous food boxes (about five boxes a day, Monday thru Friday) with a maximum capacity of twice that.

Some Conferences use garages, carports and storage rooms of willing Conference members (but see conditions below). This is helpful but often can be awkward since many different home visit teams need access to the pantry during the differing hours when they can make home visits (and this may not be when the willing member is typically home). And it may be hard for such storage areas to meet county health regulations.

Shelving. You will find that the type of shelving you use is extremely important. Wood shelving is generally unacceptable by the standards of most health agencies. Wood is too absorbent. Spills can cause bacteria build up in the wood shelves and this would make an unsafe condition in the pantry. Before you invest in shelving, check with the health department to see what the requirements are for the type of facility (food storage) you operate.

Conditions. Bugs and vermin are the greatest enemy of stored food in any form, particularly packaged grains, cereals, flours, pastas, etc. Sweep and vacuum out your pantry thoroughly before you move food into it, especially ceiling, wall and floor joints. Caulk completely those joints and any wall cracks. Make sure doors and windows have a good seal.

Many Conferences utilize pest control services on a regular basis. But be extremely careful of what they spray in your pantry as toxic chemicals are as prohibited as bugs. Request only natural/organic insecticides and low concentrations of them as well. If your pantry smells of insecticide, you probably got the wrong stuff.

Take care of your pantry as if it were your own pantry at home. The poor deserve no less than your own family.

The next biggest enemy of stored food is temperature, especially in the summer. On a 100 degree day outside, temperatures inside a storage shed can exceed 180 degrees and literally cook the food inside a metal can. It is important, if at all possible, that your pantry be temperature-controlled if not air-conditioned, and that is not an inexpensive proposition.

OTHER NEEDS

- A. Training.** Training is as essential as a telephone, office or pantry yet lack of training should not stop you from "doing home visits" almost immediately. Whether you have a new or an existing Conference, send new members out on a home visit quickly paired with an experienced Vincentian or you risk losing their enthusiasm. Visiting the poor is an experience no "training" can provide. What a Vincentian experiences can later be polished at an Ozanam Orientation workshop and other training sessions.
- B. Printing.** The design and printing of forms necessary for the day-to-day operation of a Conference has been addressed by Conferences over the years. Do not reinvent the wheel. You will likely have enough to do. Ask the Diocesan/District Council for examples of sample forms used by other Conferences.
- C. Procedures.** Like *Printing* above, also ask your Council or neighboring Conferences.
- D. Boundaries.** The boundaries your Conference will serve should be understood by all members (both phone volunteers and home visit teams), and respected. Generally speaking, Conference boundaries are the same as the parish boundaries. Make sure you and your neighboring Conferences understand what those boundaries are. A possible exception to this is when a

person, who is registered in your parish, requests help, but lives just outside your parish boundaries. Beyond a short distance, ask your fellow parishioner to please call the Conference in their area (provide them with a contact number).

What you may view as an act of charity in helping someone who lives outside the area you have chosen to serve (e.g. your parish boundaries) is sometimes misunderstood as a lack of confidence in a sister Conference's ability to do its job. If you acted because you thought it didn't have the money to help, send that Conference the money and let it make the visit -- not your Conference -- and help the person.

Some folks outside your boundaries may tell you that "*Conference X won't help me*" and ask your Conference for help. Don't second guess a sister Conference. It may have had a good reason for not helping. If another Conference wants the help of your Conference, it (not the person requesting help) must call you.

Always talk with your neighboring Conference before providing (or promising) assistance in their area.

DOING HOME VISITS

A. MAKING UP TEAMS.

- 1. Always visit in pairs.** You make contact with those you serve only as a member of a two-person team. Jesus sent his disciples out in pairs. This is the Vincentian Way. It also has several other benefits:
 - Provides additional safety in bad neighborhoods, although problems have historically been almost non-existent;
 - Provides two sets of eyes to observe, two pairs of ears to listen. It encourages varying viewpoints in reviewing the case, and support of the eventual judgment as to the type and amount of help to be given;
 - Protects team members from unfounded charges. Regrettably, there are people who now live off the litigation system. Without a witness, it is hard to defend yourself against a charge of inappropriate conduct. And even a successful legal defense may not restore your reputation.

2. **Pair new with experienced.** If a new Vincentian is learning this function, the team should have one experienced member. Example is the best teacher. For new Conferences, a mentoring Conference (if one has been assigned) or Vincentians from neighboring Conferences should be asked to provide this 'experience' during the first few weeks.
3. **Two-gender teams have an advantage.** Experience has shown there is great value in having teams with one man and one woman. Men and women notice different things on a home visit. They often "see" the situation differently. Having a man present can provide reassurance for a female team member on visits when awkward things occur and having a woman present often defuses the machismo of proud husbands and boy-friends in homes where the woman made the call asking for help. A female team member can often bond much quicker with a female client which greatly facilitates the fact finding process.
4. **Diversity.** Take special note of the ethnic variations in your community and try to have teams who can provide a more comfortable visit to people of different cultures. This may not always be possible, but it is something to strive for.
5. **The need for strength.** Your Conference may deliver a great deal of food. A week's supply of food for a large family can fill two or more large boxes, each weighing 35 or more pounds. Older Vincentians are great on a team -- with ears and eyes that know what to listen and look for. Those with gray and white hair evoke respect even in troubled homes. But many Vincentians struggle to carry the heavy food boxes that their Conference provides. Pair your older members with younger, stronger members (or size the boxes to what can be easily carried). You will do both members a great service.

And you should always ask those you serve (and the children, if present) to come out and help carry in the food. It's good for their self-respect.

B. SENDING TEAMS OUT

1. **Security procedures.** Always observe the "visit in pairs" rule -- always. Always be pleasant and friendly. Never give out your last name or home telephone number. When calling for an appointment for the home visit, if you are calling from a personal phone (home or cell), be sure to dial *67 before the number to block your number from view. Lock your car, even when you feel you will only be away for "a few minutes." You hope our guests are honest, but that is

no assurance that their neighbors are.

2. **Involve the recipient.** Have the recipient come out and pick up the food boxes and bags from the home visit team's delivery vehicle. Their participation (even under difficult circumstances) is important to their self-image and personal growth. However, you also serve the ill, elderly and infirm, as well as single mothers with young children they dare not leave unattended. Reality means the home visit team will probably carry in more than half of their food boxes.
3. **Remember that food is often only a lead-in to other discussions.** You are bringing the love and peace of Christ to those you visit. Food is only a door-opener. Talk to the people. Let them know you care. Make them your friends in Christ. Find out what their real needs are.

C. SCHEDULING.

1. **How often.** Ideally, the Conference will have home visit teams available every day of the week to serve the poor who call in for help that day. In reality, few Conferences have enough members. If you can only cover a couple days, try to space them out so that no one has to wait more than a couple days to get food or talk with a team.
2. **When.** Try to schedule home visits during daylight hours. Although this is not always possible, team members (and their families) will feel more secure if you do. Sometimes team members are not available to do calls until the evening. You must take this into account as well. Problems are very rare, even in so-called "bad" areas. But it is never unreasonable to be cautious in all areas at night.
3. **How precise.** Call the family to agree upon a time for the home visit (use *67 if calling from a personal number). Try to work around both their and your schedule. Nothing is more frustrating for the poor than to wait at home all day for a visit from a team that never arrives. Guests sometimes take valuable time off from work to talk with a Vincentian team about their needs. Do you realize the fear and anxiety someone suffers through when they face eviction or empty food shelves or their electricity or water being shut off? We serve at the convenience of those we serve.

4. Record-keeping and reports. *"The job's not through until the paperwork's done."* First, always pray for guidance before and after each call. Always discuss the case with your co-home visitor before making any decisions. The result is often a compromise of each member's feelings. Then document who you visited, when, where, what you observed, the basics of the case, and what help was given and/or promised. The Conference needs these records to appropriately handle future requests from this individual or family. The IRS also requires you to keep records of where your funds were spent.

Many Conferences use a computer to keep their records and generate reports especially the end of year report. Software database programs like Microsoft Access can be used to keep data on clients and with the search capability can provide helpful information on those making repeated calls. Other software like Quick Books or Quicken can be used to keep accurate accountability of all financial transactions which is the Treasurer's responsibility. If you choose not to use a computer then the records will have to be maintained manually usually in a three ring binder and kept behind locked doors or cabinets.

SUBSTITUTES FOR HOME VISITS

In observing both the Rule and the Spirit of the Society, the home visit is the closest thing the Society has to a basic activity, and is practiced universally.

*"The visiting of the poor in their dismal homes
is the distinctive character of the Conferences of St. Vincent de Paul."*

Joseph Emmanuel Bailly, Society co-founder, 1841

Nonetheless, there may be circumstances and conditions which result in a Conference not doing home visits, but rather having those in need come to some central location to be interviewed and to pick up food boxes and other assistance. *This is not the Vincentian Way and it is not encouraged.*

While this appears to have the advantage of "saving time," it ignores the essential charism of the Society -- that members and poor alike suffer together as one family. Vincent taught *"You are the servants of the poor, they are your masters."* And the servants always go to their masters, not the opposite.

Experience has also shown that "the word gets out" and soon that central location becomes a gathering point for the area's transients, runaways and deadbeats looking for a free handout. Empty liquor bottles, syringes, condoms and trash are

left behind. Parents of young children attending the parish school are appalled, and neighbors begin to complain to the city. Several pastors have had to close down such operations because of fears from parishioners or neighborhood objections.

PANTRY OPERATIONS

A. REFRIGERATORS AND FREEZERS.

Besides non-perishable foods, some Conferences include frozen and refrigerated items in the food they provide. At least one refrigerator and one freezer is almost a basic necessity for a pantry. Without them, it is more difficult to provide a "balanced meal" food box since the frozen and refrigerated items are frequently meat products.

Initially, a new Conference may be able to secure used refrigerators and freezers from a Thrift store at a reduced cost, or from a parishioner's donation. Once a Conference is well established, durable and reliable service is even more important and the purchase of new units (with a warranty where possible) is recommended.

B. MAINTAINING AN INVENTORY.

Your Conference pantry will be called upon to fulfill the requests of a wide variety of people -- babies, diabetics, the elderly, homeless, etc. Each wants different kinds of foods (sugar-free, high protein) or products (disposable diapers) or containers (pull-tab, ready-to-eat foods for the homeless). It is great when you can meet these various needs. This requires a well-stocked pantry, and an effort to separate out, from your general monthly allotment, those items that have special value to such groups.

Your pantry should also reflect the diverse population in your community. Be aware of the ethnic breakdown of your community as well as the type of food required by various cultures. Experience will guide you in maintaining your food inventory and compiling your food boxes.

C. OTHER FOOD SOURCES

- 1. Food bank membership.** Community Food Banks serve various parts of your Diocese and can provide your Conference with a supply of food to supplement what you get from your own parish food drives. After a period of time, they

can often supply large quantities of food such as canned fruits, peanut butter and juices. To get this food (usually FEMA and USDA food), you typically must get the individual or family visited to sign a form which is carried by the home visit team when they bring food. No other information is required.

2. **Parish food drives.** Food drives at the start of school, St. Vincent's feast day, Thanksgiving, Christmas are good times for a food drive. Add to this special Lenten collections and/or food barrels in the back of the church, and a Conference has a supplemental food supply. The Conference can place notices in the church bulletin asking parishioners for specific items which it is currently short of -- disposable diapers, spaghetti sauce, stew and other canned meat products, etc. Such notices also keep SVdP in front of the eyes of parishioners.
3. **Retail purchasing** of items on terrific "sale" is used by Conferences to secure items they frequently provide guests. When macaroni 'n' cheese is 5 for \$4, tuna is 2 cans for \$1, tomato sauce is 4 for \$1 and canned peas or corn are 2 for a buck, many Conferences stock up. Some Conferences also purchase vouchers for milk, bread, meats and fresh fruits and vegetables for those who receive food boxes, since these essentials are usually not stocked in a Conference pantry.
4. **Local businesses donations.** Sometimes, food is donated to the Conference by neighborhood stores and merchants. Having a good relationship with the local grocery store can earn you a call to pick up day-old breads and pastries. Bagel stores have offered their excess product at day's end. Fast food locations have called to donate excess buns, and even pie stores have offered pies defrosted but not sold by the time they close.

WHAT GOES IN A FOOD BOX

RECOGNIZE REALITY.

With so much food available, are you being chintzy? Some teams pack their boxes based on the amount of food they now consume in mid-life or retirement. But Conferences are most often serving families with young children who consume enormous amounts of food. Remember your own kids (or ask your wife): a can of Spaghetti'O's is one meal for one kid. If you pre-pack your food boxes by size of family, have young mothers do it!

PACK BY FAMILY SIZE.

Once you secure the food and put it in a pantry, food boxes should be individualized for the specific guest/family in mind. Don't throw some cans and packages into a box and call it a week's worth of food. If you intend to give a week's worth of food to a family of four, make sure that what you give can actually make 21 separate, nutritious meals for four people. A trap that many Conferences fall into is making up ten identical food boxes for efficiency sake and then giving the same boxes to ten different families of various sizes. Seven days' worth of food (21 meals) is a lot different for a family of 8 than it is for a family of 4. Also, keep in mind the ethnicity of the family you are serving. A Hispanic/Latino or Asian family may have food requirements different from other ethnic groups.

DO A REALITY CHECK.

If you provide food vouchers, let's do a reality check. What should make up the grocery list for a typical family and what does it realistically cost? Ask your members who are mothers of young children what it takes to feed a family. Even better, have those mothers make up your list.

SPECIAL ITEMS.

The food boxes should be supplemented with baby food and formula as needed -- although the federal government's excellent WIC (Women, Infants, Children) program provides good quantities of these items -- and more! Other items which should be stocked and provided as needed are diapers, toilet paper, soap (bath, dish washing, clothes), other toiletries.

For the homeless, food items should include things that are "easy open" (pull tops) and can be eaten directly from the can or box without preparation or cooking. Crackers, peanut butter and jams are a good choice. Keep in mind that the homeless may not have a place to store a week's worth of food and may only be able to handle a dozen small items.

HOME VISITS

Much of the information presented in this chapter is taken from the section of the “Ozanam Orientation” that deals specifically with Home Visits.

Years ago, it was very common for doctors to make house calls. It was a practice that had tremendous value for those whom the doctor was visiting. Sadly, except in some rural areas, this is no longer practiced. However, house calls are still practiced today throughout the world by members of the Society.

OBJECTIVES OF THIS CHAPTER

Home visits are the primary way that Vincentians interact with those in need and provide service to them. In this chapter, we ARE NOT trying to teach the process of the home visit. After reading this, you are NOT expected to be able to do a home visit. Further training will be required. After reading this chapter, you should:

- know why we do home visits - what is the value and what is the history behind why we do home visits.
- be able to envision a typical home visit.
- have enough detail about home visits to feel comfortable going along as a silent observer.
- be prepared for some of the reactions one might have (and perhaps, situations one might encounter).
- understand appropriate and inappropriate behaviors (touching people, objects, where to sit).
- know confidentiality rules.
- know Vincentians must "always visit in pairs."
- be aware that additional mentoring (beyond this brief look) is needed before going on a home visit.
- know to ask for your Conference's guidelines on home visits, and be aware that practices differ locally.

FROM THE BEGINNING

Home visits are at the heart of the Society. They have been the core work of the Society since its beginning more than 180 years ago. Frederic Ozanam and his fellow students, the founders and original members of the Society, went to the homes of the poor of Paris to bring them food, fire wood, and whatever sustenance they could provide. It was in the homes of the poverty stricken that Frederic and his fellow Vincentians learned what it was like to be poor.

Guided by Sister Rosalie Rendu, a Daughter of Charity, the early Vincentians learned what it meant to go to the poor, to sit with them, to talk to them, to feel the cold as they feel it, to experience the poor conditions in which they live, to feel and sense the frustration and fear that comes from simply trying to survive. It is in the homes of the poor that we can learn this.

St. Vincent de Paul told us that we are the servants of the poor, they are our masters. The servant goes to the master, not the other way around.

CONVERSION OF HEART

Frederic Ozanam shared his reasons for doing home visits: they are personal (intimate) and they can transform us. We can serve those in need not from afar, but sincerely and intimately. We visit not as social workers, but as brothers and sisters, as neighbors, as friends, and as representatives of Christ's love. The people we serve are in their own familiar place. This makes the visit more comfortable for them. Vincentians are often transformed by the experience and touched by God's grace.

WHAT WE BRING TO THE POOR

These things are listed in order of their importance and should always be communicated in the same order. First we bring ourselves and our compassion. Next we bring information and lastly we bring a little material help. We should never put the material help before our compassion.

Our first priority is to convey God's love and encouragement. This is hard for us to do when we have a line of people waiting for help. Most effective way to convey the love of God to those we serve is to take the time to visit. Your words and encouragement are often far more effective than the material help. This is what makes home visits different from a visit to an office. Our main goal is not to dispense material help - it is to convey the love of God to a person beset by difficulties.

A person who acts "entitled" in the office will often open up and share their challenges and their hopes for the future when you are sitting in their living room. Simply having someone listen to their story without blaming or judging is often a huge help to those in need. If a friend of yours was in trouble, would you not come over to see what you could do?

WHY NOT AN OFFICE VISIT

Visiting an office is not that easy for those in need. It is easier for the people we serve if we visit them:

- It relieves a bit of the "Tyranny of the Moment" for them. If they come to us during our hours, they have to work around their work schedules, find someone to babysit, and find transportation.
- It maintains their dignity. They are the host, you are the guest. You are not behind a desk, being "in charge".
- It is more effective.
- You better understand the real situation. You will notice needs that they didn't tell you.
- They can be more relaxed and will be able to share more with you. It gives us insight to the problems the family is encountering.
- It helps us to better see the face of Christ. It gives us more time with the family to hear their story and "be a friend." It provides a better opportunity to pray with those in need.

The Society is built on the premise that we will provide the most efficacious or effective service, not solve poverty.

Remember, your Conference doesn't have the funds or the ability to serve all "Those in Need" in your area. We are not expected to meet all needs. But we are expected to love those in need to the best of our ability.

BASICS OF A HOME VISIT

VISIT IN PAIRS! This protects the Society and it protects the Vincentian. It makes the people we serve more comfortable. It is more effective to have two sets of eyes and ears, two sets of experience. Jesus sent his apostles out two by two. We do likewise. This is non-negotiable. All activity sponsored by the Society must be done in pairs, never alone (yes, you can take three, e.g. an observer). Doing a home visit alone is a violation of our Rule and may not be covered by our insurance.

CONFIDENTIALITY It is absolutely essential to protect the people we serve. Unless you have a written release signed by them, it is important to talk about cases only in Conference meetings and only as needed. It's also best not to give out your last name, address, or home phone number.

SAFE ENVIRONMENT Training to prevent abuse for children and vulnerable adults is required by every diocese; although each diocese may use a different name for the program (Called to Protect / Safe Environment / Virtus / and others). The Society has made a commitment to follow the rules that are established by the Bishop in each diocese. The rules may vary slightly with each diocese.

PREPARATION FOR THE HOME VISIT

Before going on the home visit, there are necessary preparations that must be made. The first thing is to review any prior paperwork associated with this person or family from a prior visit. Visitors are expected to fill out a case record for each visit made and this should be reviewed if this person or family has already been visited. Comments from your fellow Vincentians are very important in this process.

Gather together all of the necessary paperwork for this visit. This typically includes prior case record information (only if the team decides this is

important), specifics about this request, and a list of resources that might be helpful to those seeking assistance.

Pray with your visiting partner before the visit. A spontaneous prayer usually will suffice. Your purpose is to ask the Holy Spirit to guide you in this visit, to help you observe what is important, to gather information that will help you determine what assistance is really needed, be compassionate to those in need, and to help you make the right decisions about the best way to show God's love to those you are visiting.

HOW THE HOME VISIT WORKS

Be relaxed and friendly. That has to be the starting point. The people you are visiting are nervous because they are in crisis and looking to you for help. They don't expect you to be nervous as well. Make every effort to help them be at ease.

Introduce yourselves as members of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul. They may have contacted you through the parish (whether they are members or not); so if that is the case, mention that you received their call from the church. This is also important, since most people seeking help will call multiple agencies or churches to try to get help.

Remember the tyranny of the moment. People in crisis are not normally organized in their thinking and may need your help to provide you with the information you need. Be patient. Help them prioritize their needs. Often the client can use a "sounding board" to figure out what needs to be paid or dealt with first.

Remember: the assistance you are giving is being given as members of your St. Vincent de Paul Conference – this is not your own personal charity or ministry. Assistance must be given according to your Conference's guidelines.

Observe the family and the home. You may notice other needs and be able to suggest other sources of help. Observe – don't judge!

A referral sheet is often a huge help to the client. Point out the most relevant sources of help. Make sure that if you present a referral, it is to someone specific

who might be able to help. It is not very productive to simply hand someone a list of resources and tell them to try them all. That can leave them more frustrated than when the call began.

Be sure you tell them what happens next and then follow through. Don't promise if it's not for sure. Based on your Conference guidelines, if you are able to commit to helping, do so. But if you have to consult with anyone first (like the Treasurer or other members of the Conference), do not commit.

Thank them for letting you come into their home. Ask if they would like to say a short prayer together, or if they would prefer that we pray for them at our Conference meeting. If they want to pray with you, ask what they would like to pray for besides the immediate need. Do not force prayer on them.

SHOULD WE EVANGELIZE

The question often comes up about how far we go into matters of faith. Are we to promote our faith, try to bring people to Christ, or try to bring them into the Church? The answer is both yes and no -- we're not recruiting Catholics, we are encouraging belonging to a faith community. Vincentians evangelize primarily through example.

A faith community is a good source of emotional and spiritual support. Asking about their faith community will often open a good discussion. Feel free to suggest any local church that you have heard good things about and fits the person's history. Be ready, if they indicate no affiliation, to invite them to your own church - perhaps bring the parish bulletin.

One caution needs to be made about the parish bulletin. Oftentimes the bulletin includes the home phone number or personal contact information for people in ministry (including someone from the St. Vincent de Paul Conference). We have always recommended to our Vincentians not to give their personal contact information to those in need. Vincentians should be contacted only through the normal Conference/parish number.

A FEW INTERVIEW TECHNIQUES

Use an open-ended question like, "Tell me a little about what's going on." This will help put them in control and hopefully at ease. It allows them to tell their story in their words.

Try not to ask yes/no questions. You are seeking information. You want to get to know them, to understand them and their needs. But don't give them the third degree.

Follow up with clarifying questions as needed. This is where you gather the information needed to understand their needs, their resources, the priority of those needs, and their plans for next month.

Gather information informally - it's not an inquisition. Listen more than you talk. Just listening and being understanding is a huge gift often bigger than the rent or utility assistance.

Be compassionate. Many people are frustrated and have experienced unsympathetic people. They are likely in the "tyranny of the moment" - facing crises like eviction, utility shut-off, or other stressful situations.

Be empathetic - living in their situation. But for the grace of God, we may be in their situation.

A QUOTE FROM ST. LOUISE DE MARILLAC

"As for your conduct toward the poor, may you never take the attitude of merely getting the task done. You must show them affection; serving them from the heart; inquiring of them what they might need; speaking to them gently and compassionately." (Gibson and Kneaves, Praying with Louise, p.72)

PHILOSOPHY OF ST. VINCENT DE PAUL

"You will find that charity is a heavy burden to carry, heavier than the bowl of soup and the full basket. But you will keep your gentleness and your smile. It is not enough to give bread or soup. This the rich can do. You are the servant of the poor ... They are your master, and the more difficult they will be, the more unjust and insulting, the more love you must give them. It is for your love alone that the poor will forgive the bread you give them."

GUIDELINES

New members have a real challenge before them when they join a Conference. There is a tremendous amount of “stuff” that they have to learn: who the other members are, principles and history of the Society, spirituality, how to do home visits, where everything is, what and when to do something, and what and when not to. It can all be very confusing. Actually, it can all be confusing to members who have been around for a while, as well. That is why it is important to have a set of Conference guidelines.

WRITTEN GUIDELINES

Have you ever heard the expressions: *that’s the way we do things, we’ve always done it this way, we can’t do that, or it’s just not done that way*. That is one of the most frustrating things about being a member – especially a new one. Not knowing what to do and/or being criticized for doing something the wrong way can be very humiliating. It would all be much simpler if all those ways and things were written down somewhere.

They can be. They should be. And, the most organized and well run Conferences have a set of written guidelines that are available to all members. They are not just a set of rules that have been accumulated over the years, they are a formal set of guidelines that have been defined, organized and presented in a form that is convenient to use, easy to understand and readily accessible to all members.

Without the written guidelines, the statements above will continue to flow and new members will continue to scratch their heads – some even leaving the Conference. Without the written guidelines, people will give their own interpretation of what is the proper way because that’s the way they remember being taught.

ORGANIZING THE GUIDELINES

Before preparing a set of guidelines, the Conference members should attend an Ozanam Orientation. This is important since it gives members an understanding of what is important and what should be stressed in our ministry. Without this basic understanding, guidelines may be developed simply because they sound good or logical. The guidelines we develop for a Conference should be reflective of our call to ministry.

Preparing a set of guidelines is not that difficult. The Conference should establish a committee of about three people who will take on the task of creating the first draft of the guidelines. They will get together a few times and map out the guidelines which will be reviewed, updated and hopefully approved by the Conference for their use. Your Conference may also get a copy of the guidelines of a neighboring Conference. Do NOT simply adopt someone else's guidelines as your own. You should make sure your guidelines fit the needs of your Conference and those in need in your parish community.

Look to the other chapters in this book and pay close attention to the topics of food, rent, utilities, home visits, etc. Then come to a consensus among the committee members as to what a reasonable expectation should be in dealing with those types of service. Members of the Conference may have already dealt with these issues and some unwritten guidelines or rules may already exist.

“Guidelines” should be just what the word means. These are not firm rules that have to have the “i”s dotted and “t”s crossed. These are possible ways to approach fulfilling the requests for help. The guidelines should provide possible solutions. One thing is extremely important to remember: guidelines are intended to define how people in need can be served, they are not intended to define how people are to be turned away.

When circumstances dictate, the members can vote to override a guideline for a particular case.

Once the draft is compiled, copies should be presented to all members for their review, correction and final approval. This process may take two or three meetings to complete. This review and approval process is a Conference process

and should not be left to only a few people. Once consensus has been reached by the Conference as a whole, the document should be formally published and each member should be given a copy. The Secretary will be given the original to keep with the Conference records. All new members should receive a copy of the guidelines when they join the Conference.

REVIEW/UPDATE/APPROVE

At the beginning of the fiscal year (October or November), the Conference guidelines should be reviewed by the members of the Conference. They should be evaluated to see if they are still appropriate for the conditions that currently exist. The same process that was followed to review and approve the initial set of guidelines should also be used to review, update and approve the new guidelines. Once again, all members should be given copies of the guidelines.

SUMMARY

Conference guidelines are one of the keys to having an organized and well run Conference. None of the guidelines should contradict the Rule, Manual or Bylaws or an local, state or federal tax laws. None of the guidelines should in any way indicate who or how not to serve someone in need. If they are properly prepared, the guidelines will help the Conference members to serve those in need in the best way possible.

MORE THAN MATERIAL ASSISTANCE

Several times we have described Vincentian work in terms of the love and peace of Christ. It can also be viewed as a celebration of the diversity and solidarity of the human family. God's love accepts us without reserve. Many people come to us feeling unloved and rejected. St. Vincent de Paul offers acceptance.

What is acceptance? Acceptance means an individual is valuable just as he/she is. An individual isn't forced into someone else's idea of who they really are. It means their ideas are taken seriously since they reflect them personally. They can talk about how they feel inside and why they feel that way knowing someone really cares. They feel safe. It doesn't mean they will never be corrected or shown to be wrong. It simply means it is safe to be who they really are and no one will try to hurt them. Acceptance personifies love, and we love them by listening and learning.

The basic charism of the Society remains acceptance -- respect for the dignity of the human person, meeting their hunger for friendship, and caring enough to provide help (often in the form of information) which the person needs -- all on a person-to-person encounter.

SPIRITUAL ASSISTANCE

One of the essentials of our faith-based ministry is helping and encouraging people with faith-based values to grow in their faith. What greater gift could we bring to those who are suffering than help in recovering or growing their faith?

When we encounter people who are fallen away Catholics, with their consent, we can help them return to the fold. Ideally, there is an RCIA program and coordinators in your parish that assist people in regaining their faith. In such

cases, your home visit team simply serves as the conduit for communicating the individual's need and desire to the clergy or pastoral associate.

YOU ARE THE CHURCH

Remember that you will visit hundreds of people who would never call a Catholic priest or even step foot in a Catholic Church. Yet they invite you into their homes. A basic rule of communication is: *Perception is Reality* - and you are perceived to be the Catholic Church. How you act and talk and pray is how they will believe our Church acts and talks and prays. You are, in reality, looking for the face of Christ in your home visits and bringing God's love to them. This is no place for you to have actions that are unkind, surly, critical or disrespectful.

Many Catholics have fallen away from their faith because of past clashes with a particular priest or other church official. Just as one person can drive someone away, one person can help bring them back. The church has an active "*Come Home*" campaign, and every parish has someone who is comfortable talking with a fallen-away Catholic who wants to come back but doesn't know how to begin the reconciliation.

INFORMATION ABOUT THE CHURCH

One common objective in visiting the poor is to help get the person back in touch with God. Usually that means encouraging them to go to church. This is done for more than spiritual reasons. One's family and church have always been the two fundamental support structures in peoples' lives. Family and church provide a source of help, advice, assistance, encouragement, vision and hope for the future. Church can be an essential anchor in an otherwise turbulent world.

The objective is to get the person back to *their* church, synagogue or mosque. And, if they don't have a church, make them feel welcome at yours. One Conference provides a welcome letter, saying:

"In difficult times, many people turn to God to find solace and peace. You may discover that, by attending church, your life takes on new meaning and direction. If you are looking for a church to attend, we warmly invite

you to ours.” (Enclose a card listing the daily and weekend services.)

Some Conferences also carry copies of their parish bulletin with them for those who are Catholic and may not be going to church, or who have children not enrolled in religious education. Maps showing the location of the church are also helpful. If you are going to leave a parish bulletin, be sure it does not have personal contact information for any members of the Society in it.

CULTURAL INTERFACE

It is very difficult (if not impossible) to connect with a culture in which one has not been immersed from birth. Respect for "other people" can be learned, but not assimilated. Let us be who we are and allow others to be who they are, so long as there is love.

- ◆ Remember that, to the people we are serving, we may be the first friendly contact they have with our culture in this country.
- ◆ Relieve their anxiety by extending a hand of friendship and love, and a willingness to assist them with their needs.
- ◆ Carry information written in their language that may be available from SVdP or from other organizations.
- ◆ Help them to maintain ties to some of their old traditions (Catholic church and/or other churches, ethnic and cultural organizations, etc.).
- ◆ Research, become familiar with, and make suggestions as to where they may meet other people of their culture.

Other than those of us who are native American Indians, we are all immigrants or descendants of immigrants in this land. Today, once again, many immigrants are coming to our country. Many are here with permission from our government and many are here without permission. Many times the latter are the people who are most in need of our help. They speak a language other than English and many of them struggle to survive in a foreign land. A large number of these immigrants are from Spanish speaking countries south of our border. As Christians and

members of St. Vincent de Paul, we need to reach out and help them as Christ would have done.

The Society of St. Vincent De Paul was founded on the concept of helping people who are in need. We do not ask their color, gender, religion, sexual orientation, age, race or legal status. We follow the traditions of St. Vincent de Paul and Blessed Frederic Ozanam when we help all people in need. We cannot limit our love only to people of our own nationality. We offer assistance to everyone, just as Christ offered love to everyone, Jew and Gentile alike, not just to Nazarenes.

REACH OUT

When you find a particular group of immigrants living in your Conference area and in need of help, reach out and let them know that your Conference can help them. You need to communicate with them in their own language.

You cannot assume that your offers of assistance will be translated for them or that the information will reach them by word of mouth. Many of these immigrants are simple, humble people who may have limited ability to read or write even in their own language, much less in English.

Immigrants bring not only a new language (to us) with them but also a new culture. A person might understand the immigrant language but not necessarily understand the culture. For example, the term "*son of a gun*" can be literally translated into a foreign language but has no meaning except in our own culture. It is difficult, if not impossible, to learn the entire culture of the immigrant group we wish to assist. But we can make an effort to understand the major differences between their culture and our own. What you might perceive as a minor cultural difference can often be very important to them.

We can better understand these cultural differences by asking several key questions. What are the traditional roles for men and women in their culture? What are their family values? What do they like to eat? What things are forbidden in their culture? What holidays are important to them?

What is the predominant religion for this group of immigrants? If they are Catholic, they may be used to a more traditional liturgy than what is commonly

found in our country. They may be looking for a church with lots of stained glass, candles, statues of saints, etc. We need to make an effort to understand them, so that we may better be able to assist them in their time of need.

Work towards recruiting Conference members who can speak the language of the immigrants in your Conference area. This provides an important bridge between your Conference and the immigrant group you are attempting to assist.

In most Conference areas, you will find many Americans from the same cultural heritage as the immigrant groups in need of assistance. These ethnic Americans generally understand the culture and many can speak and understand the language. Successfully incorporating immigrants into an existing Conference, where existing or new members have this cultural link, can usually be accomplished without much difficulty. It usually improves Conference successes in the community.

Successfully *incorporating immigrants* into an existing Conference, where the existing members only understand and speak English is a more difficult task to accomplish. It becomes very difficult to conduct a Conference meeting where everything is spoken in one language and then repeated in another. It makes for a long meeting and it becomes difficult to maintain continuity during the meeting.

Interfacing with immigrants from other countries is not easy and requires a major effort by all Conference members. But the language of love and the culture of caring for others are universal and can be understood by all people. You must see the face of Christ in the faces of the people in need. It doesn't matter if the face of Christ does not look like your face. It may have a different color, it may have different features, and the person may speak a different language. But the universal message of Christianity remains the same. *“Love and care for others as if they were Christ Himself asking for your assistance.”*

The Society provides a resource that can help Vincentians better understand the differences in various cultures. The resource is “A Vincentian Guide to Diversity/Multicultural Issues.” It can be acquired from the National Council Book Store.

SYSTEMIC CHANGE

Since 2006, the Vincentian Family has focused much of its energy and resources on the concept of systemic change. According to the definition developed and adopted by the leadership of the international Vincentian Family, systemic change refers to the aid that moves “beyond providing food, clothing and shelter to alleviate immediate needs, and enables people themselves to engage in the identification of the root causes of their poverty and to create strategies to change those structures which keep them in poverty.” (*Frederic Ozanam: Systemic Thinking, and Systemic Change*, Raymond L. Sickinger, Ph.D.)

SYSTEMIC CHANGE INTRODUCED TO THE SOCIETY

In 2011, Sheila Gilbert was elected and took office as President of the National Council of the United States, Society of St. Vincent de Paul. Her vision for the Society was summarized in the vision statement used during her term of office: *End Poverty Through Systemic Change*. Her statement to the members of the Society (shown in its entirety below) was the introduction of systemic change to the challenges and goals for the Society moving forward.

End Poverty Through Systemic Change

The Society of St. Vincent DePaul in the United States is committed to ending poverty. Along with the entire Vincentian Family, we see systemic change as the means to this goal.

The Society will build on its existing strengths and reach towards a deeper understanding of poverty and possible remedies to both the symptoms and the root causes using the constructs outlined by *Bridges Out Of Poverty* and the aha! Process.

Four foundational blocks for the Society’s effort are:

- (1) **Empowerment** of the Society’s members through education in the realities of poverty and its solutions, as well as empowerment of those we serve to provide opportunities to identify and claim their ability to make positive change for themselves and their communities.
- (2) **Mentoring** as a key to gaining and maintaining the motivation and support for change.

- (3) **Collaboration** with others who share our commitment to end poverty and transform lives. The Society alone, we know, cannot end poverty. Working together with others offers hope for transformative solutions.
- (4) **Advocacy** to change/adjust systems that are barriers to escaping from poverty for individuals and for communities, and create opportunities for meaningful lives for those who struggle now.

The Society's commitment to:

➔ **Local Parish Level (SVdP Conference)**

- Utilize the strength of the Society in the home visit and other person-to-person contacts. The visit will be an entry point, providing for the immediate and urgent survival needs while building relationships that will allow a simplified case management process to identify what will be most helpful to the individual wishing to move forward.
- Create a network of trained mentors within Catholic parishes and other nearby faith communities to walk with the family on their journey out of poverty.
- Empower those in poverty areas served by the conference by organizing block clubs, identifying block captains (leaders) who will lead the effort to improve the quality of life on their street. The block captains, in turn, will be given leadership training to become lead agents for neighborhood associations.
- Engage their parish members in advocating for changes needed at the neighborhood level and in larger local, state and national arenas around issues of poverty.

➔ **Local Community Level (Council)**

- Identify within the Society's membership — the attitudes, works and programs currently in place and transition any that might enable poverty — toward individual empowerment and systemic change.
- Assess community safety net resources, build collaboration among these resources, identify gaps in the local safety net, and move the community towards a service's "floor" on which will be established the stability for an individual to plan for and implement life-transforming change. This services floor will be available for home visitors and others who provide person-to-person service as resource and a reference.
- Serve as a catalyst for community-wide, long-range planning that will provide a positive climate for all those in the community, with special attention to those needing to transform their lives and move to sustainability and a meaningful quality of life. Bring together all sectors of the community and provide a place at this table for those living in poverty. Leaders in all sectors of the community — business, education, healthcare, transportation, safety net providers, government etc. — together will craft a community plan that is beneficial to all.
- Encourage each sector of the community to consider using the Bridges constructs within their sector to provide new opportunities for growth and development for those they affect.

- Advocate at the local, state and national level to remove barriers and create opportunities for self-sufficiency and a meaningful quality of life.

➔ National Council Level

- Provide training modules and delivery systems to aid home visitors, conferences and councils to embrace and implement systemic change.
- Provide access to poverty simulations, Catholic Social Teaching materials, community organization strategies and Bridges Out Of Poverty constructs and understandings.
- Build a strong networking system for existing Council Special Works initiatives to discover best practices as they move to transition to a systemic change focus.
- Develop national collaborative relationships that bring together the Society's Special Works initiatives and those of other national organizations to work towards solutions for poverty that significantly lessen the need for their services and contribute towards the overall effort to end poverty.
- Organize, with a broad base of national organizations, foundations and media, a campaign to make the faces of poverty real and alive and to bring forth poverty as a critical issue to be discussed and debated in future elections.
- In collaboration with the larger Vincentian Family, create a social media network targeting the 20-to-45 year-old age group (Catholics and all others). The network will: 1) Embed the Vincentian charism of service and care; 2) provide opportunities for direct service with those in poverty at local levels; and 3) promote advocacy around the issue of poverty.
- Communicate valid success stories to the media to raise the visibility of the Society to help attract others to the mission.
- Develop a means to measure "ending poverty" or "getting people out of poverty"

The Society firmly believes that it is called to this vision and expects that many others will be moved to participate in our efforts to "End Poverty Through Systemic Change."

BRIDGES OUT OF POVERTY

For systemic change to be successful and to realize the vision just outlined, strategies had to be developed that would bring change within the Society to our members as well as to those we serve. With that in mind, the first order of business was to help our own members gain a better understanding of those living in poverty. This might seem of little importance to those members who have helped the poor for many years; but, the reality is that understanding living in poverty is far different from observing it from the outside.

The principles defined by Ruby Payne in the book “Bridges Out of Poverty” were chosen by the Society as our basis for gaining a better understanding of what those living in poverty do and why. “Bridges Out of Poverty” is not the only source of information on this. Some have used Donna Beegle’s ideas which are similar to those in “Bridges Out of Poverty;” however, Bridges is the basis that the Society leadership chose for our focus. Aha! Process, Inc. is the company that publishes “Bridges Out of Poverty” and many other resources that build our understanding of why people do what they do and help us to guide those in need out of a life of poverty.

A leadership workshop (*Hope in Action*) was developed by the Society with guidance and assistance from aha! Process, Inc. This workshop was designed to train facilitators who would then go out throughout the Society helping members to better understand those in poverty. In August of 2013, the first of those workshops were presented with others to follow. Our members throughout the country are slowly learning that their preconceived notions of why people in poverty do what they do were based on poor information. An awakening was taking place.

HELPING THOSE IN POVERTY

Helping our members to gain a better understanding is one part of the goal. The other is to translate that understanding into strategies that can assist those living in poverty to move forward. In order to accomplish this, our members would have to learn how to identify not only those who they believe are in a position to move forward but also those who truly want to make the change in their lives.

Developing some new methodology around home visits was necessary. It is important for our home visit teams to ask the right questions and provide the right follow-up when they find a person or family that they believe is ready to move out of poverty. This is not easy but it is something that can be learned. The key is for our members to be open to asking the right questions.

Once a person or family has been identified and is willing to move through a process, there is a fifteen week program that has been developed by the Society (again with the help of aha! Process, Inc.) that will help them make the move. This process is based on the program (originally developed by aha! Process, Inc.

and customized by SVdP) known as *Getting Ahead in a Just Getting' by World*. The program is designed to help individuals slowly understand and step their way through a process to move forward. It can have very positive results for those willing to go through the program.

Another program that is similar in concept to *Getting Ahead in a Just Getting' by World* is one that is for those who work with restorative justice. This program is titled *Getting Ahead When Getting Out*.

The *Getting Ahead* programs are not complete in themselves. There is a need for Vincentians to serve as Mentors to those going through the process. The Mentors serve as guides and encourage the candidates to continue on in the process. Without this encouragement and guidance, the candidates may feel like they are totally alone in the struggle to move forward.

The old adage “you can lead a horse to water but you can’t make him drink” holds true here. Sometimes those we serve are not ready to follow a disciplined program to help them move out of poverty. Some may be willing to start the program and then decide later that they are not willing to continue. This is something our members will have to accept.

WHERE TO GO FROM HERE

The programs described above are available for our members and Conferences. To find out more about Systemic Change, the National Council has several webpages and many documents available for you to peruse. Members who are interested in Systemic Change should ask their Conference President to contact their Council or Regional leadership to find out what training programs are available and when.

TRAINING EXAMPLES

I. TELEPHONE ANSWERING

Policies and Procedures

- ☺ Be POLITE and HELPFUL, even if the caller is not. Many callers are in desperate straits -- out of work, sick, hungry, about to be homeless, etc. Many are embarrassed to call and ask for help. Some don't understand and think we are a government-affiliated agency. Remember, to those in need, YOU are St. Vincent de Paul.
- ☺ ONLY use your FIRST NAME.
- ☺ *"GOOD MORNING. THIS IS THE ST. JOHN CONFERENCE OF THE ST. VINCENT DE PAUL SOCIETY. HOW MAY I HELP YOU?"*
- ☺ Start writing the information in the LOG BOOK. Repeat all numbers: address, apartment and phone numbers. Later, when you have time, you will transfer the information to a friend in need intake card.
- ☺ KEEP CONFIDENTIAL INFORMATION CONFIDENTIAL -- never tell a caller what another Vincentian has written on their friend in need card, and never give out the phone number of any volunteer or staff person.
- ☺ CHECK THE FILES to see if there is a current intake card on the person.
- ☺ Check the "CAUTION" LIST (if one exists).
- ☺ We are only able to help those living WITHIN OUR PARISH BOUNDARIES. If someone calls in who lives outside our parish, they must call the St. Vincent de Paul Conference in their parish or the local Catholic Church Parish Office. Callers will sometimes tell you that their Conference can't or won't help. Tell them they must call their Conference again. (We sometimes WILL help but only if the other Conference calls us and asks us to help.)

If the caller persists, you can also suggest that the friend in need call the Pastor of the parish where he is located directly and say his SVdP Conference cannot help. This gets the message to the Pastor that his Conference needs more resources.

- ☺ Get ONLY as much INFORMATION as is NEEDED; less is needed for food requests, more for rent and utility requests.
- ☺ FOR FOOD, ask what times would they be available for someone to bring the food. This is never a guarantee. We may lose a team that day -- ill, out of town, car breaks down, etc.
- ☺ FOR RENT and UTILITIES, make no promises; say *"we MAY be able to help."* Tell callers *"Someone will call you back to set up a home visit"* and double check their phone number.
- ☺ FOR RENT and UTILITIES: Sometimes by mid-month, we run out of funds. If Conference leaders tell you we have reached that point, tell callers *"we don't have the resources to help at this time, but our home visit team may be able to suggest other things you can do."*
- ☺ SHARE what INFORMATION we do have -- tell the caller to immediately make an appointment with the Community Action Program, the Salvation Army....

II. INFORMATION TO SHARE

FOOD – ask if they have a LINK card for SNAP (food stamps) – if not, give them the address and phone number for DHS. Ask if they are aware of the food pantries and soup kitchens in the community. Provide the address and phone numbers as appropriate.

HOMELESS -- give the phone number and location for overnight shelters in your area.

RENT – if there are agencies in your area that provide financial assistance for rent, provide that contact information. If subsidized housing is available, let them know where to apply for that.

UTILITIES – depending on time of year and availability of funds, Community Action Program, Salvation Army, or other local resources may be sources of assistance. Requests are taken on a first-come, first-served basis and funds often run out before the end of the month. But always call and talk with them since there are exceptions.

MEDICAL CARE - Provide the location of the nearest county health clinic and of the closest free mobile health unit (and the day it's there). Serious conditions should go to the nearest Trauma Care Center, life-threatening emergencies always directly to the emergency room of the nearest hospital.

III. INFORMATION TO GET FOR RENT REQUESTS:

- 1) Is the person working and, if so, where?
- 2) apartment complex name, manager's name and phone number;
- 3) have they received a 5-day notice (different from a court eviction notice – they DO NOT need a notice for us to assist.)
- 4) call the County Supervisor of Assessments or City Inspector to verify the ownership of the rental property, or call the landlord

COUNSELING (if and when you are comfortable doing)

- ◆ Have you talked to your Landlord to explain your situation? Many times some arrangement can be made; usually simply not paying your rent only makes the situation worse.
- ◆ Have you asked family and friends for help?
- ◆ Your budget could be helped out by using our food boxes or other food pantries
 - a. Salvation Army also has food boxes as do some other churches.

- b. Dining rooms are open 7 days a week and serve good food, no questions asked.
- c. CAP and DHS are equipped to provide you with case management, but you must show the initiative to make an appointment, show up and follow their advice.

IV. INFORMATION TO GET for UTILITY REQUESTS:

- 1) the name of their utility
- 2) their account number (do NOT take their bill!)
- 3)
 - a. the amount due,
 - b. how much of that is past due, and
 - c. whether they have received a shut-off notice,
 - d. whether they have requested an extension

NOTE: We may be able to help with water, gas, or electric utilities. We do NOT help with cable charges (or phone bills if that is your Conference decision).

COUNSELING (if and when you are comfortable doing)

- ◆ Have you talked to the Utility to explain your situation? Many times some arrangement can be made; usually simply not paying your bill only makes the situation worse.
- ◆ Have you asked family and friends for help?
- ◆ Your budget could be helped out by using our food boxes or other food pantries
 - a. Salvation Army also has food boxes as do many churches.

- b. List any Christian Manna meals, or Dining rooms serve good food, no questions asked.
- c. CAP and DHS is equipped to provide you with case management, but you must show the initiative to make an appointment, show up and follow their advice.

V. HOME VISIT TEAM PROCEDURES

The following are guidelines from one Conference which makes a high volume of home visits...while specific to their situation, you may find them useful to adopt or adapt for your Conference.

- If you hit *67 on your phone before you dial a number, it will block your phone number from Caller ID
- We do not leave our personal phone numbers with those we serve or on answering machines. If we have trouble reaching them, leave them a message asking them to again call the Society of St. Vincent de Paul help line at xxx-xxxx and tell the person answering the best time for them to be reached by _____ from the Conference. Since some don't pick up if they see a blocked call on their phone, you can also leave a message saying that you will call back at a certain time. When identifying yourself, just use your first name and St. Vincent de Paul Society.
- When you call for a visit appointment, ask them to have ready a photo ID, a copy of their latest bill for which they are asking help, copies of their last few pay stubs and any other documentation that you feel might be helpful. While the person making the call is given basic information on their situation and request, including number of people in the family, it is usually good to confirm this on the phone when making the appointment. It is good to check the address location (Google Maps, Mapquest, etc.) beforehand, and if you have questions, get clarification of location if needed from the individual.
- When you call to make your appointment for a home visit, also ask if they need food or household supplies. Boxes of food are available in the

_____. Please take a box of food and a bag of personal care items (next to the box). There are also packages of frozen food in the _____. If you think it would be helpful to your friend in need, please take a bag from the freezer also (meat and miscellaneous items). There are heavy foam coolers to borrow when you take freezer items. Please return coolers for others to use. Food can only be accessed from _____ during office hours - Monday through Friday (8:15 – 4:15). We also keep a supply of food boxes, household items, and visit packets in church basement (accessible whenever the church is open).

- There is a folder in the desk that has some \$5 Subway cards, \$25 grocery cards, \$20 bus cards, individual ride bus passes, and \$25 Discount Prescription cards. You may stop in to get any of these before going on a visit and may give them to friends in need if appropriate. Most of these same items are also kept in our staging area at church.
- Two people always go together – a man and a woman, preferred.
- At least one member of the team should have a packet of forms found in the lower left hand drawer at our office in the church. Request for Assistance form should be filled out. Release form should be filled out and signed if you will be calling anyone for additional information. The budget form is a good resource for many friends in need; it can be addressed in the interview or left with the friend in need if you feel it would be helpful. Leave the Directory of Services and the prayer card with the friend in need. If you are able, point out appropriate helpful information in the Directory of Services.
- Stress that we're a volunteer Christian organization and that we value honesty and the need to understand the "situation".
- Always discuss with your partner what help should be given, financial or referral and if there is further discussion needed, call or email other members for opinions. Generally a Home Visit team makes a "spontaneous gift of the heart" in their decision. Usually check with the Treasurer to see how much you can offer to assist, according to your income for that month.

- There is a \$_____ limit on any decisions to be made by the Home Visit team. Anything above that must be discussed with the Conference President or another officer or committee member with experience as approved by the Conference.
- Check with your utilities – they may allow you to pay once a month for 30 different families – so only one check a month. I.E. We call the utility during the home visit, take the name of the person we talk with, provide our voucher number and negotiate how much needs to be paid to stop disconnect. Usually we know this from the bill previously and have made an agreement, if we pay only so much of the bill, the friend in need will have to come up with the rest.
- When the request is for rent, the County Supervisor of Assessments or City Inspector should be called to verify that the landlord is indeed the owner. This is public information – simply state the address and they will tell you the owner. DO NOT state you are from SVdP – that is confidential for the friend in need. If owner and landlord are not the same, the owner should be contacted to verify that the name given as landlord is an agent that they have assigned.
- It is always a good idea to verify income – through check stubs. At times, it may be necessary to talk with a supervisor.
- When a decision is made to help a family, the check is always made out to the appropriate company – i.e. Public Service, City Water, Pharmacy, the confirmed landlord, a doctor or hospital, etc. and delivered or mailed to that person/company. We never give the money to the friend in need. Please get a receipt or ask for one to be mailed to your mailing address.
- It is a good idea to have a PO Box for your mail, to keep it separate from the church mail and to ensure confidentiality.
- If you have agreed with the family that they need to make a payment first before we make our payment, and need them to confirm that this has been done, tell them to call the Society of St. Vincent de Paul Help Line, and tell the person to let “*first name*” at the Conference know that they have made

their payment. It is usually best to confirm with the appropriate company that they have received the family's payment before calling the family back and asking your Treasurer to send the payment.

- (Conference Treasurer) has the checks. When you are ready to make a payment, send the necessary information on a voucher form to him/her (amount, to whom, account numbers / address, etc.).
- A copy of the completed Request for Assistance form should be turned in with the voucher to the Treasurer to keep on file (can be left in the SVdP drawer in the _____). Please remember to include the number of people helped in this family on your sheet as we need that information for our Conference Annual Report.
- Let the Conference President know if you will be out of town and/or unavailable to be called for a period of time, or if you are working, your on/off work days.
- SVdP Conference meetings are normally scheduled on the _____ at _____. In addition, there is a spiritual renewal/formation meeting held for all Conferences on the _____ of each month.

FOR PARISH OFFICE TELEPHONE STAFF:

NO WALK-INS

- 1) Very little meaningful help can be provided in the office. Real help starts with a home visit by a home visit team. Our phone dispatchers are usually not trained home visit members.
- 2) Our telephone dispatchers are swamped just answering the phone. They usually have no time to talk with a walk-in.
- 3) The legal and personal safety standards of the Society prohibit us being alone with any friend in need.
- 4) We have contacted surrounding churches and agencies and all have assured us that they do NOT tell possible friend in needs to GO to SVdP. They tell people that SVdP may be able to help; they give out our card and tell people to CALL us. People who say they were told to come to our office have failed to follow directions.

A call WILL result in a home visit team getting back in touch with the person as soon as possible, usually within a day or two. The telephone dispatcher in the office could do no more than provide a Food Bag (which is something Church office staff can do anyway).

- 5) Some telephone dispatchers are trained home visit team members and may be willing to talk with a walk-in IF someone else is present. If you face a family in a truly desperate situation, call back to the SVdP office and ask. If the volunteer is alone and declines, give the walk-ins our card and tell them to CALL in. Tell them our volunteers operate out of their homes, not this office, and will call to schedule a home visit. We even visit the homeless living under bridges, so there is no excuse not to call.

- 6) Some Conferences have arranged with their parish office staff to call Vincentians to come to the office and meet with walk-ins. This takes some coordination with the staff to know who is available to be called that day and a place for the walk-ins to wait and meet with Vincentians.

RESOURCES

Every Conference should create an **Information and Referral Manual** in a three-ring binder containing information on all available local resources. This manual is an organized system of complete and up-to-date information. The information can also be summarized on a card as a leave-behind for those we serve. A good example of a short summarized-card is the **Basic Resources Card**

INFORMATION IS CRITICAL

An Information and Referral Manual provides your members with the essential information needed to serve the needy in your community. Knowing where help is available for various situations is critical to those in need, especially those new in the area.

Information is one of the most valuable things you can bring to those you serve. Your Conference Information and Referral Manual must be current and up-to-date at all times. This is a lot of work to create at first but accurate addresses and up-to-date phone numbers reduce the frustrations of families already suffering from stress, anxiety and worry.

Your Conference should create a committee, of members from the home visitors team, to develop an outline of what is needed based on the questions they hear from those they serve in their home visits.

INFORMATION CASE FOR THE HOME VISITORS

Conferences typically provide information to their members by photocopying and distributing multiple sheets of paper. Eventually, most find it is difficult if not impossible to keep the information updated.

A good practice would be to place the Information and Referral Manual in a “**Home Visitor’s Carrying Case**”. Purchase quality (heavy duty) 2" 3-ring binders in zippered cases with side pockets.

The 3-ring binder is for the Information and Referral Manual which can be added to (or deleted from) due to the 3-ring format. The carrying case also contains all the items which the team may need when making a home visit:

- Pad of lined paper,
- Two pens,
- Vouchers, bus cards, gift certificates
- Paperwork
 - Request for Assistance forms
 - Release of Confidential Information forms
 - Budget forms
 - Vouchers
 - Referral forms (to other agencies, food pantries, etc.)
 - Utility forms for special programs and discounts
- The most recent Parish Bulletin

Make up three or four cases. Each team, upon picking up their home visit contact cards, takes a Home Visitor’s Case with them. They return it when they return their completed Request for Assistance forms. Then the next team can use it when they pick up the cards for their visits.

INFORMATION and REFERRAL MANUAL

This is easy. Some communities publish what is sometimes called a *Sources of Assistance* book. This could be the basis for your Information and Referral Manual. Many Conferences have additional information on a hundred pieces of paper in a dozen different places. Assign the job of organizing these to your members (this is a great project for new members). Have them get copies of everything anyone uses. Finally, you'll need someone with a computer to volunteer to put it all together (an *Information Secretary?*).

After you have put your first manual together, you will realize that it forces your Conference to maintain contact with the entities listed so you know when

addresses and phone numbers change. When you are providing information to a family in dire straits, you don't want to be "the last to know" if the Salvation Army changes its phone number or the local Community Action Agency (CAA) moves its offices.

THE BASIC RESOURCES CARD

Every Conference has thirty or more phone numbers they use over and over again. Entering these on a Basic Resources Card or on a one page list to make them handy for use by the phone people and officers is a smart idea. Because it is in constant use, a Basic Resources Card printed on card stock and inserted in a plastic sheet holder will withstand constant use and can also be used as a leave-behind for those you serve during a home visit.

Basic information should be:

- Main numbers of your parish or SVdP help line
- Help Line numbers of Conferences surrounding your parish (get their permission first)
- Doctors, dentists, and other professional people who are willing to provide all or part of their service free
- Agencies you most often work with:
 - Community Action Program (CAP)
 - Salvation Army
 - Housing Network Authority
 - Churches, local Houses of Worship or Faith-Based Organizations that you have a networking relationship with
- Addresses, phone numbers and hours for area food pantries, soup kitchens

SHARE THE UPDATING PROCESS

Once a year, take a manual apart and give one sheet (two pages) to every member. Have them call every number on the pages to verify that the address, phone number and any names are unchanged. Collect the pages back and make the changes!

Friendships require time to develop; they must be nurtured along the way. So too do your relationships with government agencies, community groups and others in

your area. There are always new things happening out there -- new programs, new hotlines, new shelters, new food sources, new meal services. If you don't have your finger on your community's pulse, you'll be the last to find out, and your guests will suffer.

PLAY TO YOUR MEMBERS' INTERESTS

If you have members interested in politics and government, have them track the changes in government agencies and programs. It's likely they already notice articles about new programs and funding as they read their daily paper. Similarly, if you have members who are active in Interfaith Ministries, ask them to seek out names and numbers of other outreach groups. Finally, you may have members who are employed by DHS or CAP or other Social Service agencies who may be aware of changes.

Good information is accurate, up-to-date information -- correct addresses, phone numbers, hours of operation, even the names of intake personnel or program managers.

Categories for the Information and Referral Manual

Abortion, Alternatives To
Abuse, Child
Abuse, Elder
Abuse, Sexual
Adoption
Adult Day Health Care
Advisory and Advocacy Groups
AIDS and HIV
Alcohol and Substance Abuse
Alzheimer's
Auto Repair

Baby Needs
Benefits Counseling and Casework
Blind, Services For The

Catholic Social Service

Christmas Help
Child Abuse (See Abuse, Child)
Child Care
Churches Providing Assistance
Clothing
Community Action Program
Companion Animals
Computer Assistance
Counseling
Credit Counseling
Credit Reporting Bureaus

Deaf, Services For
Dental Care
DES Service Centers
Dining Rooms/Hot Meals
Disability Services
Domestic Violence (See Shelters - Women – Domestic Violence)
Donation Pick-Up SVdP

Education
Elder Abuse (See Abuse, Elder)
Emergency Assistance
Employment

Food -- Boxes
Food -- Dining Rooms
Food -- Home Delivered Meals
Food Stamps (See DES Service Centers)
Friendly Visitors
Funeral Assistance

Gas Vouchers

Health Care and Insurance
Health Care – Medicare
Home Delivery for Meals

Home Modification (For disabled)
Home Repair & Weatherization (Seniors)
Hospice
Housing – Low Income

Immigration Services
Information and Referral Services

Job Counseling (See Employment)
Job Placement (See Employment)

Legal Assistance
Lifeline Services

Maternity
Medical Equipment
Medical Services (See Health Care)
Mental Health Services
Mortgage Problems

Pregnancy (See Maternity)
Prescriptions

Refugee Programs
Rental Assistance
Respite Assistance

Salvation Army
Senior Abuse (See Abuse, Elder)
Senior Centers
Shelters - Children
Shelters - Family
Shelters - Men
Shelters - Substance and Alcohol Abuse -- Men
Shelters - Women
Shelters – Women - Domestic Violence
Shelters – Women, Pregnant

Shelters – Substance and Alcohol Abuse -- Women
Shelters – Women with Children
Social Security
St. Vincent De Paul Services
St. Vincent De Paul Thrift Stores

Thrift Stores - Other
Transitional Housing
Transportation

Utility Assistance

Vehicle Donation To SVDP
Veterans, Services For

WIC Programs
Women's Services

Youth Services

NETWORKING

Combined federal, state, county and local expenditures to assist those in need exceed one and a half *trillion* dollars a year. Divided by the eighty million people who require some type of assistance, this amounts to \$20,000 for every man, woman and child in need.

So why do we still have people in need? That is a timeless question which has long been debated and likely will continue to be. We certainly can't blame it on Christ's comment in the Gospel, "*The poor you will always have with you.*"

Compared to \$1.5 trillion dollars, it's obvious that your Conference's meager resources aren't going to make a very big dent in poverty. But those government funds are out there to help. Rather than try to do everything yourself, you can network with existing agencies (usually, but not always, governmental) to help those you serve gain the financial assistance they need to see them through their crises. As *Star Trek's* Mr. Spock would say, "*that is logical.*"

GOVERNMENT AGENCIES

Remember, "*We provide prayers, understanding, information and caring.*" It is not an abandonment of our mission to direct those in need to government agencies. SVdP checks are not intrinsically better than DHS checks.

The uniqueness of our service ministry is not in our money, but captured in our act of visiting the poor in their homes, bringing prayers, understanding, information and caring. You love and care so much for your guests that you work hard to provide accurate, helpful information on what agencies or organizations can help them address their needs. You give them your most valuable resources - yourself, your time and your attention -- as you counsel and help them plan a way out of their issues. You may even bring the person to a state office and "walk them through" the process.

Your Conference has nowhere near the resources of any government -- federal, state, county or local. They have the primary obligation to help someone in need and you should insist that they fulfill that obligation. Your Conference's role, if it has the resources, may be to temporarily 'fill in the gap' when governmental assistance fails to fill the legitimate minimum needs of an individual or family.

If your Conference attempts to become a guest's primary source of funds (thereby competing with the government), it will quickly exhaust its resources and find itself unable to provide even supplemental assistance to the rest of the poor. A family who needs \$450 for their utility bill might be eligible for \$350 from the local CAP (Community Action Program) or other local resource, leaving just \$100 for your Conference to pick up. But if you pay the full \$450 before checking with other agencies, you may needlessly run out of funds to help subsequent cases.

LOCAL SUPPORT SERVICE AGENCIES

The primary agency for assisting individuals and families in need is the local Department of Human Services (DHS). It administers a wide range of programs from job training to regular (continued, periodic payments) and one-time assistance, including:

- (1) the public assistance programs created after the 1996 Welfare Reform Act: including Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) which replaced the old Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC); general assistance (GA), emergency assistance (EA), cash assistance (CA), Food Share, Employment and Training (FSET), etc. These are just some of the programs to assist people unable to work due to illness, disability (physical or mental), child responsibilities, or other problems;
- (2) Medicaid -- the medical care program for the poor or state provided medical insurance plan;
- (3) Federal Food Stamp program – Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP – which is delivered via a LINK card which functions like a debit card);
- (4) Government provided cell phones: Assurance Wireless, Safelink, Wireless, Reachout Wireless, Life Wireless, Budget Mobile, Tag Mobile, StandUp Wireless, Terracom Wireless , enTouch Wireless. In some states, your guests

are eligible if they receive benefits from any of these programs: State Medical Insurance (SMI), Food Stamps, Low Income Home Energy Assistance (LIHEAP), Medical Assistance (MA), Supplemental Security Income (SSI), Homestead Tax Credit (Schedule H), or your state job program. They may also qualify if their Total Household Income (THI) is at or under 135% of the Federal Poverty Guidelines.

The Department of Human Services (DHS) is also an entry point for many federal programs, including Social Security Supplemental Security Income (SSI) and Disability Insurance assistance (SSD).

In addition, most major cities have a Community Action Program (CAP). These agencies receive federal social service "community block grants" as well as additional funds from the state, county and their city. Smaller cities and rural areas are served by a county equivalent.

CAPs generally provide only one-time, emergency assistance to those with a crisis -- loss of housing, utilities being cut off, medical costs, etc. These agencies are particularly valuable in that they have staff to case manage many of the guests who come to you for help, and who need a specific plan of action to address their situation. They will often take a home visit by a Vincentian team as evidence of an individual's or family's need. At other times of the year, these agencies run out of funds and SVdP may be the only source for emergency assistance.

These agencies may limit certain types of assistance to citizens and those in this country legally, to those with a job, or to those who have not received help in the prior twelve months. Always check, however; their rules vary and some have "discretionary" funds (donated by non-government groups) which can be used to help families not eligible for assistance under their standard rules.

The help your clients get from CAP also appears to be influenced by the relationship your Conference has with CAP staff. Many Conferences have found that, by having a close relationship, dollar limits for their guests can be exceeded, appointments secured faster, and even new money for exhausted funds "found".

QUASI-GOVERNMENTAL AGENCIES

The Salvation Army provides assistance to those in need from its own resources. In addition, it is often the agency for some government assistance funds. Other churches such as Lutherans, United Methodists, Presbyterians and Mormons, among others, have active ministries to serve the poor, utilizing in large part government grants and congregational funds.

THE COMMUNITY OF FAITH

“The Lord hears the cry of the poor, blessed be the Lord.” Many faith-based organizations sing that refrain. It is a marvelous reaffirmation of our faith in God and in His concern for all His children. Those of us in SVdP are part of that process. Some-times the Lord hears the cry of the poor through our work. We become part of His plan. He acts through us and, in doing so, sanctifies us.

But it would be a terrible vanity to think that the Lord only hears the cry of the poor through us. Almost all members of the great community of faith have one or more programs of outreach, or ministries, to serve those who are suffering. Since the Lord is no longer physically here on earth, He accomplishes His work through these ministries -- Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, Mormon, Islamic. We all call Abraham our common father and worship the same One and Almighty God. In recent years, we have also found Buddhist organizations that have joyfully chosen to work closely with us to assist those in need, in our way, regardless of race, color, creed or national origin.

Each of us plays a role as His eyes, ears, hands, feet or voice. Some of us collect food, others deliver it. Some shelter the homeless, others offer showers and a place to wash and dry their clothes. Some provide eyeglasses, others blankets. We each have a role to play, for the Lord truly hears the cry of the poor.

One of the warmest moments of your Vincentian ministry may be when you visit organizations and see how they too are sharing in the responsibility to care for the "least of my brethren." Pope John Paul II has pointed out on many occasions that there is far more that unites than divides us. Active ecumenism was his wish and actively promoted by the Society. In the very prayers we say at Vincentian gatherings, we ask,

“That we accept with new enthusiasm our calling to make visible our unity in Christ by working together with all Christians in service to the needy.”

For some Catholics, this can be very difficult because of views taught and held since our childhood. However, the Catholic Church has moved aggressively towards cooperation and coordination with its sister churches, and we must all move with it.

If you are not networking with several non-profits and other churches, temples, synagogues or mosques in your area, you are missing opportunities to better serve the needy in your community. You are also losing out on the friendship of some of the kindest, brightest and most caring people in your community.

Some of these faith-based organizations have services and resources that you cannot provide, and sending those you serve over to them will give those who are struggling added help to regain their footing. They, in turn, may call on you to provide assistance to a family in need who first turned to them in desperation. Many a family has been kept off the streets by paying their overdue rent with \$300 from the community action agency and \$100 each from SVdP, the Salvation Army, or other members of the community of faith.

Walk down the street to a neighborhood house of worship, extend your hand in friendship and introduce yourself. Tell them what your Conference does to serve the poor and ask what they are doing. Tell them you want to work together since your Conference shares the same objectives. Break down the barriers that have divided us, and together we can meet the great challenge of Matthew:

“As often as you do these things to the least of my brethren, you do them to Me.”

THE VINCENTIAN FAMILY

Twinning (sharing of resources) is an important function within the Society. This equips Conferences to better meet the financial needs of the poor by sharing resources in a pre-committed manner. But there will be occasions when a Conference, working with a family in desperate circumstances, finds their needs are beyond what it can provide even after networking within the community.

In such situations, the working relationship you have developed with other Conferences in your area may provide your Conference with one or more additional sources of help to assist the family. Rare is the Conference that does not have "ups and downs" in donations. So when you are scraping the bottom of your barrel, a neighboring Conference may have a little "extra" it can provide (as can your Conference, in turn, at some later date).

The objective is to serve those who are suffering. Cooperation between nearby Conferences is both essential and eminently sensible. From a practical point of view, such a relationship is likely to flourish only when the leadership of both Conferences gets to know one another. This happens when they both regularly attend District Council meetings and other regional functions. Friendship and fellowship within the Society creates bonds which encourage sacrifice to help one another.

It is living the Spirit of St. Vincent de Paul.

Part 4: Conference Funds



ACCOUNTING AND RECORD KEEPING

You are the steward of the funds which the Conference accepts from members and contributors for the care of the poor. Very few Conferences have enough funds to assist everyone who asks for help. We say "yes" to some and "no" to others. Further, the IRS has given the Society an exemption from paying income taxes and permits your contributors to take a tax deduction for their donations. In return, it requires an annual accounting.

To achieve the annual accounting required by both the Society and IRS, it is important that Conferences follow proper record keeping standards.

RESPONSIBILITIES - *Treasurer*

The Treasurer is responsible for the Conference funds and for keeping accurate and appropriate records of all the receipts and expenditures. This refers to all accounts which the Conference may own (checking, savings, money market, etc.). The Treasurer keeps accounts which should be audited at least once a year by two members delegated by the Conference or by a qualified person or organization. It is common practice among Conferences that two Conference members should be required to sign the checks.

The Treasurer keeps up-to-date the financial report. In this way, the true financial condition of the Conference is known at all times. Funds belonging to the Society have always been, and must always be, kept separate from the Treasurer's personal assets and the Church's business assets. There must be no co-mingling of Conference funds. Conference funds should be deposited regularly and promptly in a bank account in the Conference's name.

A bank balance (reflecting all accounts) should be reported at every Conference meeting and verified annually by the President or an audit committee of two

members. For auditing purposes, invoices and statements are obtained before disbursement is made or receipts should be collected and retained for all disbursements. The credit of the Conference must be safeguarded at all times and, therefore, all outstanding bills should be paid as they become due.

SETTING UP A BANK ACCOUNT

Conference funds should be deposited regularly and promptly in the appropriate bank account in the Conference's name. The standard format for a Conference name is "Society of St. Vincent de Paul, xxx Conference." Do **NOT** use the words "church" or "parish" or start with the church name. The primary account typically referred to is a "business" checking account. The account may have service charges, be service charge free, earn interest, etc.

Some banks offer accounts with no monthly service fee to charitable organizations. Service charges should be avoided if possible, but not at a cost of making part of the Conference funds unusable. The bank may require maintaining a minimum balance to avoid service charge. Do not make a decision to save a service charge instead of helping someone in need. The account may be set up in a bank, savings and loan, credit union, investment brokerage house, etc.

The primary consideration is that the funds should be liquid. You are not in the business of financial investment; you are in the business of charitable helping, so there should be no restrictions on the immediate availability of all of the funds.

It is common practice among many Conferences for two officers to be signers on the account. Some Conferences may choose to require two signatures on each check written over a certain amount. While that is a good procedure, it may cause practical issues in getting checks signed on a current basis. So that decision is left up to the individual Conference. Because of the nature of the non-profit sector, accounting firms recommend that the checking account be the type where the canceled checks or electronic images are available or returned with the monthly statement. Depending on the bank, this may or may not be practical. Under normal conditions, the Treasurer is the holder of the checkbook, issuing checks as they are needed.

JOURNAL / LEDGER

It is recommended that SVdP Treasurers maintain a journal for recording the fiscal receipts and expenditures for the Conference. A Receipts and Expenditures Journal, records all cash and check receipts and expenditures in the date order of their occurrence. The Conference relies on the Treasurer for verifying any bills presented for payment. All expenditures should be transacted by check (receipts required). There are, however, some circumstances that may come up that require members to transact business personally and request reimbursement. Reimbursement will be by check and receipts are required for reimbursement.

The Treasurer's Journal follows the same basic classification for income and expense items that are recorded in the Secretary's minute book. The definition of terms employed in the Treasurer's Journal is therefore identical to that used in the Secretary's Record. The National Council has prepared a "Secretary's Minute Book" and a "Treasurer's Manual" that have sample and suggested forms and formats that can be useful in handling the accounting functions.

The annual report forms (discussed later) defined by the National Council identify the income and expense items that the Treasurer should track on a regular basis. Using a simple electronic computer based worksheet, like Excel, can be very useful for this and for preparing monthly and annual reports. Some Conferences use software packages (such as Quick Books) to help them maintain their records on computer. Some Councils have developed sophisticated software that closely follows the record keeping required by the Society.

MONTHLY BANK STATEMENTS

Each month, the Treasurer receives an account statement from the bank or financial institution with which the Conference does business. These statements should be based on a standard month end (e.g. January 31, June 30, etc.). Banks will generally accommodate this. The Treasurer must then balance the account to the statement and reconcile any differences.

AUDITS

A bank report and balance should be submitted at least annually and verified by the President or an audit committee. This audit is considered to be an internal audit and may be accomplished by a Conference committee of two or more members. As with other committees, this one is appointed by the Conference president.

On the National Website, you will find specific procedures defined for the Conference Audit. This consists of a Conference Audit Manual and Conference Audit work sheets. This is the primary method for doing Conference Audits. In addition, a lesser set of suggested audit procedures are included in the "Treasurer's Manual." On the National Council website, under the category of "Best Practices" for Conferences, you will also find sample audit procedures used by some Conferences.

STORAGE OF RECORDS

Generally, the IRS requires all Conference records be kept at least seven years. There is a list in the U.S. Manual which defines each type of record and how long it must be maintained. Often there will be more than one Treasurer during any seven year period; so, at the appropriate time, all records must be transferred to the new Treasurer. (see *Confidentiality and Records Retention* later in this Chapter.)

RESPONSIBILITIES - *Others*

PROTECTING VALUABLE FORMS

You keep close tabs on your cash, credit cards and checks. This should hold true for a Conference as well. ***The practice of giving signed, blank checks to home visit teams is unwise and should not be done.*** Remember, we never give money directly to those we help - - rather, payment is made afterwards to the landlord or utility, (typically, by the Conference Treasurer), so there is no need for home visit

teams to have signed, blank checks. Keep in mind that vouchers are as good as money and should be just as well protected. There have been instances in which those we are helping have gotten their hands on one or more blank vouchers, forged them for their own benefit, or sold them for ready cash.

Some people we have helped have altered vouchers or checks. Do not give checks to those we help! Avoid problems with vouchers by properly and completely filling in the amounts using both numbers ("1") and longhand ("one") on the form. Bank personnel are pretty good about not cashing what looks like an obviously altered check, but, unless you fill out every blank on a voucher, you leave it open to alteration. In order to be good stewards of the funds entrusted to us, you must take proper precautions and follow reasonable procedures.

LEGAL REQUIREMENTS

State and federal laws govern the activities of non-profit organizations. The entity under which Conference operations are tax-exempt has the role of seeing that proper reporting of all funds is done to meet requirements of State Charitable Organization licenses and Federal 990 requirements. Conferences are dependent upon volunteers to achieve compliance with these government regulations, but that does not relieve them of these responsibilities.

Donations to the Society are deductible for state and Federal income tax purposes if your Conference has tax-exempt status. A Conference may have obtained tax-exempt status directly from IRS, may be covered by the Council's tax-exempt status, or by the Group Exemptions through the National Council of the Society. That tax-exempt status can be maintained as long as you comply with the requirements of annual reporting and keep your records as required.

STANDARDS FOR ACCOUNTING

1. Conferences must prepare and submit to the Treasurer of the District Council, an annual report by November 30th of each year, for the twelve month period ending September 30th of that year. This is done by completing the Annual Report form designated by the National Council and explained later.

2. Conferences must maintain confidential records on all the people that have been assisted.
3. Conferences must maintain receipt and expense ledgers and journals. Generally, such records must be kept for a period of seven (7) years.
4. In accordance with IRS regulations, Conferences must acknowledge in writing each donation of \$250.00 or more, given at one time. \$5,000 in donations given \$200 at a time does NOT legally have to be acknowledged (but it's smart to!). In cases where donations are collected by the parish and then given to the Conference, frequently the donor will receive their tax acknowledgement as part of their annual contribution statement from the parish (with a line itemizing the amount given to the Society).
5. Conferences often received checks restricted specifically for "food only," "clothing only," etc. However, a Conference may not accept donations "earmarked" for a particular person. This would enable someone to give money, through the Society, to another person and take a tax deduction for their "donation." This is clearly against the law.
6. A Conference must deposit all funds into the Conference checking account. All expenditures by the Conference should be paid by check, with proper supporting documentation.
7. Assistance from a Conference must not be self-serving. If a member of the Conference or a person related to a Conference member should request assistance, that person or relative of that person must not take part in the Conference decision concerning assistance. To avoid embarrassment or hard feelings, that member should absent themselves from that portion of the Conference meeting where the decision is decided. The Conference shall make its decision with no special treatment or favoritism.
8. Information about those that are served that is shared with the Conference members must be kept in the strictest confidence.

9. Records of meetings, Conference actions, data files of those helped, checkbooks and minutes must be kept in a secure location and their use be maintained in confidence. If you share an office with another parish ministry, for example, these records must be kept in a locked file cabinet where no non-Vincentian will have access.
10. While individual expenditures must remain confidential, Conferences should share information from the annual report of its activities with its contributors and the parish community. Regular reports in the Parish bulletin are an ideal way to accomplish this and are strongly encouraged.
11. Although no work of charity is foreign to the Society, money donated to the Society can only be used for works in which the Society's members are personally involved in a Conference-supported activity. Giving money donated to a Conference to another organization not in the Vincentian family, however worthwhile, violates the intentions of the donor and must be avoided. Donors would have made their donations directly to such organizations instead of SVdP if that had been their intention.
12. Surplus funds should be twinned to other, poorer Conferences or forwarded to projects and programs of upper Councils. Conferences should not hoard money, or keep more on hand than they expect to use within several months. Conversely, Conferences needing funds should not hesitate to contact the Council, who will make their situation known to the other Conferences in the diocese. Conferences who do have an excess of funds should consider twinning either domestically or internationally with one or more Conferences

CONFIDENTIALITY

Confidentiality has always been an important value in the Society of St. Vincent de Paul. For many decades, we were known as "The Secret Society" in the Catholic Church because we so assiduously guarded the personal problems and finances of those we helped (in those days, often our own fellow parishioners).

Confidentiality does not prevent telling the SVdP story to the parish or the public.

Confidentiality does prohibit information shared with your Conference by those you help from "leaking" outside of the Society.

Outsiders. With less resources and more people in need, SVdP Conferences may find that their resources are frequently not enough, and that they need to collaborate with other community groups, agencies or churches in their area to effectively help people. Such situations may range from a simple indication that a family is participating in a program like Adopt-a-Family to telling another church that Mary Doe can't pay her rent this month because her husband left her.

As we network with other groups, we must have the written permission of the guest first.

When sharing with other agencies, do not give more information than what they need to help the family or individual. It may be good to ask up-front what their policy is on how this information will be used and with whom they may share it. With the development of national databases, what you share locally may quickly get into a national database and perhaps hurt the family or individual in some way by denying them benefits, etc. It is for this reason, among many others, that you should NOT collect Social Security numbers from those helped.

Computers allow the sharing of information on a wider basis than ever before. Once your database is shared, the information on your guests can easily be exchanged with other groups not initially involved or intended to be included.

Privacy laws and litigation. More laws regarding privacy have been enacted and people are more aware of legal issues. As a result, those that are helped are more apt to resort to legal measures where there is a possible breach of confidentiality.

The requirements of others. New policies are being developed by some agencies that belong to national databanks, including utility companies. These often require Conferences to have written permission from those they are helping before their situation can even be discussed with the utility or agency. It is for this reason that we recommend everyone we serve be asked to sign a Release of Confidential Information, giving us permission to share what we know with others in order to secure help for the individual.

Definition of “confidentiality”

“The concept of confidentiality is based on the individual's right to privacy, expressed or implied, and has both legal and ethical implications. It means that disclosures which the individual or family makes to the Vincentian and the SVdP Conference will not be revealed to others except under certain circumstances and then only for the purpose of helping them.”

Confidentiality is more than legally important. In Vincentian work, confidentiality is a basic, lasting concept -- essential to helping people help themselves. Trusting relationships develop between persons who need help and the Conference. For those relationships to be productive, there must be mutual trust. Confidentiality is one of the "building blocks" that help a good relationship to develop. It is so important that "confidentiality" is a prerequisite for membership in the Society and its breach by a member may be grounds for requesting a member's resignation from the Conference.

In a home visit, people tend to share more personal information than they would in a more formal setting (e.g. welfare or Social Security office, etc.) because the Conference member is from a church. The person also feels safer because s/he is in her/his own home. As a result, Vincentians have an added responsibility to be careful about what they ask and how they share it.

It is the Vincentian's responsibility to only ask questions that relate to the issue at hand and the help requested. Only write down what is absolutely needed to serve the individual or family. Side comments, personal notes, and written records of the Conference can be subpoenaed. Conference written records should be kept to a minimum because of this.

A Need To Know

Need is determined and help given only as a result of sharing factual and often very personal information. It is in the "handling" of this information by the Conference that questions about confidentiality arise. To help ensure confidentiality, the only appropriate place to share this type of information is at the Conference meeting. It is not wise to share such information with Conference

members in the parking lot, parish hall, in an elevator, etc. You do not know who may be listening.

Outside of a Conference meeting, members should not share names or specifics with their friends or neighbors unless they are active Vincentians and involved in the case. Members should also not share names or specifics with their own family members. Finally, remember that cell phones, e-mail, the Internet and computers are not as secure as you might like.

Write Articles with Care

Special caution must be exercised when including names, specifics, photographs or even general information in any communication or publication where someone could recognize an individual or family from the case description. Stories done with newsletters or local media must be done sensitively and only after securing the written permission of the person(s) being helped (or use other names indicating “not the person’s real name”).

Release of Information

It is often helpful if home visit teams talk about "confidentiality" in one of the first interviews with the person being helped to explain how the information sought might be used or shared. The National Council has a "release" form (found in the National Council website under “Best Practices” for Conferences), giving the Conference permission to share the information it is given for the purpose of trying to secure assistance for those we serve. The person you help should never be surprised by what you shared or with whom. If they say, “*I didn't know you would contact them*” or “*I didn't know you would share that,*” it usually means the Conference home visit team did not properly explain what signing that release means.

We sometimes forget to have them sign the release form and end up asking if verbal permission is enough. Written Permission from the individual is highly advisable when working with those who have very personal, complicated problems (e.g. AIDS/HIV, emotional or legal problems, counseling situations, etc.). Some agencies like public housing groups will simply not talk to the Society about a family’s situation until they have received a faxed copy of the signed release.

Possible Exceptions to Confidentiality

There are a few exceptions when information may be released without the informed consent of the family or individual. One such exception is when there appears to be a real danger that a person will injure himself/herself or others or endanger the larger community.

Another exception is when a law enforcement agency requests the information or a subpoena is presented. Some of our Vincentians mistakenly believe that our rules of confidentiality are equivalent to the bond of the confessional. They are not.

A Conference Record Retention Policy

When a Conference begins operation, paperwork is generated. This includes files on those helped, bank statements, invoices, receipts, etc. which begin to take up space. There is an accounting need to keep information for a short while on the people served, what was done, payment of bills, statistics for local parish and Council uses, etc. Initially this is not a problem, but, after a few years, a loose-leaf binder expands and older records have to be put into storage in the church offices or in a Conference officer's home to make room for current records.

Confidentiality demands that all records on individuals and families served by the Conference must be kept in a safe, private place and always remain secure. There are also remote but possible legal issues and potential liabilities that vary from state to state.

Therefore, it is wise for a Conference to have a "record retention policy" because "confidentiality" involves not only how information is shared but also how old records are properly and confidentially stored and eventually destroyed.

Your Conference record retention policy should include the following:

- ◆ How records should be kept secure and confidential.
- ◆ How long records should be kept.

- ◆ How records should be disposed of confidentially, when no longer needed.

Never just throw records into the trash. You must shred old records.

SUGGESTED RECORD RETENTION SCHEDULE:
SEE PAGE 32 OF THE MANUAL

PERMANENT

Annual Conference Report

(Include statistics and membership lists with anything historically important.)

Letters of Aggregation

THREE (3) YEARS

Bank Deposits (Checking/Savings) & Bank Reconciliations

Case Records/Cards

General Correspondence

SEVEN (7) YEARS

Bank Statements & access to checks (online or hard copies)

Invoices and Receipts Received

Treasurer Statements (Month/Year)

Minutes/Minute Books

It is recommended that computer records follow the same Retention time frame and should have backup (could be in the cloud and in at least two additional places: another E-Book drive, external hard drive, USB, Google Drive, DropBox, SkyDrive, etc.) and should have a firewall protection for the Conference computer to protect client personal information.

The time of the record retention period begins not from the actual date of the document, but, at the end of the fiscal year in which the document was created. That is, a three-year record created in April 2004 cannot be discarded in April 2007, but not until SEPTEMBER 2007 which is the end of that fiscal year.

LIABILITY CLAIMS

There are situations that may cause claims or lawsuits to be made against the Society of St. Vincent de Paul and/or individual Vincentians. Sometimes the Diocesan or District Council has arranged that their own liability policy also covers all Conferences and members. If this is not the case, each Conference must have its own professional liability insurance. The Diocesan or District Council or individual Conferences may apply for the National Group Insurance for coverage.

However, some of the claims may not be covered by terms of the insurance policy. In addition, some of the claims may be directly against individuals for their actions and not fall under the insurance coverage of the Society. For example, intentional acts that injure people or property are excluded in most policies.

Also, anyone operating outside the rules and guidelines of the Society may not be protected. It may be determined that the Vincentian was acting on their own behalf outside the protection of the Society's insurance.

All Vincentians using a vehicle on volunteer Vincentian business must have their own insurance. The liability insurance policy will protect the Society in case you have an accident in your own vehicle, but it will not protect you.

COMMON SENSE RULES TO AVOID POTENTIAL PROBLEMS:

1. Always operate within the rules and guidelines of the Society as spelled out in the Rule, Manual and Bylaws. This includes all written communications from Council officers and Conference presidents where these are not in conflict with the Society or Council policies.
2. **NEVER HOME VISIT OR MEET SOMEONE YOU HELP ALONE.** This especially includes giving anyone a ride anywhere without another Vincentian present. If a family's desperate need requires you to deliver food alone, take it to the apartment Manager's Office and ask the manager to call the person to the office, or possibly to a nearby public facility.
3. Use common sense when making physical contact (hugging, for example), especially with children and those of the opposite sex. *"Protecting God's*

Children” sponsored by the Catholic Diocese can serve as a good guideline about which actions are appropriate and which are not.

4. Do not discuss our guest’s personal problems except with them or with other Vincentians. If counseling for someone is appropriate, your Conference may want to offer to pay for an initial session with a professional. Vincentians are not trained marriage counselors, for example, so we do a couple a grave dis-service if we try to be one.
5. If an incident occurs that you feel may result in a claim or if anyone threatens to sue or make a claim, contact the Diocesan/District Council immediately if your Conference is insured through them. If your insurance was acquired specifically by your Conference, contact your insurance company directly. Late reported claims can be denied by the insurance company if the delay causes a loss of their ability to conduct an investigation.
6. **DO NOT TRY TO NEGOTIATE A SETTLEMENT WITH A CLAIMANT.** This action may prejudice the claim and void our insurance coverage.
7. Call the police to all traffic accidents.
8. Do not discuss any incident with anyone except the police, the Society's insurance carrier's representative or your own lawyer. **Do not talk or even accept a phone call from the attorney for or insurance company of any guest who is now or who may in the future sue or make a claim against you or the Society.**

ACCOUNTING REQUIRED BY SVdP

FOUR SIMPLE FORMS. Let’s look briefly at what is required. We’re a non-profit organization and one of our primary purposes is to assist people. **We must be good stewards of the funds committed to our use.** And, in order to be able to solicit tax deductible donations, we have to show in writing that we are doing what we said we would. This can only be shown through four Conference records:

#1: **Case Record Form** (Intake Assessment) must be kept to prove that we actually assisted real people;

#2: **Secretary’s Minutes** of our meetings;

#3: **Treasurer's Report**; and

#4: **Conference Annual Report** that is sent to Councils and forwarded to National or entered online.

These are designed so that you can simply transfer the information from your other Conference records directly.

1 – CASE RECORD FORM (OR INTAKE ASSESSMENT FORM)

An individual record -- the Case Record Form -- is maintained for every person or family that comes to the attention of the Conference. These records should consist of two parts: 1) essential identifying information about the person or family and their particular request for assistance, and 2) a log of contacts the Conference has with each of the people requesting assistance.

As soon as the Conference enters into contact with someone in need, that person or family becomes a contact, hence the Case Record Form or Intake Assessment Form. The Secretary is responsible for keeping all such records in a safe and protected place.

The National Council has created a standard Case Record Form and includes this form in the Secretary's Minute Book which is available on the National Council website. However, many Councils and Conferences throughout the country have created their own case record. In addition, there are online versions of forms being used as well. Regardless of the actual form or medium in use, the principles discussed below hold true.

It is the responsibility of the home visit team to review the record of the person they will be visiting. It is then their responsibility, prior to each Conference meeting, to update the records of the persons they visited. They report on their visits during the meeting and return the files to the secretary after use.

The Case Record Form makes provision for identifying information. The form in use actually covers a wide range of factors about the person or family. Remember that the Case Record Form constitutes a tool for getting to know and to help the family. Limit yourself to those elements which are necessary and useful to your being an effective helper. Only in those cases where the Conference becomes rather deeply involved will home visitors want or need a fuller picture.

The information identified on the form is generally self-explanatory. There is nothing listed that should need special explanation. We should avoid the red tape look. If the person or family is visited more than once, additional information will be gathered on each visit.

The home visitors are responsible for documenting the progress by recording their ongoing contacts. Be brief. Be factual; but remember that not all facts must be recorded. Opinions, particularly negative and judgmental analyses, seldom have a place in any SVdP report. Even if, for prudent reasons, some reservations about the people we are serving are inserted, be sure that such opinions are clearly labeled as personal impressions.

Case records that are more than a year old rarely have any meaningful value for most cases except as history. A person's life may turn completely around in less than a year. Old records (although maintained for 3 years) should not be accessed except for those who have been receiving ongoing assistance for a long time, as the Conference deems necessary.

2 – SECRETARY'S MINUTES

Accurate and timely minutes should be prepared for every Conference meeting. A specific format is not mandated, however the "Secretary's Minute Book" available from the National Council provides a good example and can be used as a guide.

3 – TREASURER'S REPORT

A financial report showing a summary of all receipts, disbursements and bank and other monetary accounts should be prepared on a timely basis and presented at each Conference meeting. The report should show current month and year-to-date amounts. It has been suggested that comparative amounts from the previous year could also be reported. The specific format of the report is not mandated, but it is suggested it follow the format of the "Conference Annual Report." This report should be presented to the membership at the regular Conference meeting. It is recommended that a summary of the financial information of the Conference be shared with the pastor and parishioners on a regular basis. Many Conferences use the weekly parish bulletin for this purpose.

4 - CONFERENCE ANNUAL REPORT

The Conference Annual Report form is intended to promote more timely, accurate, and consistent reporting. It is essential to have your Conference annual report completed properly and returned on time so that the National Council can responsibly publish SVdP's consolidated National results and comply with the requirements of our tax-exempt status.

The Conference Annual Report form is published each year by the National Council and it includes instructions on preparation and submission of data. The National Council has also made online reporting available to Councils and Conferences. Online reporting is preferable.

This Conference report form must be used by all Conferences. If you will be preparing your report on paper, please do not use older versions of the form. Remember that the key to good reporting is keeping good records throughout the reporting year [i.e., monthly and quarterly reporting]. Please read the instructions that come with the forms carefully. More detailed explanations may be found in the Treasurer's Manual and Secretary's Minute Book. If you have any questions on reporting, contact your local Council for support.

RAISING FUNDS

The Society is not just another social service agency. Its primary purpose is not to bring help to the poor, at least when defined as material or financial assistance. Its purpose is to bring the love and peace of Christ to those who are suffering. In doing so, we bring the greatest gifts: of *ourselves* and *our time*.

Nonetheless.....

“What does it profit, my brethren, if a man says he has faith, but has not works? Can his faith save him? If a brother or sister is ill-clad and in lack of daily food, and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace, be warmed and filled,' without giving them the things needed for the body, what does it profit? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.”

St. James, the Apostle (2: 14-17)

As St. James so aptly says, it is difficult to minister to someone's soul when his body is hungry or naked. Missionaries have historically found that they had to minister to the physical needs of those under their care before they would listen to the Gospel.

When you bring the love and peace of Christ to those you visit, you will often find your brothers and sisters in need and naturally want to help. Therefore, we raise funds to assist those in need to live out, in a concrete way, the central message of Christianity -- love one another. Through the simple act of sharing, in some small way, with those who have less, you cause the poor to see your good works and give glory and praise to God. It is best expressed in St. Matthew's Gospel:

*“You are the light of the world.
Men do not light a lamp and then put it under a bushel basket.*

*They set it on a stand where it gives light to all...
In the same way, your light must shine before all men
so that they may see your good works
and give praise and glory to your heavenly Father."*

So raising funds is not why the Society was founded or why it continues. It is an adjunct, but necessary, element, to our work with the poor.

TRADITIONAL INCOME SOURCES

A. CHURCH COLLECTIONS

You must first begin by talking with your Pastor. If he is convinced that the work of your Conference is meritorious, he will probably help you. If he feels your work will help him do his job in the parish, he may well become enthusiastic. Remember that he may have heard promises in the past which weren't kept, so it may take him time to "come around."

Once your Pastor is committed, there are several ways parish Conferences can be funded.

1. Regular monthly envelope collections

The most effective collection has been found to be a regular envelope dedicated to the Society of St Vincent de Paul in the monthly envelope package. This keeps the Society and its ministry in front of the parishioners on an ongoing basis, and results in a steady income stream for the Conference's work with the poor.

2. Church Door Appeals

The oldest Vincentian tradition is to have members collect donations outside the doors of the church after each Mass. In some parishes, this is done once a month. Use baskets typically lined with black fabric conspicuously labeled "St. Vincent de Paul." The disadvantage of this method is it is very labor-intensive, especially for small Conferences or churches where there are many Masses (although it only takes a member 10 extra minutes after the Mass s/he would go to anyway).

3. Fifth Sunday Collections

Four times a year, a calendar month has five Sundays. A few fortunate Conferences receive the proceeds of the Sunday collection on those occasions. More often, the Pastor permits the Conference a *second* collection on those weekends.

4. Specific-Day Collections

Some Pastors permit the Conference a second collection once or twice a year, plus give it the regular collection from the Thanksgiving morning Mass and the proceeds from all collections at the Ash Wednesday and Holy Thursday Masses. Another opportunity for a specific-day collection is on the Sunday just before or just after the feast day of St. Vincent de Paul and or Blessed Frederic Ozanam.

5. Poor boxes

Some churches still have poor boxes. It is appropriate (if not expected) that donations placed there will go to the poor, and SVdP is the ministry that serves the poor. Talk with your Pastor. If theft is or has been a problem, there are ways of building, modifying and securing boxes. Poor boxes can be a major income producer, often generating \$200 a week (\$10,000 a year) or more, so do not dismiss them lightly.

If your parish is without poor boxes, perhaps your Pastor will let you install them.

6. Other

Propose to your Pastor a second collection on the Sunday when the Gospel reading is about the poor widow who gave two small copper coins (the "Widow's Mite") at the Temple. Another good time is the Sundays in Lent which the Church teaches is a time of prayer, sacrifice, almsgiving and concern for the poor.

B. DISTRIBUTE ENVELOPES

Some Conferences place envelopes at the doors to the church next to the church bulletins ... some place them on each seat in the church once a month ... some

have the Pastor's permission to place them in boxes in the pews where the hymnals are kept ... some place them on top of the poor boxes at the church entrances ... and, ideally, some are able to staple them inside the parish bulletin with an appropriate flyer.

In any case, envelopes are one of the most effective and simple ways of getting contributions from your parishioners. And they are a means of knowing who your financial supporters are and how to reach them. With this information a Conference can cultivate donors and eventually increase their frequency and amount of their donations. (See Section D below)

The envelopes should ...

- ◆ say "Society of St. Vincent de Paul" (our official name),
- ◆ have your name -- "St. _____ Conference" -- so parishioners know their money is going to their own parish organization,
- ◆ your mailing address (this facilitates parishioners taking the envelopes home, putting in a check and *mailing* it back),
- ◆ the Society's USA official logo and in our official color of ink,
- ◆ possibly an appropriate quote related to your work (typically from Matthew 25), and
- ◆ a place for the donors to add their name and address.

As noted previously, the best method is to have SVdP envelopes included with the regular church collection envelopes which are mailed to registered parishioners each month or quarter. If you are this lucky, you might not get to "design" your envelope.

If your parish offers an electronic method for parishioners to make their monthly direct donations to the parish in lieu of paper envelopes, e.g. Faith Direct, you may want to speak with the parish business manager about adding your Conference as one of the options for a monthly donation.

C. THE SECRET COLLECTION

Since the time of Frederic Ozanam, it has been traditional to take up a "*Secret (or*

Black/Blue Bag) Collection" at every Conference meeting, with each person anonymously contributing whatever s/he is able. This is typically done by passing around a bag or sack. Taken up at each Conference meeting, this can add up, over time, to become an important source of funds for the Conference's works of charity.

It is also a valuable source of funds for non-charity activities. Some Conferences have chosen to use these funds for purposes other than the Conference's normal works of charity: pay for members supplies (books, pamphlets, etc.), cover the cost of Conference social gatherings, cover the cost of members' attendance at special meetings, etc. This is a practical and legitimate thing to do as long as the members are in agreement with this purpose before the secret collection is taken.

D. DEVELOP A REGULAR CONTRIBUTOR BASE

Developing a contributor database requires recording the name, address and amount of every donation for years. This is a significant undertaking unless you have a person with a computer, a database program, and a willingness to enter data week after week. Such a database enables the Conference to publish a newsletter which has been used successfully by working class parish Conferences to increase per capita giving to extraordinary levels over time.

Donor database programs are expensive. However, the process of managing donor information and easy contacting donors in mass can be somewhat automated using spreadsheets and the mail-merge function of word processors.

This system can give your Conference real stability in meeting the financial needs of the poor in your community. You can (and should) tell contributors that you'd rather have their hands and time rather than their money, but many parishioners will still prefer to discharge their responsibilities to the poor by writing out a check.

Regular communication (typically, a quarterly newsletter) can be used to help convince donors over time to be "regular" -- to give every week or every two weeks or every month. Even just \$5 a week or \$10 a month brings in \$250 and \$120 over a year's time -- probably far more than the parishioner would likely give at one time. This gives the Conference a uniform, almost predictable income

stream. It can build confidence when facing decisions about large financial outlays that would otherwise likely be avoided for fear of having insufficient funds in the future.

Interestingly, Mother Teresa did not like this concept, frequently turning down offers of fixed monthly corporate donations. She felt such arrangements distracted her and her sisters from the need to pray *daily* to ask the Lord for the resources to provide for His poor. Pray that you are doing the right thing

E. FUND-RAISING EVENTS

Conferences occasionally have an opportunity to conduct fund-raising events which not only raise money for the work of the Conference, but expose the Society to parishioners and other people in the community. These might include events without a clear connection to either our faith or service to the poor, such as raffles and bingo, where SVdP is only the financial beneficiary. Raffles and bingos are acceptable sources of income as long as they are not the primary source of income for the Conference.

Others might have a connection to the poor, such as "poor man suppers" (bread and soup) during Lent, or Souper Bowls which contrast the condition of the poor with society's ostentatious celebration of major sporting events. Some tie to our religious values, such as contemporary Christian music concerts or the sale of Christmas sweatshirts, or parish/diocesan anniversary or pro-life T-shirts. Parish Women's Guild's often pledge the money raised at one of their events to the Society's work.

F. WALK FOR THE POOR AND NATIONAL VEHICLE DONATION PROGRAM

The Society encourages all Conferences to organize and participate in the annual Walk for the Poor. This is normally scheduled around the last Saturday in September to coincide with the Feast Day of St. Vincent de Paul. There is a wealth of information on how to plan this event found on the National Council website.

Another great way to raise funds is to promote the Society's National Vehicle Donation Program in your parish and community. Used cars donated to the

program are picked up within 24 hours, sold at auction, and the proceeds return to your Conference for use in helping those in need. There are excellent promotion flyers, available free of charge, from the National Council office.

G. TWINNING

The Vincentian family has historically practiced "twinning," where a Conference shares its resources with poorer Conferences (or districts). Twinning can be done in three ways: (1) those Conferences with excess funds (or with a willingness to share from their own need) who share their dollars; (2) those who share other valuable resources such as food, personal hygiene items or Easter baskets; and (3) those who share their members to help overwhelmed Conferences make home visits.

The philosophy of twinning is simply that, if we are to love and serve the poor, this same obligation also applies to the poor Conferences within our own Vincentian family.

The objective of the program is to insure that no SVdP Conference is left effectively unable to function because it is without funds to respond to those who call for help. While Vincentians primarily provide prayers, understanding, information and caring, a Conference which is never able to provide even the smallest bit of financial help to those in desperate straits has a difficult time retaining members.

Contact the National Council office if you are interested in finding out more about the International Twinning program.

H. CORPORATE FUNDS

Many companies provide funds to charities in one of three ways:

- ◆ Employee matching funds. Some companies will match contributions made by employees to charities. Some match dollar for dollar, some 50 cents on the dollar, etc. Remind all your members -- Active, Associate and Contributing -- to ask their employers if they match contributions.

- ◆ Company support for employees. Some companies contribute when an employee contributes a minimum number of hours working for a charity. Examples are Chase Bank (up to \$150), Motorola (\$50), Mobil Oil (up to \$500), Kimberly Clark (no limit). Many of these programs apply to their retirees as well. Have all your members -- Active, Associate and Contributing -- ask their employers if they have such a program.
- ◆ Company grants. Some large companies (Anchor Coupling - Caterpillar, Banks, Target, Home Depot) make grants to neighborhood charities under certain circumstances. If you have a business within your parish boundaries, ask if their corporation has a grant program for local charities.

I. WILLS AND BEQUESTS

No one likes to benefit from the death of another, especially a friend or neighbor. But people die every day, and many leave behind funds which they would like to be put to good purpose. The Society has a large percent of its members falling into the "retired" if not "elderly" category. As such, we are particularly aware of death (and taxes). Some of us may leave nothing behind but our spirit, while others have accumulated significant resources or assets.

Many people want to avoid leaving their estate to relatives they feel will not handle this wealth in a kind and sharing manner. They have been supporters of the Society during their lifetime, and would share part of what they leave behind with the Conference working in their parish. The exposure of parishioners to the local work of the Society, through the activities of your Conference, provides a reminder that their wishes can be reflected in their wills and trusts and be realized after their death.

This message can be enhanced by discrete reminders in communications with your contributors, your Conference mailings, and church bulletin items. Some Conferences (both affluent and poor) have received thousands of dollars from such bequests. They have built and equipped food pantries and service centers with such proceeds.

K. MEMORIALS

When someone dies, often their obituary will carry a notice that, in lieu of flowers, "contributions can be made to..." If it lists your Conference name and address, your Conference could be the beneficiary of several hundred dollars. Even if your Conference is not listed, other parishioners will often make a contribution to SVdP in the deceased person's memory. Such donations tend to be small, but cumulatively they can add up to a significant figure. Many Conferences report six to eight such occasions a year, sometimes averaging almost \$300 each in Conference income!

If there is a funeral home or homes in the area of your conference, approach the manager or owner and ask if your conference donation envelopes can be made available to those who come to pay their respects. These can be placed near the mass offering envelopes. In some cases the funeral home owner or manager may be a parishioner and more willing to accept your envelopes.

The secret to developing this income source is how you handle the donations you do receive. Acknowledgement in the right way (to both the donor and to the family of the deceased) makes a good impression and leaves a "reminder" in the minds of people who likely do this regularly when friends die. Over time, it can become almost instinctive for parishioners to make a contribution to SVdP in a deceased parishioner's name.

DISBURSING FUNDS

The proper use of money has been and always will be a hot topic. In your own life, you are faced daily with tough decisions related to spending money, and it is reported to be the number one cause of marriage arguments. Some of the same problems will find their way into your Conference work.

It is helpful to know that the Society has been very explicit in the Rule and other documentation over its more than 180 years about the proper ways to spend the funds you receive. Its counsel will help guide and direct you, because, in most Conferences, for every \$1.00 received, there are two or three possible places to spend it. Therefore, you must disburse your funds with wisdom and discernment. Remember, you are not a bureaucratic social welfare agency. What you do, you do with love, compassion and respect for the dignity of those we serve.

BASIC GUIDELINES

A. WHAT YOU CAN SPEND MONEY ON.

Anything that will build up the dignity and reduce the suffering of a needy individual or family, including:

FOOD. Many Conferences maintain a pantry where they store food obtained from area food banks, from parishioner donations, and from retail purchases during supermarket sales. The use of a pantry, with minimal retail food purchases, allows a Conference to maximize its food dollars. There may be minor costs related to operating a pantry (utilities, repair and replacement of appliances, even rent) but they are valid Conference expenditures.

Some Conferences provide "vouchers" or gift certificates which they purchase from local grocery stores. It is best to make arrangements with the store for them to honor a "NO ALCOHOL OR TOBACCO" proviso written at the top of the voucher. Some parishes or parish schools use a "script" program as a fund raiser.

Script certificates are the same as gift certificates for a grocery store with the exception that they are purchased in bulk at a discount (usually 5% or more) and then sold at face value. The 5% discount goes to support the parish or its school.

Some Conferences purchase script to give to the poor thus helping their parish or parish school. A few Conferences are able to purchase their own discounted script in bulk. However, no matter how obtained, this is always the most expensive way to provide food to the poor.

CLOTHING. Giving those in need a guest voucher to a local thrift store is the most efficient method of providing this help. Thrift stores (preferably a local Conference or District/Diocesan SVdP Store) have a wide selection of gently used clothes at very low prices. However, with vouchers there may be some limits to what can be provided.

Some Conferences conduct a back-to-school backpack or clothing program, providing a \$35, \$40 or even \$50 gift certificate for clothes to each youngster about to start or return to school. Others seek gently used hats and gloves/mittens and scarves during the winter to take along on home visits.

FURNITURE. When there has been a fire or other emergency, sometimes there is a need to help a family out with furniture and appliances. The best method is to get the word out to your parishioners – to identify those who might be in the process of replacing an older (but perfectly serviceable) item. Unless you have storage space available, you may have to limit yourself to matching an immediate need with a current offer. In cases where you do not have a family with a need, suggest the donor family give the item to another charitable organization in the area that has provision for pickup. Unless you have developed a network of parish men with trucks and younger backs/muscles, you may have to get the receiving family to arrange for pickup and delivery. When possible, this gives them a stake (and pride) in helping themselves. It is also possible to purchase used appliances at discount stores, but this is an expensive way to go.

Some Conferences limit themselves to purchasing air mattresses for those who need beds. These can often be purchased for reasonable amounts.

Others utilize vouchers to their own SVdP Thrift Store for basic furniture (i.e. sofa, chair, table, lamp, bed, and dresser).

RENT ASSISTANCE. Conferences with sufficient funds often help with rent. Depending on the financial condition of the Conference and the amount that rent needed, it may be necessary for those we are helping to first come up with a portion of the amount needed...with the Conference's assistance being the "last dollar in" to close the gap on the amount owed.

Before paying any money to a landlord, you should always first verify that the person named as the landlord by those we are assisting is not in some way related to the people we seek to help.

Cash or a check should never be given to the person requesting assistance. Checks should be made out to the apartment company and given directly to the landlord or complex manager. For your protection and that of the guest, it is best to get a signed receipt, even for a check.

UTILITIES. Help with electricity, gas and water bills is a common use of Conference funds. This has become even more important in recent years since, under current U.S. HUD rules, a person who has had their power turned off can lose their HUD housing quickly (and possibly become homeless). Like rent, utility bills can sometimes be quite large, and may require the person being assisted to first come up with a portion before the Conference pays. It is also possible in many instances to pay a portion of the outstanding balance to get the family reconnected, or placed on a payment plan. With certain utilities you can call as a church or agency and give your pledge or voucher number over the phone and this is counted as a payment immediately (even if you bundle your checks and mail them only once or twice a month). In some communities, you may need to apply for and receive a PIN number for your Conference to access this process and make pledges or give voucher numbers.

Again, never give cash or a check to those we serve; mail or deliver a check to the utility.

Conferences generally do not pay for cable or satellite TV bills. Many do not pay cell phone bills since they question whether this is "essential." There may also be

available to those receiving public aid like SNAP (food stamps) or TANF a free cell phone with 60 to 250 minutes a month from SAFELINK.

CAR REPAIRS. Whether to pay for car repairs is among the hardest decisions you will have to make since transportation to a job is often essential to hold a job. Yet nothing is as common among the poor as old cars which need repair. The cost of repairs always ends up higher than first estimated. Occasionally, Conferences have developed a relationship with an auto repair shop that will provide free labor and discounted parts for repairs to families sponsored by the SVdP Conference. Even then, you can easily throw good money after bad, repairing something on a car that still has six other things that badly need fixing. You must discern if this is the best way to serve.

BUS TICKETS. If you are in a developed urban area, depending on the location, bus service may be available, enabling most people can get to work, school, a doctor or DHS appointment on the bus, although it can be a slow, time-consuming process. There may be a discounted monthly passes which can be obtained. This is usually a far lower-cost option than spending hundreds to repair a poor family's vehicle.

Care should be taken to respond to requests to purchase out-of-town bus tickets. It is a good idea to verify that, when the person or family gets to the location they have chosen, they will not be in a position of seeking assistance from SVdP or agencies in that location. If you choose to do this, make sure you purchase the ticket at the station and get the person on the bus (unfortunately, some simply cash the ticket in and don't travel).

Conference leaders should know about a service that has been available for years to the Society throughout the country. This is a discount for bus tickets offered by Greyhound Bus Lines. The specific rules that must be followed in order to get this discount vary with each local area. In some areas, a Vincentian may submit a voucher for ticket with all information spelled out in detail. In some areas, Vincentians must purchase the tickets in person and paying with a SVdP check. In some areas, payment can be made with cash, personal check or credit card as long as a SVdP ID is shown. As stated above, the rules vary with the local area. Conferences should contact the Greyhound station nearest to them and discuss this with the manager to be sure how it can work for your Conference.

GAS VOUCHERS. You will find those in need with decent cars who say they are so strapped, after making the rent or utility payment, that they have an empty gas tank and have an important job interview or doctor's appointment that or the next day. The best practice is to simply accompany the person to the gas station, fill the tank to the level or dollar value you decide, and collect the receipt for your Conference. As always, NEVER GIVE CASH for gas. Some Conferences have made arrangements with a local gas station which honors Conference gas vouchers. Most limit these to \$25, but gas prices are rising. If you have a good relationship with the gas station personnel, they will tell you when a guest tries to exchange the voucher for cash. If your gas station won't honor and process your vouchers, you may have to purchase Gift Cards.

MEDICINES. Many of those we serve have a Medicaid card to cover most of their medical expenses. However, prescriptions seem to be an item often left uncovered by the existing system. Therefore, some Conferences will pay for drugs in an emergency, generally limited to insulin, heart, high blood pressure and breathing problems, and all antibiotics. (A pharmacist will tell you whether the guest's prescription is for one of these conditions.) You may get individuals on medication for anger and anxiety control, and these are left to your discretion. Many Conferences will not do Methadone, any narcotic or psychotropic drug.

As with other services, never give the person cash or a check. Bring a check to the pharmacy after the guest has left the prescription with the pharmacist. Some Conferences tell the pharmacist they will pay for a one-week supply or \$100 worth of the drug, whichever is less.

COUNCIL SPONSORED PROGRAMS. Sometimes the District Council or the Diocesan Council will have programs that aid Conferences in helping those in need. Examples of this are thrift stores, free meals, transient aid, homeless services, prescription payment, vehicle repairs, car purchases, and many others. Some of these services are provided free of charge and some require a payment from the Conference. Conferences should take advantage of these programs wherever they are applicable.

ADMINISTRATIVE COSTS. You can pay for the reasonable expenses incurred in operating your Conference -- telephone bills, postage, printing costs, office supplies and even office equipment and furniture (*but see "C" below*).

Many Conferences maintain a food pantry on parish grounds. In some cases, the cost of operation is zero. However, some pantries are air-conditioned and have several refrigerators and freezers. This increases parish utility bills to the point where the Conference is asked to pay a fixed amount each month toward the parish electric bill. Some Conferences have been asked to pay rent for the room that they occupy. Some pantries occupy buildings specifically constructed for that purpose. Because of this, a small portion of the Conference's funds can be placed in a reserve to pay these anticipated expenses.

Because such "fixed" costs can grow over time, requiring an increasing portion of the Conference's income, caution is suggested before a Conference takes on such overhead.

MEETING EXPENSES. A Conference may want to pay to send its President or another member to a regional or national SVdP meeting. These are legitimate SVdP expenses. Christ Himself several times took his disciples aside for a day or more to teach and continue their education away from the hassle of everyday life

MISCELLANEOUS. What's left is a collection of situations generally handled on a case-by-case basis:

CHILD CARE is seen increasingly and can be important in the first couple weeks when a person begins a new job after completing job training. But these costs mount up fast. State subsidized child care may be available in your area, and those we serve should be referred to that first.

MEDICAL TRANSPORTATION. One Vincentian team visited a woman on dialysis with a contagious condition which required her to come in for treatment early (6 am) in the morning before any agency offering rides to the doctor was open. The Conference paid for taxi service to the office (with the Red Cross returning the guest at the conclusion of her treatment because they were open by then). The cab companies may be willing to work with your Conference and bill it for the rides they provide.

BURIAL ASSISTANCE. Occasionally a Conference gets a request to help bury a person whose family cannot afford the costs. If your Pastor will write a letter indicating the deceased was an active Catholic, have the family immediately contact Catholic Cemeteries which sometimes can help get discounted or free services, including grave sites. Pastors may also be able to help secure "pro-bono" services from funeral homes for those who were active in the church. Check with local community/township agencies to see if they help with this expense.

Summary. It has been said over and over again that no work of charity is foreign to the Society. Assistance to those we serve can take almost any form *as long as the home visit team decides that the need is real and the Conference has the resources to provide the service.*

As has been mentioned, some Conferences make special arrangements with stores, pharmacies, hotels and gas stations to accept a voucher from the Conference and to bill the Conference for the services rendered. Remember that vouchers are like checks -- they have to be paid. Other Conferences establish special relationships with barbers, dentists and doctors to provide some free or discounted services. In looking at these possibilities, always keep in mind that the best way to find out if someone is willing to offer a free or discounted service is to simply ask the question directly. The worst that can happen is that the answer will be "no" and you will be where you started out (but you tried).

B. WHAT YOU CAN NOT SPEND CONFERENCE FUNDS ON.

DONATIONS TO OTHER non-profit/profit GROUPS however worthy their activities may be (including other parish ministries, parish school scholarship and uniform funds, Catholic Schools, other Catholic charities, etc.). If Society contributors had wanted their money to go to the other activity, they would have given it to the other group directly and not to SVdP. Funds can be given to such activities only if three conditions are met.

For example, if Conference members regularly work in a community pantry or interfaith ministries emergency services office, some Conference funds may be

used to support that organization. The key here is that (1) the Conference has chosen to be involved, (2) Conference members are actively participating, and (3) both know that the money is being used for direct assistance to the poor.

Conference funds may not be used to help a charitable organization with which it has no working relationship, no matter how good the cause may be. For example, "Birth Right" is a pro-life charitable organization operating a crisis pregnancy counseling service. This is a good cause; but, they work with people from all economic brackets and you cannot be sure that your funds will only be used for the poor. No funds may be given in this case.

However, if Birth Right operates a home where poor pregnant women may stay until a period after the birth of the child, then the Conference may provide beds, cribs, clothing, food, etc. In this way the Conference knows how the funds are used.

REIMBURSEMENTS FOR PERSONAL EXPENSES. Vincentians should not be paid for their time or mileage to make home visits. If those expenses are a problem for a Vincentian, allow him or her to ride with another Vincentian or give her/him a responsibility on the telephone or in the pantry.

SOCIAL ACTIVITIES. Friendship and fellowship is the second purpose of our SVdP ministry. Vincentians need each other's help and support as they live and work this ministry. Functions which help Vincentians get to know each other better are very important; however, they should be held at the expense of the members – not the Conference.

Expenses for simple refreshments at Society meetings, workshops, seminars, etc. should again be covered by the members. Expenses for any entertainment or outings that are arranged by the Conference *for the poor* can be paid by the Conference; however, more lavish socializing (dinners, parties) should be funded by the members themselves or by the Conference's "Secret Collection."

C. WHAT YOU CAN SAVE MONEY ON – MONTHLY FOOD ALLOTMENT.

FOOD BANKS. Check into local or regional food banks which serve other food pantries in the area. They become your primary source of food, supplemented by

what you can get from parish donations, or have to purchase at a discount. There is little or no cost involved, although a small amount of paperwork is required. Conferences utilizing these food sources do not consider the paperwork either intrusive or burdensome.

D. OTHER APPROVED EXPENDITURES - OTHER SVDP UNIT EFFORTS

The primary purpose for the existence of upper Councils (District, Diocesan, National, and International) is to support the work being done in the Conferences. This includes formation and training programs, spiritual exercises, coordinating communications with the national organization and special celebrations.

In cases where Councils have significant outside income from thrift stores or other development efforts, they may also provide transitional housing, dining rooms, elderly and youth programs, alcohol/drug rehabs, ministries to the homeless and incarcerated, transient aid, etc. All of the efforts made by the upper Councils should, in some way, help the Conference members in their development as Vincentians or in their work with those in need.

The Rule of the Society requires each Conference to support all of the special works of the upper Councils. This means not only monetarily, but in all aspects of the activity. All special works of any upper Council are the moral and legal responsibility of the member Conferences.

E. PERSONAL CHARITY PROHIBITED

Vincentians are to be reimbursed by the Conference for the funds they expend on behalf of those we serve. Vincentians are not to be paid for their time or mileage to make home visits. However, if a member purchases gas or a meal for a family, they are to be reimbursed by the Conference as soon as possible.

One little known maxim of the Society prohibits a Conference member from using his/her own personal funds to assist the poor if that member does not get reimbursed for the expense. Vincentians are to use the common funds of the Conference in all Conference efforts. In this way, you insure the emphasis on the word "we". *We, the Conference, have done these works of charity. We, the Conference, have helped this family.* We, the Body of Christ, have shared Christ's

love with those in need. It is not "I have done this" or "It was through my help, that this was accomplished."

The works of the Conference are not Mike's or Maria's or John's or Helen's works; SVdP works of charity are Christ's works.

F. NO BUDGETING

Readers should take note that there is no section on "Budgeting" in this Manual. From a conceptual and practical standpoint, budgeting cannot be done for Conference work. Saving for a "rainy day" or a "real emergency" does not apply to Conference work. Today is the rainy day. The family or individual you are currently working to assist is the real emergency. If you determine the need is real, and the need is a necessity, and you have the resources to satisfy that need, then your obligation to Jesus in the suffering poor is to satisfy that need. You don't know what tomorrow will bring, or if tomorrow will even come. You know only what God has presented to you today.

Theoretically, we might budget for Conference fixed administrative costs (postage, telephone, printing, etc.) but these are only a small fraction of a Conference's expenditures and would not constitute true "budgeting."

The Spirit and Rule of the Society call for our funds to be used to assist the poor. There is no support for maintaining large bank accounts. The Society trusts in the often experienced protection of Providence. It does not hoard money; it gives according to its means.

Part 5: Other Considerations



ANNUAL REVIEW

There are a number of things that must occur at the beginning of the fiscal year. The standard fiscal year for SVdP is October 1 through September 30. So, the things identified here should occur within the first two months of each fiscal year. This is a time of reviewing, evaluating and reporting. Many of these topics have been mentioned elsewhere in this document, so consider most of this chapter as a reminder.

SOLIDARITY CONTRIBUTION

The solidarity contribution is mentioned first, not because of importance, but because it is generally due on the first day of October. According to the Rule and Bylaws of the Society, the National Council can assess a solidarity contribution to be made by Councils and Conferences for the support of the National Council, its facilities, staff and works. This solidarity formula will not be described here since it can be changed at any time by resolution of the National Council. All Councils and Conferences are expected to make their appropriate contribution to the National Council.

Also, District and Diocesan Councils are permitted to assess a solidarity contribution that each expects from its subsidiaries. Although this would also be due on October 1st, this date can vary from Council to Council. The actual assessment formula can vary as well.

ANNUAL REPORT

The Conference Annual Report is due by November 30 each year. That gives each Conference two months after the close of the fiscal year to complete the annual reporting task and submit the report to the District Council. Where no District Council exists, the Isolated Conference is to submit its report directly to the National Council office.

The Conference Annual Report form may vary from one year to another depending on the data gathering requirements of the National Council. The form is sent out prior to the end of the fiscal year and contains complete instructions on how the data should be entered.

Data for the Conference Annual Report may be entered on a paper form and mailed to the appropriate Council or it may be entered online through the National Council Database at www.svdpmembers.com. Complete instructions are also presented for online entry. Whether on paper or online, the due date is the same.

ANNUAL REVIEW WITH PASTOR/PARISH

After the Conference Annual Report is prepared by the Conference President, Secretary and Treasurer, it is to be shared with all of the members of the Conference. The President, Secretary and Treasurer should be prepared to answer any questions that the members have regarding the report.

After the Conference Annual Report has been reviewed and approved by your District Council President, a summary of the annual report should then be prepared and submitted to the pastor for his review. The review and approval by the District Council President is necessary to ensure the numbers are correct before sharing them with the pastor or parish. Emphasis here is on the word “summary.” The summary should also be presented to the parish council as well as to the parishioners through the parish bulletin.

Although this should be scheduled more often, it is expected that the Conference President will meet with the pastor and review all of the work that the Conference has accomplished though the year. This should not only cover what has been done but what the Conference has planned for the upcoming year.

IRS FORM 990

The IRS requires all nonprofits to submit a form 990 describing their financials and works at the end of their fiscal year. IRS gives our Councils and Conferences until

February 15 of the following year to submit this report. However, not all Conferences are required to submit this report.

Only those Conferences that have their own EIN are required to submit this report. For all Conferences that have been allowed to use their Council's EIN, the Council (District or Diocesan) will submit a consolidated 990 to IRS which includes the Conference information.

GUIDELINES

The Conference guidelines for service should be reviewed each year during October and/or November to ensure that the guidelines reflect the current conditions. It is at this time that changes in the guidelines should be considered. However, the guidelines are the work of the Conference members and the members may change the guidelines at any point in time. There is nothing magic about this time of year. A regular review is good practice.

AUDIT

This is the time of year that it is recommended that all Conferences have an annual audit. For Conferences, this is an informal audit and may be done by two or three members of the Conference, but not by those responsible for accounting or disbursing funds. The purpose of the audit is not to find fault. Its purpose is to assure the members of the Conference that all proper procedures are being followed and all of the funds of the Conference have been reconciled on a regular basis. It is recommended that an audit take place when a new President takes office.

On the National Council website, under Governance-in-a-Box, Additional Resources, you will find the Conference Audit Manual and Conference Audit worksheets. This is the primary method for doing a Conference audit. The National Council website also has a sample audit procedure under Best Practices. There is another recommended audit procedure in the Treasurer's Handbook.

RECORD KEEPING

In the Manual of the Society, there is a list of all of the various types of documents and records that the Conferences typically deal with. Some are kept permanently. Some are kept for seven years and then destroyed. Some are kept for three years and then destroyed. Some are kept for one year.

The beginning of the fiscal year is the time for the Secretary and Treasurer to review their records and do what is appropriate with each type of document.

SUMMARY

The beginning of the fiscal year is a time to ensure that everything related to last year has been properly reviewed and reported. It is also time for records to be properly stored. This is a time when the Conference members should have every assurance that they are moving into the new fiscal year in good form.

COMMUNICATIONS

Successful recruiting of new members is easier when an organization has a positive image from using good communications. Successful fund-raising results when good communication techniques are applied in telling the story of existing needs that are met by the organization. Successful refocusing of the lives of those we serve can occur when information, opportunities and encouragement are communicated in a sensitive and useful way.

"Poor communications" usually ranks near the top in any appraisal of why something failed -- be it a business, a church or a marriage. So let's dedicate ourselves to having good communications. This is not really hard to do, unless you try to do it alone. Get each of your Conference members to work on it, and it's easy!

THE PRINCIPLES OF COMMUNICATION

Communications is like a chair with four legs. You must have all four or it will fail to perform its function and fall over. And if each leg of the chair does not get the same attention (if all the legs are not the same length), you may not fall over, but the wobble will distract and keep you from your goal (building the membership of your Conference, for example).

There are four elements (legs) of a good communications program (your chair): Simplicity, Persistency, Diversity and Visibility.

A. SIMPLICITY

If your message is important and you desire understanding without confusion, then "keep it short and simple" (KISS). The billboard industry knows to limit its messages to no more than seven words (four is the ideal, if you can do it). Research has shown that most people will listen to, understand and remember

three points in a message, no more. For those of us in SVdP, serving the poor, our message is important and can be expressed simply:

1. There are lots of people in need in our community. Every community has individuals and families who are unemployed, under-employed, ill, poor, shut-in, afraid or abused. Even "wealthy" communities have poor: the emotionally poor in spirit -- lonely, withdrawn, bereaved or anxious. You must find these people if you are to serve them.
2. We are doing lots of good things. Most people have no idea how your Conference helps. When informed, they approve and are supportive. You must not be afraid to talk about the many and varied good works of the Society and your Conference.
3. We could use lots more help. People want to be needed. Their time is valuable and they do not want it wasted. And they are more likely to volunteer to help if they can be a part of a vibrant organization that is doing good works in their own community but acknowledges it needs more help to continue.

B. PERSISTENCY

Subway (or Macys or Ford) doesn't run one commercial a year, or a month, or a week, or even a day. The average person requires up to 16 exposures to a message before there is both real mental awareness, understanding, retention and a commitment to some action -- buy a burger, an appliance or a car.

After all, communication is successful only when it produces a desired action -- when someone volunteers or contributes or makes the commitment to change their life. However, action must be preceded by three other stages: awareness, understanding and empathy (a sense of duty). Progressing through each stage takes work, time and patience. You must master one before going on to the next.

There is no "magic brochure" that will so attract and motivate people that they'll sign up in droves. Communication is a long, slow, process which must be undertaken patiently. You will see results over time -- usually measured in months and years, not days and weeks. But every trip starts with a single step.

C. DIVERSITY

People join an organization because it offers them the opportunity to do things that warm their hearts and enrich their souls.

If your Conference is perceived as an organization that only distributes food, it will only attract people who are interested in distributing food. If its ministry is a broad-based one, serving many different guests with many different needs -- hungry, ill, ragged, lonely, abused, homeless, etc. -- it will attract people interested in each of those situations.

Your programming must provide for and your communications must focus on the diversity of the work of the Society and your Conference.

D. VISIBILITY

The best message in the world is useless if you don't get it out or if those who hear can't understand. *The communicator has the obligation to ensure that understanding results ... NOT the listener.* This is perhaps the hardest rule for a communicator to understand and accept.

Not everyone reads the church bulletin, so you must also use the parish website and social media, bulletin boards and newsletters and fliers in the pews. Not everyone likes to read, so you may also have to make a verbal presentation at the end of Mass, to other parish ministries, and at tables set up outside the church. Not even everyone can read, so you may have to use movies, photographs and the example of others actually doing the work.

In some communities, this also means you must recognize the need for bilingual written and spoken communications wherever possible, and for an understanding of the culture of the people with whom you are trying to communicate. In some communities, this may require communications in several languages.

ARRAY OF TOOLS

You have many opportunities to tell your story and many media to utilize. You should take advantage of as many of them as possible.

A. PRINTED MATERIAL

- ◆ Church bulletins. First, ask your pastor to include "St. Vincent de Paul" among the list of parish functions and ministries printed on the cover of the church bulletin (are you part of your parish?). This increases the visibility of the Conference with parishioners, with the poor whom you want to serve, and with potential contributors.

An example can best explain one result of this.

A woman traveled from out of state to a local church for the purpose of fulfilling her grandmother's wishes regarding the distribution of her estate after her death. She brought with her a check for \$35,000 which her grandmother wanted the parish to use for scholarships for local youngsters. Her grandmother had visited the community years before and remembered the poverty she had seen there.

While talking with the parish secretary about her grandmother's wishes, she noticed the parish bulletin which listed St. Vincent de Paul. *"Does the parish have a St. Vincent de Paul Society,"* she asked. *"Yes,"* said the parish secretary. *"Well, grandmother would certainly want to help them too,"* she said, taking out her checkbook and writing out a check on the spot for \$15,000 to the parish Conference!

Edison once said that genius was *"ninety-nine percent perspiration and one percent inspiration."* That Conference undoubtedly would attribute ninety-nine percent of their good fortune to the Holy Spirit and only one percent to their communication skills. But remember another axiom: *the Lord helps those who help themselves.*

- ◆ A weekly news item inside your church bulletin should be your goal. In the crowded bulletin of a busy parish, you may have to settle for occasional news

items -- but try for at least one item every three weeks. Use the SVdP logo whenever possible (it promotes the visibility of the Society), putting it by the news item. Learn the deadlines to submit your material to the parish secretary and length rules, and faithfully observe them. Style, grammar and punctuation are less important than the simple facts, presented briefly. Avoid using the identical message several times in succession. Try to approach the same subject matter with different words each time.

The National Council provides bulletin announcements that can be used every week during the year. These are located on the National Council website (www.svdpusa.org).

- ◆ Fliers inserted into the church bulletin are an excellent communications tool. Yet some Vincentians reported a "problem" with this communications method in their parish. It seems they were printing and dropping off their fliers, expecting someone else (usually parish staff) to insert them. When you ask your pastor for permission to include a flier in the church bulletin, assure him that Vincentians will stuff it. Then honor that commitment.
- ◆ Reports to the Parish. Provide your parish with a summary of your Conference activity and works at least semi-annually. Look at the type of information in your annual report to the Society as a guide. Some Conferences meet it by providing a report to the pastor and parish council, but there is much to be gained by giving it out to the entire parish. Provide the number of calls for help received, number of families helped, and hours spent in service to those in need, amount of money received from donations and amount spent. Consider using a flier (one page report) as the vehicle for your annual report.

Of course, thank parishioners for their support (monthly financial and supply donations) and perhaps set out your goals for the coming year. The more parishioners know about the work the Conference does, the more they will support those efforts with their time and money.

Experience has shown that Conferences that issue this type of bulletin announcement (after not reporting regularly in prior years) notice a marked increase in both new members and financial contributions. Besides, it is simply a good stewardship practice.

The best time for your annual report is shortly after you complete your fiscal year (Sept 30).

- ◆ Brochures. Place brochures and pamphlets around the church explaining what the Society is, what your Conference does, and what kind of help you need. These can be ordered from National for a nominal fee. Put copies of the free National Vehicle Donation Program brochures in the church lobby.

- ◆ Bulletin boards. 11" x 17" posters and notices about upcoming events should be placed on all church bulletin boards. Keep the information current and change the material constantly. After about four weeks, if it hasn't been read, it won't be. Laminate an index card with the SVdP logo and phone number. Staple it permanently in the lower corner of every bulletin board.

Ask if you can put up a full display on the bulletin boards a couple times a year. Include 8x10 photos of Vincentians at work: packing food boxes, conducting the annual food drive, attending a day of reflection, volunteering at the food reclamation center or a thrift store, visiting a home visit family (get their written permission before you take pictures in their home).

- ◆ THANK YOUs. Send these out at every possible opportunity to anyone who helps the Conference. You can never say “*thank you*” too often. At the end of each year, one big “thank you” to the entire parish should be a ‘must’ -- and will reap the Conference dividends the next year.
- ◆ Newsletters. (Combines communications with fund-raising!) Half of all American families now have computers and the group acquiring them fastest today is retirees. Many people fancy themselves as writers. Cheap and simple software programs are available to help put together a newsletter. Find a member or two who are willing to do this. Start with an issue quarterly then work to six issues a year. Mail (or email it at lower cost) to your Active Members, Associate Members, regular donors, community and parish leaders, clergy, etc.
- ◆ Electronic Material: Remember electronic media. Increasingly, people think organizations don't exist in real life if they don't exist online. Many parishes have websites that list ministries and organizations. The parish may have an email newsletter. When submitting items for your church bulletin, send the material also for inclusion in the parish website or online newsletter.

Your city or township may have a website or email newsletter. Local television and radio stations and newspapers usually have online community calendars. These can be good places to promote your upcoming meetings and events. It is free to list events and it takes only a few minutes.

If your Conference doesn't have a website, consider a Facebook or Twitter page. This can be a good way to reach out to the world. The National Council (www.svdpusa.org) has "how-to" documents for creating a Facebook or Twitter page for your Conference on the Members page under Council/Conference documents for Extension/Revitalization.

It can be helpful to prepare an electronic one-page summary/overview of your Conference's work and contact information to quickly and easily send to prospective members or supporters.

B. PERSON-TO-PERSON ACTIVITIES

- ◆ Schedule Conference meetings on different days and at different hours to ensure that everyone, regardless of their work schedule, has an opportunity to attend Conference functions (for example, one meeting on a Wednesday evening, Saturday morning, or another on a Sunday after Mass).
- ◆ Mail the agenda of upcoming meetings to members who have been missing meetings. It's a good reminder. To encourage better attendance, publish an annual calendar showing all meeting and other activity dates so people can plan in advance to attend and participate.
- ◆ Mail the minutes after the meeting to members who did not attend. For those who missed the meeting, that's also a good reminder not to miss the next one.
- ◆ Parish Ministry Fairs. Almost every parish has one, so don't pass on this opportunity to tell your story. Print simple sign-up forms (get new folks to sign up and come to a meeting; worry about getting detailed personal data later). Also print a short list of the work your Conference does and where it needs help.

- ◆ Parish Festival (are you a part of your parish?). Take part in the festival as a Conference. Distribute information on the work of the Society and your Conference. Provide sign-up forms.
- ◆ Personal Talks. This gives you the opportunity to recruit by letting the workers in other parish ministries understand what the Conference really does. Talk to the Sodality, Knights of Columbus, peace and justice council, Catholic Daughters of America, Right-to-Life Committee, etc. Cooperate with these groups on joint projects -- distributing Rosaries, scheduling people for Exposition of the Blessed Sacrament, helping build a Habitat for Humanity home.

You don't have to be a great speaker. Just tell them what you and your fellow Vincentians do. How many parishioners want to answer Christ's call to serve the poor, but have never been asked? They may be embarrassed to come forward or maybe they just don't know where to go to become involved. You can be their gateway to the Society.

- ◆ Recruit, recruit, recruit! The strength of a Conference is in its members, so it must constantly be recruiting new members. Recruitment can usually be accomplished in four ways:
 - 1) *An Invitation to Serve* -- This is a very successful program first introduced in Phoenix in the 1990's and supported by the bishop and most pastors. After many successful recruitment campaigns, it was promoted and distributed as a nationwide program through the National Council.
 - 2) *Word of mouth* -- friend asking friend
 - 3) *Written material* -- passing out brochures, mailing newsletters
 - 4) *Presentations* to groups of non-members

Ask people to join: If you don't ask, you can't get. The best recruiting is done by people who are currently active and enthusiastic. They give the best testimony of the benefits they receive from serving the poor.

Ask people again and again. Many will eventually join. Some may simply change their mind. Others' lives and interests may change and they are finally 'ready.' A few may just be impressed by your sincerity and persistence.

- ◆ Address the Congregation. Many Conference presidents have been addressing the congregation at the end of all Masses once a year with their pastor's permission. *An Invitation To Serve* utilizes this arrangement and your bishop may be an active supporter of this approach. It gets your message to those who won't read what you print and distribute, and satisfies those who want to "put a face" on an organization.
- ◆ Use sign-up tables on special Sundays, placed outside the church doors. Have literature, photographs, newsletters, sign-up forms, and a card preprinted with the day, time and place of your next two meetings. Good days for this technique include ...
 - ... the Sunday with the 'Widow's Mite' gospel
 - ... the last Sunday in April (Ozanam Sunday) -- Blessed Frederic Ozanam's birthday and the anniversary of the founding of the Society is April 23
 - ... the Sunday closest to Sept. 9 -- Blessed Frederic Ozanam's feast day
 - ... the Sunday closest to Sept. 27 -- St. Vincent de Paul's feast day
- ◆ Have a special Mass to celebrate these feast days. If there are Conferences in neighboring parishes, consider joining together for the Mass. Schedule it at a time convenient for Father, and follow the Mass with coffee and refreshments or a simple pot luck supper afterwards. Invite all the clergy from the parishes involved to join the Conferences members for a short time afterwards.

C. COMMUNICATING THROUGH ATTITUDE

(Making people feel welcome)

We have all heard that "actions speak louder than words." Truer words were never said. If you want your Conference to grow, your actions must match your words.

- ◆ Be a totally open organization. Exclude no one. Invite everyone. There are no closed meetings. There are no subcommittees that make all the decisions; however, only Active Members participate in the decision-making. We are totally democratic.
- ◆ Tell the parish what you want. The parish must know that you want new members. Say it verbally and in posters, fliers, newsletters and brochures. Too many groups (including church groups) are viewed as cliques or closed societies.
- ◆ Publicize your meetings well in advance. People live busy lives and have full calendars. Then provide last-minute reminder calls.
- ◆ Make it easy to join. Don't make it complex -- no applications, no forms -- just a willingness to serve.
- ◆ Make people feel welcome at any meeting. When someone new shows up, welcome the person. Introduce all new people at each meeting, and continue to introduce them for two or three meetings thereafter.

D. FOCUS YOUR COMMUNICATIONS

(Protecting the future of your Conference)

Often your communications will focus on a specific target audience. You must modify your language, tactics and even media to appeal to different groups. One example is communicating with youth groups.

- ◆ The Society has no future if you do not bring in young people. Problem Conferences are usually those which have made no effort to bring in new members. Old members resist change. They don't trust the judgment of newcomers, claiming they have no experience. Yet without a continuing flow of new blood, a Conference will become stagnant and die (or become ineffective).
- ◆ Expand your efforts through contacts with:
 - * Boy and Girl Scouts and similar youth organizations. Talk with their adult leaders about talking to the troops and packs. Devise activities where young people can be involved and make a contribution. One Conference

even offers the St. Vincent Youth Service medal, borrowed from the New Orleans Diocesan Council.

- * Teen, college, young adult, and RCIA groups in the parish. Again, talk to the heads of these parish ministries. Talk to the groups separately, adjusting your talk to the interests, resources and age of each group.

- * Teachers, nurses and counselors at your parish grammar school and regional Catholic high school. Ask to visit the classroom to give a 15-minute talk about St. Vincent or Blessed Frederic. Get the kids to take on a project, designing posters and fliers in their own graphics showing how Jesus expects us to treat the poor. Publicize the best in each age group. When the project is over, write thank you letters to the kids (not the teacher) in their own language. Consider, for example, sending first graders a letter from a poor child written with crayon.

E. ADAPT TO CHANGING CIRCUMSTANCES

- ◆ Prospects for membership are always changing. People die or move out of your parish while others move in; kids grow up and become adult members of the parish; parents finally get their kids out of the house or retire and now have time to volunteer; after a period of grieving, widows and widowers have time on their hands, a need for social interaction, and a desire to contribute and be involved.

This requires constant repetition of your message, often to people you might feel have heard it before. But at earlier times in their lives, their minds weren't receptive and they failed to hear. For many, it's a new message: working in the Conference provides an outlet for one's energy, stability in one's life, new friendships, and involvement with people who share their values and faith.

- ◆ Recognize that lifestyles have changed. You can no longer expect to find members who fit the membership mold of 50 years ago. People's lives and jobs have changed, their time and family is more fragmented. You must accept what people can contribute, even if it is less than what the Conference

used to request or expect. There are no longer any "minimums" attached to membership.

If you want young mothers as members, you must accept less from them (in terms of time commitments) than from the retired individuals the Society traditionally recruited. Many people can't give you two hours a week; they are lucky to give you two hours a month.

- ◆ Don't give up on former members. Send out a "come home" letter to every past member. You don't know why they left, what or who offended them, what has changed in their lives. Now may be the moment when they are ready to come back. They may be just waiting to be asked.

F. UNDERSTAND EFFICACY

(Accomplishing your objective)

Efficacy is neither efficiency nor economy. Efficacy is attaining a desired result. Money is only a minor consideration in our ministry. You want people to do what's right, not what's the most economic or efficient. People are happier when they can 'feel' the result of their work -- relate to the poor and their condition. Then you are more likely to accomplish your objective -- gaining and keeping new members.

A mother who spends \$3.79 to buy and donate a 32-oz. jar of peanut butter knows kids like peanut butter. She knows it's a healthy, high-protein food. She knows that jar will make 17 sandwiches for hungry kids. She can now relate to how the mother of several poor children will feel when she receives it -- even though she will never meet that poor mother or see her children. Even though you may be able to get a whole case of peanut butter from a food bank for just \$3.50, don't even think about asking her to give you the \$3.79 instead. It would take the joy out of her gift. It would "de-personalize" her act. It would steal away her connection with that poor mother. Her gift of peanut butter enables her to "identify" with the needs of another woman. *That's efficacy.*

Substituting the writing of a check for the personal service shown above would be efficient, cold, and impersonal. The Society leans toward efficacious service.

BE TOLERANT AND UNDERSTANDING

Our church, our Society and undoubtedly our own Conferences are full of liberals, conservatives, radicals and Neanderthals. If we are to successfully work together to serve the poor, we must focus on what unites us rather than on what divides us.

You don't have to change your party registration to join the Society, and no one can make you vote for someone or something you disagree with. You probably already have friends you disagree with on major topics, yet you go out to eat or drink together.

Love, respect and tolerate each other. Rejoice in the fact that, despite our seeming differences, we are united in service to the poor.

Despite our own personal preferences, we must acknowledge that we never know what act or prayer or touch or liturgy helps turn a soul back to God. Bishop Fulton Sheen said there is a light bulb in every human being, waiting for the moment when Christ provides the energy, however small at first, to light the filament.

Do the work of the Society. Help light those filaments.

HELPING OTHERS SERVE THE POOR

When someone considers reaching out to help the poor and calls the parish office for a contact person or organization, the name given is usually someone involved in the St Vincent de Paul Conference. Why? It is because they are active, visible and available. They are the ones to contact who will channel the desire to serve or volunteer in the right direction. For it is by our visibility within the parish community, not our anonymity, that we help others come to serve the poor.

AT THE CONFERENCE LEVEL

BEING ACTIVE

Active Members of the Society are actively involved in the works of the Conference, and at least knowledgeable if not involved in the work of the District and Diocesan Councils. We've all heard the phrase, *"If you want something done, ask a busy person."* That busy person may not be able to help, but he or she usually will know where to send someone to get help.

BEING VISIBLE

Each of us, regardless of the talents God has given us, can be a leader. We lead by example. Even the most introverted among us can lead by doing -- doing the Conference food and clothing drives, bundle Sundays, Christmas programs and all the other activities that the parish Conference is involved with.

Through the parish bulletin, you let your fellow parishioners know what you are doing and how you are serving the poor. This gives others ideas on how they can help. Monthly news items in the parish bulletin about Conference activities are recommended. Monthly news items, consistently appearing over several years, begin to make a lasting impression.

Give the people in your parish a name (a person to contact) or a telephone number (office or Conference number - not a member's personal number) and repeat that often. If you have a good thing going (and we do), tell the world. People like to join an organization that is active, with lots of things happening.

You also need to make known the needs of the Society as well as the Conference, along with the opportunity to help the poor. We have a message of hope for the poor. We also have a way to help, for those who aren't poor.

BEING AVAILABLE

To be available is to make a great gift -- the gift of your time. The work of the Society is, according to the Rule, subordinate to your commitments within your family and job. So your "available" time comes out of your recreation or "fun" time, and that's the sacrifice.

Many Conference members are available to the poor but aren't willing to talk about what they do for others. Some of us aren't instinctively saleswomen and salesmen, but we must all become communicators. There are people in the parish and outside world who want to know the what, why, where and how of what we do. We need to tell them. Everything we do requires volunteers to make it work and enthusiasm to make it happen. Once others hear about these things, they too can be a part of it.

AT THE UPPER COUNCIL LEVEL

The work of the Society often meshes with the objectives of other groups, even commercial organizations. Mutually-beneficial activities can be scheduled that serve the needs of these groups and the poor at the same time. Even activities which appear self-serving (e.g., the professional athlete showing up to serve in a charity dining room) can have many beneficial effects. The poor can thrill to see the star, and the athlete can have his heart touched by what he sees and begin to take a deeper interest in the poor and the work of the Society.

Other community groups, such as those dealing with domestic violence, can find their efforts flower when they join with the Society to serve those who are

suffering. In a synergistic effect, Vincentians are able to do their work better and more productively while the other groups can extend their assistance into more troubled homes.

Contacts with CEO's or large business interests are probably out of the reach of the average Conference. However, if that CEO or business executive is a member of your parish community or a personal friend, who knows what can be achieved?

Who knows what initial contact got Eddie Basha (owner of a food store chain), Bill Keane (popular cartoonist), Joe Garagiola (baseball player and commentator) or Mohammed Ali (champion boxer) involved with the Society? Perhaps it was a simple Vincentian, enthusiastically talking about our work with someone they knew only as a friend or neighbor.

Leadership by example. Active. Visible. Available. You can do all four.

RETAINING YOUR MEMBERS

We have noted several times in this Manual that progress takes time and patience. Gaining new members, increasing contributions, attaining spiritual maturity, and developing a network of relationships happen only slowly, over time. Once you have made that commitment in effort and prayer, would it not be a shame to lose what you worked so hard to build?

You retain people by helping them do things that warm their hearts and enrich their souls. Then they will make the personal commitment to continue.

An important point to remember is that a happy, dedicated member is one who knows what is expected and also knows how and why what he/she does is important to the Society and those in need. The heart of retention is the long range feeling that the Society and its works are individually fulfilling.

NEW MEMBERS

Gaining a new member is like finding a diamond in the slag at the Kimberly mines. You have no idea of its real value until you chip away the exterior to reveal its inner composition (get to know her/him), and spend time polishing its surface (provide training, motivation and direction). A hesitant retired accountant could become your most dynamic home visit team member, engaging even the most cynical of guests in fervent prayer. A quiet young parishioner may have the potential to be your successor as Conference president.

How do you retain these diamonds in the rough?

1. **Assign them a mentor.** Assign them someone who will work with them for a while -- at least four to six months. Preferably an experienced Vincentian of the same sex. To be considered for the role of mentor, a member should be well experienced in the Society (it would be wrong here to define a number of

years of experience), have participated in sufficient number of home visits to have experienced a wide variety of circumstances, and has attended the Ozanam Orientation.

2. **Assign them something to do right away**, even if it appears trivial, like organizing the shelves in your pantry. Explain how it is important to your overall work (you must meet the health code or risk the loss of your pantry) and that you will be moving them to other, more important work soon.
3. **Assign them a meaningful responsibility quickly**. Don't break your promise from the above item. Give them something important to do, preferably home visits with an experienced Vincentian.
4. **Provide them with training** (local) as soon as possible for specialized positions (answering the phone, packing food boxes, picking up bread). Team them up with an experienced Vincentian for home visits or food delivery. People learn best from observing others.
5. **Get them into Ozanam Orientation training** within 3 months. Never send them alone; send them with someone they know. Anxiety and confusion runs high among new members; having a friend with you helps clear away those bottlenecks to participation and development.
6. **Help them feel they are members of a big family**. Invite, but don't force, them to interesting District Council and/or Diocesan Council meetings. Offer to pick them up and drive them to the first couple functions; encourage the creation of car pools to take groups of members to functions. Mix new members with old-timers whenever possible. It gives confidence to the newcomers and new vitality to older Vincentians.
7. **Don't exclude non-Catholics**. We are an organization which is "*Catholic in character*." Anyone who shares the objectives of the Society is eligible to join. A real measure of your effectiveness is when non-Catholics join, perceiving that SVdP is not only an effective organization serving the poor, but a means of living out the tenants of their Christian (or monotheistic) faith. Recent Popes have all stressed our obligation to practice ecumenism; let's not drop the ball in the field.

Next, consider the suggestions, below, for existing members.

EXISTING MEMBERS

Yes, new members are essential for growth, vitality and the future. But existing members are your backbone, source of experience, the people who will guide and mentor the newcomers. They need your attention too.

- ◆ **Keep your members busy.** More members drop out because they don't think they're needed than because they're overworked. Keep them busy. Get them involved in the whole picture. Let them know what's going on, locally, at the District Council/Diocesan Council level, even nationally. Get someone to handle the "telephone tree" and make sure everyone gets a call when help is needed. Even if someone says "sorry" again and again, don't give up on getting them involved - keep calling.
- ◆ **Form committees** and ask everyone to serve on at least one and, hopefully, two. Good ones are:
 - *Information and Referral* -- Keep the material in your Information and Referral Manual (*Sources of Assistance*) complete and up-to-date.
 - *Food Procurement* -- Track what food is available at food bank and at alternate food sources; how and when your monthly allotment and other food supplies will be picked up, unloaded, and shelved.
 - *Food Processing* -- Arrange for vouchers for milk, bread, fresh fruits and produce; repackage laundry detergent, and odd items the Conference receives in bulk.
 - *Furniture Registry* -- Establish and maintain a list of donated, used furniture available from parishioners for guests when needed. Try to arrange for temporary storage. Match up with requests from guests.
 - *Food Pantry* -- Keep the pantry clean and the shelves stocked. Some Conferences pre-pack food boxes by size of family.
 - *Social events* -- Arrange pot luck dinners, outings, parties, etc., for all members spaced throughout the year.

- *Spirituality* -- Make a calendar for the year with plans for the religious days related to our Society. Coordinate activities with neighboring Conferences.
 - *Communications* -- make sure the parish bulletin has an item about SVdP every week, or the bulletin board has a display, or the newsletter is properly prepared for bulk-rate mailing.
 - *Correspondence* -- handle the correspondence of the Conference, communicating with other parish groups, sending get well and condolence cards, thank you notes to contributors, etc.
 - *Projects or Events committees*: Back to School, Postal Food Drive, Roses for Life, Boy Scout Food Drive, Christmas Gift and Food Basket, etc.
- ◆ **Encourage continuing education.** A person never stops learning. The Diocesan Council can provide you with many ideas and resources for spiritual growth and Vincentian development for your members. Included are:
- * The Ozanam Orientation provides basic orientation and essential background and is obligatory for new members and those serving as officers. This one day workshop includes SVdP history, spirituality, philosophy, organization, activities, home visits, etc. Even experienced members have found this program very beneficial.
 - * Serving in Hope has seven modules with multiple lessons in each. Modules include: Our Vincentian Vocation, Our Vincentian Spirituality, Our Vincentian Heritage, Our Vincentian Mission, Our Vincentian Rule, Our Vincentian Conference and the Home Visit. Each lesson contains study, reflection, and small group discussion. The formation guides and videos can be ordered from the National Council office.
 - * Voice of the Poor. This educational guide on advocacy is available through the National Council office.
 - * Diversity. “A Vincentian Guide to Diversity/Multicultural Issues” is available through the National Council office.
 - * Attend Home Visit Training, Spiritual Advisor Training

* Attend Retreats, Region Meetings

Be cautious about discouraging members from moving away from being actively involved. People's lives change, sometimes often and at inconvenient times. Women get pregnant and have babies and their lives take difficult turns. Adults find a parent has Alzheimer's or a child has ALS. Members who are actively involved who must 'withdraw' or 'take time off' should never be made to feel 'guilty' about the change.

Vincentians who leave active service on a positive note are more likely to return when their lives change again and/or to continue to help out in other ways (financially, volunteering for special projects, etc.).

Build the role of Associate Membership. Continued participation of the Vincentian, in any role, is the key to eventually getting the person back into an active role.

- ◆ **Involve your regular donors.** Regular donors are equal partners in the Society. We are a union of willing hands (Active Members), caring hearts and helping hands (Associate Members) and generous almsgivers (regular donors). Each is separate but equal.

Many people are afraid to participate, afraid to meet the poor. They choose to discharge their responsibility to help the poor by writing you a check. While you may need their check to help the poor, your objective should be to tactfully get them involved in person-to-person contact with those in need. Let them find out it's not stressful when working with another, experienced parishioner. Help them find how it gives them a warm and fuzzy feeling.

Get them into home visits the easy way -- with the Back to School program, Thanksgiving or Christmas food box distributions that some Conferences put together.

Include regular donors in as many activities as you can, especially Masses on feast days of St. Vincent and Blessed Frederic, food and clothing drives, etc. Send all major communications and newsletters to them. This can sometimes convert them to Associate and then Active Full Membership.

- ◆ **Provide Recognition.** In the business workplace, when someone asks the question, “*what do you want from your boss in your job,*” the two top answers are always security and recognition.
 - * Recognize long-time members (at 5, 10, 15, 20, 25 year and other anniversaries), those who continue to be active past the age of 80, and all retiring members.
 - * Recognize your pastor, priests, deacons and nuns who provide help and support for your programs and/or your Conference. We sometimes forget who pays the electric bill for our pantry.
 - * Conduct a "graduation ceremony" when a member completes the Ozanam Orientation. Recognize them in front of the entire Conference at your next meeting.
 - * Use a star or other special character on your Conference membership list to indicate members who have completed the Ozanam Orientation.
 - * Prepare and publish a list of Conference officers over past years. List all Vincentians who made the Quarter Century Club.
 - * Put up a plaque in your pantry with the names of Vincentians who passed to their eternal reward while serving the poor. Add a new name plate each time a member dies, conducting a short prayer service.

- ◆ **Recognize the need for recovery and recuperation.** Occasionally a member may become dissatisfied or bored with their present assignment. Others may get tired (especially your oldest members), and a few may experience burn-out. Remember that a person's family and job come first according to the Society's own Rule.

Recognize these folks and thank them for the work they have accomplished, and show them how their involvement has helped the people the Conference served and our Society. Ask them for input on the manner in which you conduct your meetings and make assignments. They may have a different

perspective, and help you to improve Conference operations. After positively dealing with the situation they find themselves in, discuss other positions which may be more attractive to them.

Everyone in your Conference will get tired of the "same old thing," so keep trying new projects and changing (improving) old programs. The attitude, "*but we've always done it that way*" will only insure that your Conference remains a handful of old men and women, as you drive away new and younger people and burn out older ones.

A perception that an organization is dying is the number one reason why people leave or fail to join an organization. The vibrant Conference will keep existing members and attract new members.

- ◆ **Work on (and Pray over) Personality Conflicts.** Personality conflicts are inevitable in any group of humans. Yet, if these are not managed, they will cause you to lose at least one of the two protagonists. The President and Spiritual Advisor should try to help resolve any issues between the warring partners. It may be necessary to separate these people until, over time, they get to better know (and respect) each other in new ways. Change home visit teams, schedule the Hatfields in at times when the McCoys aren't there. Time heals all wounds; give it a chance. And pray that the Peace of Christ descends on both of them.
- ◆ **Equip your people to do their job.**
 - * **Information.** Your Conference does more than pass out food and money; you provide information which is often essential for the guest to get back on their feet. Your members must have that information to do their job.
 - * Publish a year's Calendar so Active Members, Associate Members and regular donors, as well as your clergy, Parish Council and other church ministries, know what the Conference is planning and when. This helps prevent conflicts, helps people reserve dates when you need their participation, and helps communicate the breadth of your Conference work.

* Adopt and communicate Conference Policies and Guidelines. Home visit teams especially must know what latitude they have when working with a family in trouble. Nothing is more frustrating than having the responsibility for a case without the authority required to act. Home visit teams should know one of three conditions exist when they visit:

1. that they cannot help a family financially with rent due to lack of funds, and must help in other ways -- referrals, information, counseling, extra food, etc.;
2. that they cannot help a family with rent without the approval of the Conference which meets sometime down the road;
3. that they can help a family with rent up to "X" dollars without further approval -- beyond that amount, Conference approval is required.

* Necessary referral forms and vouchers (for clothing, gasoline, groceries, furniture) should be available and members instructed on how to properly complete them. The Conference pays its bills faithfully and promptly so vouchers given to guests are honored by thrift stores and other vendors.

- ◆ **Recognize the value of Fellowship and Friendship.** Don't forget to schedule social events. The Society's second objective requires a friendship relationship among members. People are social beings, and personal relationships help cement one's commitment to the common work. Sometimes this can be combined with retraining (below).
- ◆ **Retraining.** Retraining should occur periodically. We all need to be reminded of basic job duties, of things that have become more important in recent years, and of how to handle new forms, procedures and program changes. Older members not kept up to date can feel "lost" and out of touch. Get all your folks together for refresher training at least every six months. A good way of handling this is to schedule a social activity and combine the two. A summer barbecue can involve socializing and eating, followed by a 90-minute refresher course, or vice versa.

- ◆ **Never Forget Spirituality.** People joined the Society of St. Vincent de Paul - not the American Cancer Society, or the United Way, or the Red Cross. What separates the Society from these very worthwhile organizations is the fact that we are a faith-based organization; we bring spiritual values to the people we serve.

Burn-out is common after a relatively short time in most other volunteer agencies because the members don't have a belief system to sustain them. We can always fall back on our faith. That is the reason we have members well into their 80's and even 90's who have been serving in the dining rooms, stores and other special works for more than 50 years.

Whether old or new, your members have a "thirst" for spirituality. They need to be reminded of the spiritual aspects of their work. If you only talk about the "numbers" -- boxes delivered, money raised, families visited, hours worked -- you will find members losing focus.

Even in the very best Conferences, teams experience discouraging cases. They "get taken" by fraudulent couples. And, after a series of thankless guests, greedy applicants, lazy individuals and indifferent bureaucrats, those without a spiritual foundation will be "lost" to despair and discouragement.

Our spirituality is our anchor. Keep it present at all times. First things first. Never become a Conference of just "numbers."

RECRUITING NEW MEMBERS

In the previous chapter, we focused on how to retain the members you have and how to help them to grow. Keep in mind that in order for the Conference to grow we need to be able to attract new members. New members have the ability to renew a Conference with fresh new ideas and experiences. History has shown that Conferences that do not engage or welcome new members become stagnant and often close down.

Imagine the benefits of gaining a new member is like finding a diamond in the slag at the Kimberly mines. You have no idea of its real value until you chip away the exterior to reveal its inner composition (get to know her/him), and spend time polishing its surface (provide training, motivation and direction).

In this chapter, we will focus on the techniques to use to bring new members into the Conference so that you can discover those hidden diamonds.

PERSONAL INVITATION

It has been proven; the best way to recruit new people for your organization is the personal invitation. Challenge every member of your Conference to invite one friend or family member to join the Conference. Your Conference would easily double in size. This is because people have a tendency to trust the recommendations of people close to them, people whose opinion they value.

If you have enjoyed being a Vincentian, then you have probably talked about it to family members and to friends. Spreading the word about something good can prove to be contagious. If being a member of the Society has truly had a positive impact on your life, then you want to share that with others.

Start by encouraging them to attend a meeting. Invite them to participate in some activity of the Society. Invite them to accompany you on a home visit to

observe how we serve those needing help. Exposure to who we are and what we do is one sure way to make someone want to know more. Of course, keep in mind that all you can do is invite them. It is the Holy Spirit that will move them to sign the dotted line.

INVITATION TO SERVE

After the personal invitation, the next best recruitment method available is the *Invitation to Serve*. The *Invitation to Serve* is a proven recruitment method that is used for starting new Conferences and recruiting new members for existing Conferences. This is touched on in the chapter titled “Getting Started.” This method provides an organized approach for recruitment and has a proven track record throughout the United States and has been used for more than 15 years.

There is no need to go into detail about this recruitment program here. All of the details are described in the program documentation which is available on the National Council website (www.svdpusa.org) under Council and Conference Documents. Suffice it to say that everything you need for a successful recruitment is spelled out in the program description. All you have to do is follow the step-by-step plan.

MINISTRY FAIRS

Another recruitment method that has been in use is the parish ministry fair. Essentially, the parish picks out a particular weekend on which they invite all of the parish ministries to have a display table with information about their particular ministry and invite parishioners to join. Members of each ministry provide brochures and other information and answer questions the people have about their ministry.

This can be an effective way to get people to join many ministries. It can also be overwhelming to people who are given too much to choose from. For an individual ministry, you are faced with people being offered too many choices, a lot of competition, and the possibility that you will be overlooked depending on your location. Realistically, more time is required and much smaller numbers result from this type of recruitment. However, it does give your organization visibility and an opportunity to talk about the good works of the Society.

DIVERSITY

In any recruitment effort, we must keep in mind the ethnic and cultural differences of the community in which we live. The membership in our Conference ideally should reflect ethnic and cultural diversity. An example would be, if our community has a high populace of Hispanic/Latino people, that membership should be reflected within the Conference. The same holds true with Black Americans, Native Americans, and other ethnic or racial groups. Our Conference should be aware and exposed to the cultural competencies needed to service those in need regardless of ethnic, racial or cultural background.

Did you know the Society was founded by a group of college students? Young adults were at the very center of our existence and growth as an organization. Youth and young adults represent the future of the Society. It is imperative that we make every effort to attract and welcome young people into our Conference. This very important topic is discussed in more detail in another chapter on Youth and Young Adult Involvement.

BE WELCOMING

The biggest failure that occurs in any recruitment effort is when existing members do not welcome the new recruits. In this case, we are not referring to saying “hello” and shaking their hands. “Welcoming” means to allow them to participate in the life of the Conference.

“Welcoming” includes the following:

1. Allowing new members an opportunity to attend meetings on a regular basis. Sometimes our existing members are unwilling to accommodate changes to attract new members. For example, often times Conferences will hold their meetings during the day because the majority of the existing members are retired and daytime meetings are attractive and convenient. However, this does not allow people who work during the daytime hours the flexibility to attend the meetings. The existing members could adjust their meeting schedule to accommodate the new recruits as a sign of acceptance.

2. The same holds true with doing home visits. Sometimes our members again set all home visit schedules for daytime hours with no regard for its new member's availability.
3. Our existing members need to partner with the new recruits to make them feel welcome in addition to training them. Sometimes our members are so accustomed to a familiar partner they sidestep the opportunity to partner with new members.
4. This is also true with activities other than home visits. For example, certain members are used to doing a particular job, such as organizing and maintaining the food pantry. They feel ownership of that work and will not allow anyone else to help.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, one of the *fastest* ways to lose members is to not make them feel welcome.

SUMMARY

There are proven ways to bring new people into the Conference: personal invitation, *Invitation to Serve*, and ministry fairs. However, no effort will prove successful if you do not welcome the new recruits and get them active.

YOUTH AND YOUNG ADULT INVOLVEMENT

Much of the material in this chapter is excerpted from "Youth and Young Adults – A Foundation Document."

The Society of St. Vincent de Paul's emphasis on youth and young adults stems from its grassroots response to God's call of grace. It articulates the desire of Vincentians throughout the United States to engage in a process of formation, education and training of our young people to advance in holiness of life and to mentor our young members with the hope and skills to better serve those who are in need. The Christian education of young people was one of the original goals set forth in the first Rule of the Society established in 1835.

The Society categorizes youth as young people under the age of 19. Young adults are those ranging in age from 19 to 39.

VISION

The involvement of young people is an ongoing process that began with the beginning of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul with Frederic Ozanam and his friends. It is the responsibility of all people in the Society to collaborate and brainstorm with the young people who are the future of the Society. The younger generation has much to offer but they are in need of guidance and support from our senior members of the Society. The young members of the Society strive for the essential elements, personal holiness, service of the needy, and friendship - as all members do.

ADVANTAGES

A wide distribution of ages is the sign of a healthy organization, for a mixing of the young, middle-aged and older members produces the best of all worlds.

- Young members keep the Society fresh and vibrant.
- They see with new eyes and often look far ahead.
- The young members tend to be very enthusiastic, idealistic and often very up-to-date on the latest trends.
- They find adaptation relatively easy, they are spontaneous and multitask and are very connected to each other and the world through technology.
- The older members assume the responsibility of assisting them along their path of training, respecting their personal choices and their aspirations of Vincentian service. (Rule: Part 1, 3.7)

SIX MAJOR GROUPS OF YOUTH AND YOUNG ADULTS

1. ELEMENTARY SCHOOL
2. MIDDLE SCHOOLS
3. HIGH SCHOOLS
4. UNIVERSITIES/COLLEGES
5. YOUTH GROUPS
6. YOUNG ADULTS

STEPS WHEN ENGAGING YOUTH AND YOUNG ADULTS

1. Adult Leaders for the youth groups

The Adult Leaders (two recommended for groups with minors) who are working with the youth groups must comply with the Safe Environment Policy (including background check) of the (Arch) Diocese.

The adult leaders are people who enjoy working with youth and have some skills at doing so. They are encouraged to have some background of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul or at least willing to learn.

The adult leader will not only be a guide for the youth group Conference but at times will be the organizer, chauffeur and chaperone.

2. Education

It is important for our older Vincentians when interested in engaging young people into the Society to educate them about the Society. The Founders, Patrons, History and Mission are essential areas to begin.

The education of young people about the Society may begin in a classroom setting in a parish school, religious education class or as an invited guest at a high school or college.

Making use of technology and having resources that the young people can further their study of the Society are helpful tools.

The education may continue with the young people participating in projects with our older Vincentians as well as participating in formation opportunities as Ozanam Orientation, attending Regional and National or International meetings and days of prayer and reflection.

3. Publicity

Young people today are extremely connected not only in their local area but also world-wide through social networking and technology. It is important for Vincentians who are engaging the young people to make use of some of these means of connecting and communicating.

Showcasing the works of the Society is important to help others know what the Society is doing. This does not infringe on the “confidentiality” of the cases that the Conference members serve but helps to establish the Society’s identity to the public.

Highlighting in the parish bulletin or website the number of people served and the number of volunteer hours given by Conference members is one way that parishioners as well as young people know their donation of time

and money is being used properly. Having the knowledge that the Society is doing very good work allows others to participate through monetary donations as well as other parish-wide activities such as a food drive, etc.

Young people as well as others like to know what an organization is doing before they decide to participate themselves.

4. Invitation

A personal invitation is a great way to involve young people into any organization.

It is important to engage young people for the ideas and contribution they can make to the organization.

5. Change

Probably the most important step to engage young people is the willingness of the older Vincentians to change. This change may be an attitude change or in many cases it may be a willingness to change how things are done.

Giving the young people a chance and seeing that they are sincere about their desire to help those in need may be the first step to start a youth Conference or having the young people be a part of your Conference.

It is important to remember that, as with any new member of a Conference, the existing members must be welcoming and willing to let the new youth and/or young adult members become fully active with the works of the Conference. They are the future of the Society.

APOSTOLIC REFLECTION

Much of the contents of this chapter is drawn from the explanation of Apostolic Reflection as presented in the Spiritual Advisors Handbook, which can be acquired from the National Council office.

The term Apostolic Reflection is drawn from the apostles returning from a missionary trip, and reflecting with Jesus on what happened and what was the meaning of it. You might recall how Jesus would invite them on their return to “an out of the way place.” In Luke 10:17 they returned saying, “Master, even the demons are subject to us in your name.” Jesus replied, “Don’t rejoice so much in the fact that the demons are subject to you as that your names are inscribed in heaven.” He then praised God for revealing what was hidden to the merest children – us.

Apostolic Reflection is already part of our Conference meetings, especially when we share our stories of our encounters with those we serve. It is rooted in the method St. Vincent taught his followers. He would have them reflect on a situation, and then very simply share with the group their thoughts and feelings on it, asking “And what did you think, my Sister, my Brother?”

The challenge of Apostolic Reflection is to grow in holiness. We search together for God. It’s the Spiritual Advisor who creates the atmosphere of trust for sharing. At the same time, it is Apostolic Reflection that brings about an atmosphere of trust.

For St. Vincent, where do we find God? “God is here” in all the events of our lives, and especially in the persons and situations of the poor and vulnerable. That is what we are trying to identify in our Apostolic Reflection. Where is God in this

situation, this home visit, etc.? How would God act? What does God have to say to us about it?

We are called by our Rule to grow in holiness together. When we go on a home visit, or serve a person who is poor in our centers or stores, we are doing it in the name of the Society, not in our own name. The whole Conference shares in that visit. Therefore, it is the whole Conference that needs to reflect on where God was for them in that visit.

St. Vincent believed that for Vincentians, God is found first and foremost in the person who is poor. God's needs and wants are revealed to us in the needs and situations of persons in poverty. We take time in Apostolic Reflection to ponder what God is revealing to us in and through them.

We have three guiding principles from St. Vincent and St. Louise to keep our Apostolic Reflection on track:

1. The sacredness and uniqueness of each person
2. Deep affection for each member of the group
3. Sharing of apostolic and spiritual experiences with one another

They honored the sacredness of each person in the group and of those served, by the attention they gave to the words, silence and presence of each.

We honor our own unique experience first, then that of members of our Conference, and then that of the persons we serve.

Reflecting with one another brings us back to the essential element of the Society --Vincentian Friendship and Fellowship. In Apostolic Reflection we share our lives with one another in freedom, respect, attentive listening, and love.

Are our Conference meetings the sharing of our encounters with those we serve on a deeper level, or do we stop at recounting the dollars spent, the groceries given, or even judgmental criticisms?

Deep sharing is so absent in our lives today. It must be intentional. Apostolic Reflection for Vincentians is a free, deliberate, conscious willingness to share our

lives, our experiences, our spirituality, our relationship with God. We are then enriched with the great gift of diversity.

Apostolic Reflection prevents the individual and the group from getting in a rut by reflecting on the uniqueness of each encounter and its message to us. *God speaks to us! We listen!*

A way to measure if our Apostolic Reflection is fruitful is to ask whether our Conference members have achieved these four benchmarks.

- The God who called us together here is here. We've come together in God.
- God is present in each person and in the community.
- We set aside our timetables to be led and to abide in the eternal God.
- The journey is a shared one, like the Trinity.

It goes beyond presuming that my way is the best way, or feeling *your way* is more important than *my way*. Diversity becomes a blessing. The Spirit blesses us in dialogue, through the richness of our differences. Many unique parts make a unique whole – our Conference.

The elements of Apostolic Reflection are:

- 1) The Spiritual Advisor quiets the group to become aware of the God who is present in every situation.
- 2) One's experience might be a home visit or client, or something that struck them in the newspaper or TV (e.g. war, natural disaster, or oppression), etc. Describe the people involved.
- 3) What was your reaction? Come in touch with your own feelings. How did the people involved react? Why? How might they have felt?
- 4) Does any story of Scripture come to you spontaneously? Is there something St. Vincent or Blessed Frederic might have done or said?
- 5) What surprised you? What new way of thinking did you receive from the group? Is there any action that needs to be taken?

In Volume 4 of "Serving in Hope," Apostolic Reflection is used in reflecting on each of the seven themes of Catholic Social Teaching. The themes are such topics as the dignity of the human person, the rights of workers, an option for the poor

and vulnerable, etc. Blessed Fredric desired the virtues of charity and justice for the Society. In Volume 4, we learn to become more conscious of how our words, actions, judgments, attitudes and opinions regarding the situations we encounter in our day to day living reflect the social teaching of the Church. After your Conference gets some experience in Apostolic Reflection, we encourage the use of “Serving in Hope,” volume 4 as the next step.

Fr. Hugh O’Donnell, C.M. identified 3 models of Apostolic Reflection, but there are many more. They all need to contain the elements given below:

1) Common sharing concerning a common experience:

- We pause to remember that God is present in the event.
- Relate to the event based on common experiences.
- Each one shares their view of the experience and how they felt. How might those on the receiving end felt? Each one takes a turn around the circle without interruption, except for clarification. All listen.
- What were the common threads we heard?
- Does any Scripture passage or image come to mind? Any saying of St. Vincent or Blessed Frederic?
- What insights did we receive?
- What might God be calling us to now?

2) One shares, common reflection.

- Leader asks the group to pause to be aware of God’s presence in the situation to be shared.
- Ask for one volunteer to share an event or experience in the past 1-2 weeks (specifically an encounter with a client):
 - What was the speaker’s reaction and feelings?
 - What was the reaction of the persons receiving help?
 - How might they have felt?
- Now ask all to reflect on this case:
 - Do they need clarification?
 - What other feelings might the clients have had?
- Does a scriptural image or passage come to mind for anyone?
- Does a quote or image from Blessed Frederic or St. Vincent come to mind?
- What insights did we derive from this reflection?
- Is there any action we should take?

- Anyone may thank or intercede with God.

3) Personal sharing-corporate listening:

- In a group, each person is invited to share his or her story, his or her experience.
- Simple sharing means all we do is share it, without dialogue or comments, without critique.
- We welcome each person's story as it is experienced and shared.
- It is a non-judgmental, non-critical, and non-evaluative way of allowing people to speak out based on their own life experiences.
- It is permitted to ask a question for clarification.
- Consequently, everyone around the circle gets a chance to share her or his experience.
- This is followed by *corporate listening*. "What did we hear ourselves say?"
- It could be as simple as, we heard ourselves say it has been a difficult week, or we have heard ourselves say that our God is a God of surprises, or we heard ourselves say that our lives are far more touched by our patients, by our students, by others than we imagined.
- It is a way of knowing how God is present and active among us, how God is here."

Hopefully, Apostolic Reflection will become a way of life that will transform your Conference and the Society.

May God's blessings be on your Conference and on those whom you serve!

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