

**Society of
St. Vincent de Paul**



**Guide for
Conference
Presidents
&
Executive Members**

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I. Introduction

"The main role of a conference is to group together Christians who wish to pursue the Society's mission. A conference is a gathering of people similarly motivated to serve Christ by serving the poor. Working within the conference, members can nourish and renew their faith, and sustain each other through prayer so that each member will grow closer to God." (The Rule, 2.2.2)

The Rule describes, in greater detail, the purpose and operation of the conference. It then goes on to outline the responsibilities of the president (and other executive members) in some detail. This booklet will not reproduce what is in the Rule but, rather, will highlight a few points, provide a few tips, and point you toward sources of additional information and support.

a) So, you're the new president

Hopefully, you willingly and joyfully agreed to take on this important responsibility after a number of years of dedicated service as a Vincentian. If you find yourself in this role under other circumstances, don't panic – there's help available.

If you're feeling a little bit overwhelmed at the moment, it's probably because you're thinking about the range of tasks and responsibilities that have been placed gently in your lap. These include:

1. Practical concerns

- a. How to plan & run an appropriate, effective, interesting, enjoyable meeting;
- b. How to organize visitation schedules, file keeping, etc.;
- c. How to plan for events (Bundle Weekend, etc.);
- d. Reporting (monthly & annually) to the particular council or Central, as appropriate

2. Leadership issues

- a. How to keep your conference spiritual, active, focused, energized, and joyful;
- b. How to help ensure that your conference is appropriately & adequately serving the needs of those seeking assistance;
- c. How to help your members grow in their faith and ability to serve our neighbours in need;
- d. How to hold current members and recruit new members;
- e. How to appropriately delegate tasks & responsibilities to the other conference members;

- f. How to help develop the leadership potential of the other members and encourage them to take on leadership roles in the conference & Society.
- g. To achieve all of the above while serving humbly, faithfully & joyfully.

b) Feeling better? No?

Hopefully, by the end of this booklet you'll know that, with God's help, with the support and assistance of your fellow conference members, and with the support & guidance of your particular council and of Central Office, you will be an effective leader of your conference.

Before we begin, you need to familiarize yourself with what the Rule has to say about:

1. The purpose and operation of a conference; (2.2, p. 29 of 2007 edition)
2. The role and responsibilities of the conference president & executive members (see also the Appendix of this booklet);

Please come back to this booklet once you've read at least these sections thoroughly.

II. The Rule

The Rule is an amalgamation of the knowledge and wisdom and inspiration gained through over 175 years of service to neighbours in need. It is a source of inspiration, guidance, and information for Vincentians. It:

- helps us to better understand & appreciate our Vincentian vocation and spirituality; (especially Section 1 & 4a)
- addresses the full range of practical issues, from sample meeting agendas to election procedures to the structure and function of each level of the Society; (especially Section 2)
- describes, in detail, **your role and responsibilities**
- provides the necessary forms and ceremony scripts; (see Section 5)
- summarizes key aspects of our history; (see Section 5)
- addresses a number of practical issues, such as confidentiality, advocacy, screening, and disputes. (especially Section 3)

Every member should have a copy of the Rule, available through Central office. A revised edition was published in 2007. Please ensure your members have the updated edition.

III. Your Conference Executive

You will want a full, strong executive for at least two reasons.

1. There is a lot that should and can be done within a conference. If the tasks/responsibilities are spread among the executive and the rest of the conference members, the load on you and them will be reasonable and the work will get done effectively
2. The executive members will have the opportunity to develop their leadership and organizational skills, as well as their confidence. This greatly increases the likelihood that at least one of them will be willing and able to take over the presidency at the end of your one or two three-year terms.

Members are often reluctant to take on leadership roles. There may be various reasons for this.

1. They feel that other commitments (work, family) wouldn't allow them to do the job properly.
 - a. Suggestion: have two vice-presidents or divide the tasks of the secretary between two members, etc.)
2. They don't feel they have the experience and/or skills needed.
 - a. Suggestions:
 - i. Assure them that you or another member will mentor/coach them;
 - ii. Get them to commit to the role on a temporary/interim basis, with the assurance that they can step down if they find it too challenging;
 - iii. If they've been given other conference tasks/ responsibilities previously they are more likely to have sufficient confidence to take on this new responsibility.
3. They indicate that they joined the Society to serve, not to lead.
 - b. Suggestion: Remind them that taking on a leadership role is a very special way of serving our neighbours in need. Through their leadership or other responsible role they are helping to make the conference more spiritual, active, vibrant and focused, resulting in more effective service to neighbours in need.

See Section 2.2.7 of the Rule for the roles & responsibilities of executive members.

IV. What Type of Leader Will You Be?

a. Willing to seek help from every appropriate source?

The humble leader will seek information & assistance from:

- The past president (and other current or former executive members);
- The conference as a whole and individual experienced conference members;
- The particular council president (or PC executive members);
- Neighbouring conference presidents;
- Toronto Central Council President or Executive Director, or the Resource Coordinator;
- The conference or PC spiritual advisor or pastor.

b. Willing & able to delegate?

Appropriate and regular delegating of tasks & responsibilities accomplishes a few important objectives.

1. It helps ensure that a number of important tasks will be completed in an appropriate & timely manner;
2. It means that you, as president, will not be overworked needlessly and overwhelmed;
3. Perhaps most importantly, though, it means that the members are making important contributions to the well being and effectiveness of the conference and are developing the skills and confidence to take on leadership roles in the future.

By keeping all the work to yourself (for whatever reason, including that you hate to bother other people or because you feel only you can do it correctly), you are doing a disservice to those being served, to the individual members, to the conference, to the Society, and to yourself.

c. Providing opportunities for your members to grow in faith and ability to serve?

This commitment involves:

- Ensuring every meeting includes prayer and meaningful spiritual reflection
 - A booklet with sample readings/reflections, with guide discussion questions, has been developed to assist you. It is available on our website www.ssvptoronto.ca under Materials Available or through Central.

- Every meeting provides some opportunity for members to increase their knowledge & understanding related to their service;
- Encouraging members to seek out and take advantage of growth opportunities;
- Recruiting new members on a regular basis;
- Seeking out a spiritual advisor (pastor or other appropriate person)
- Setting meeting agendas that help ensure your members will pray, reflect, share, learn, socialize, contribute, and laugh during conference meetings; attending monthly PC meetings, and encouraging conference members to also attend.

V Conference Activities

A: Home Visitations

1. For conferences with many calls for assistance, home visitations will be the main activity of the conference. However, anything done over and over again can become routine, even mechanical. We can even begin to forget what really matters in the task.

Home visits are about meaningful, person-to-person contact with those in need. The voucher is one way we assist but it is not the most important way. **The love, respect, caring, patience, understanding and hope we bring is more important** (even for the neighbour in need who seems to simply want to grab the voucher and close the door).

Home visitation is the core of what we, as Vincentians, do. It is one of the activities that makes the Society and our works unique and effective. Although there may be some very valid reasons for some conferences to reduce the number of home visits in some circumstances and to use additional ways to assist (e.g. food pantry, meeting neighbours in need at the church), we hope that you, as president, will do everything possible to keep home visitations as the core work of your conference. In many cases, the solution is to recruit new members (so there are more members available to serve and more members who are willing and able to visit certain areas during the day rather than after dark).

2. A few conferences have committed members ready to serve but receive few calls for assistance. In such cases, the conference may wish to actively seek out neighbours in need. Finding those who suffer from some form of poverty is not an easy task. In making the following suggestions, it is important to note that the more the Society is known, the more those in need will contact us for help.

- a. Referrals made by the clergy, government officials, police, hospitals, doctors, school personnel, etc. These persons should be made aware of our existence, our projects, and how to contact us.

- b. Referrals by other community organizations (food banks, other churches in the area, etc.). Such organizations should be familiar with our services & projects so that we can help whenever they cannot.
- c. Observations by members. Encourage members to be alert for possible cases within their community, their schools, the church, etc.

B. Other ways of serving

“No work of charity is foreign to the Society.” Conferences are encouraged to serve neighbours in need in ways that are being under-served or not served at all.

- (a) Volunteering at one of our Special Works. There are at least 50 different volunteer opportunities available (as described in our booklet Service/Volunteer Opportunities in our Special Works booklet (available on our website, www.ssvptoronto.ca, Materials Available).
- (b) Discussing with your pastor (and, perhaps, the Parish Council) what gaps in service there may be in the parish.
- (c) Visiting hospitals, correctional institutions, old age homes, other institutions in the community.
- (d) Encouraging conference members to serve on committees, including:
 - i. Homes Division
 - ii. Stores Division
 - iii. Marygrove Camp, Camp Ozanam
 - iv. Court Services
 - v. Prison Apostolate
 - vi. Board Committees (e.g. Advocacy, Spirituality, Resource, etc.)
- (e) Sponsoring another Conference in underdeveloped areas through Twinning.
- (f) Joint projects with schools (e.g. coat program, etc.)
- (g) Becoming familiar with all community projects designed to help the needy, without forgetting the projects of the Particular and Central Councils.
- (h) The members of your conference or particular council have other great ideas.

C: Planning effective meetings

If you haven't had a lot of experience planning effective meetings, a few problems can occur

- Tendency to keep too tight a grip on the meeting and discussion, perhaps because you fear losing control or appearing incapable;
- Getting into a rut, where each meeting is the same as the one before, following a standard agenda that allows little room for genuine learning, sharing, problem solving, or laughter.

To assist you in this regard, we have developed a booklet entitled Effective Meetings. It is available on our website www.ssvptoronto.ca under Materials Available.

D: Member Development

Anyone who serves another in any capacity has a responsibility to do the best they can, within the limitations of their time, gifts, and knowledge/skills. In order to serve more fully and effectively, members can build on their gifts and they can increase their knowledge and skills. The Rule makes it clear that members have a responsibility to continue to grow and develop their ability to serve.

- *Article 2.2.2 – “Within a conference continuous formation should be provided.”*
- *Article 2.2.9 – “Conference meetings are the best place for the education and formation of members, both spiritually and as servants of the poor. This ongoing formation complements formation sessions sponsored by councils.”*
- *Article 3.12 – “It is essential that the Society continually promote the formation and training of its members and Officers to deepen their knowledge of the Society and their spirituality, improve the sensitivity, quality and efficiency of their service to the poor, and to help them to be aware of the benefit, resources and opportunities that are available for the poor. The Society also offers members higher training in order to better help to raise the cultural and social level of those who request this support.”*

This education/formation should focus on:

- a) The development of the Spirit of the Society among members.
- b) The improvement of our knowledge of available resources/support services and the comfort and ability of members to serve those with a wide range of needs and challenges.

The best time to train members is during the meetings of the Conference. The time allowed for the spiritual readings is the most appropriate time to meet goal a) stated above. Short discussions on various topics such as ways of visiting, different social services, other community services available, etc. will help meet goal b).

The general meetings, scheduled by the Particular Council or by the Central Council, also offer learning/growth opportunities for you and your members. Members should be encouraged to participate in such meetings and seminars. In our ever-changing world, the Society of St. Vincent de Paul must offer services that meet the needs of today in order to survive. You are the person to whom the disadvantaged will turn to for advice and information. Therefore, you and your conference members must remain informed and current in order not to disappoint them.

E: Recruitment of New Members

If your conference has not recruited and retained any new members in the last five years, your conference probably requires some renewal activity. You need to recruit new members:

- To ensure there are a sufficient number of **active** members to adequately serve those requesting assistance without overburdening existing members;
- To regularly bring new energy, commitment, and ideas into the conference;
- To ensure the long-term health and vitality of the conference;
- To avoid a few members becoming too entrenched and locked into certain ways of thinking and of doing things.

While personal invitations to prospective members is generally the most appropriate and effective means of getting a few new members, recruitment drives are also very effective. To assist you in this regard, we have developed the Recruitment booklet. It is available on our website www.ssvptoronto.ca under Materials Available. The TCC is also able to assist you with your recruitment drive and especially with the training of your new members. Let your PC president know you are thinking about a recruitment drive and he/she will ensure that you get the assistance you need.

Getting new members is generally the easy part. **Keeping** new members can be more challenging. Your odds improve if you:

- a. Make it very clear up front what the service involves. This ministry is a tough one and not for everyone. Downplaying this initially is likely to result in loss of the member once they learn the truth. Having an experienced member taking the prospective member on a few home visits before they commit to membership is a key step.
- b. Provide them with some training up front and provide ongoing support (mentorship). The TCC can assist with the training aspect.

- People join so they can serve. You will lose members faster as a result of boredom than overwork. If they are not getting the opportunity to serve on a regular basis, they will seek out other service opportunities.
- Some conferences have a few members that have served there for many years. They may feel they know how things should be done (because “ that’s the way we’ve always done them”) and may not appreciate new members (especially younger ones) coming in with their new ideas and ways of doing things. If the new members realize their views are not being respected and given due consideration, they are likely to quickly move on. We need to be open to new ways of thinking. We need to be welcoming. We need to be respectful. We need to be humble.

VI. Your Conference – and its connections to the Church, the Community, and the Society.

The conference cannot and should not exist or act in isolation from the parish, the pastor, the other parish ministries or other conferences/Vincentians.

Please consider the following points.

1. We operate in the parish only because the **pastor** has authorized us to be present and an active part of the community. If the pastor decides that the conference is not effective or relevant or that it creates more problems for him and the parish than it solves, or has a serious disagreement with the conference, he might dissolve/close down the conference (that is, by not providing meeting space and removing the poor box). This has happened in a few TCC parishes. The pastor is responsible for what goes on in the parish and has a right to be informed (e.g. amount collected in the Poor Box, names of members, etc.). As an honorary conference member, he also has a right to know who is being served. In order to continue to be effective and thrive, a conference (through the president) needs to build and maintain a good working relationship with the pastor.
2. The **parishioners** make your service possible. As donors, they have a right to know generally how the money is spent. More importantly, they need to feel good about the Society and its work. They need to feel that the conference is using their donations to help the parish meet its Christian responsibility to help “the least of our brethren.” In order to feel this, they need to be updated through a financial report (at least annually, delivered verbally from the pulpit and/or as a Bulletin insert). They need to know a bit about what the Society is and what we do. Most parishioners, when asked what they know about the Society, will answer something like, “well, I know they help the poor somehow and I hear they’re a good

organization.” Is that enough to encourage ongoing donations? Is that enough to encourage parishioners to consider becoming a **member** of your conference? This is why it is important to inform/remind the parishioners of the work of the Society on at least an annual basis.

3. Other **ministries** care about those in need as much as your conference does. The members of those ministries have chosen a different way to serve (e.g. taking communion to the sick, visiting the elderly, Social Justice), but they care as much as you and your members do. When ministries do not communicate, they do not know what each other is doing. This means that there may be duplication of effort (and perhaps even competition) or, worse, gaps in service between the ministries and what the Society can offer. To reduce these likelihoods, some pastors (with the encouragement of the archdiocese) are now organizing all their ministries (including the conference) into groups or **Purpose Teams** (e.g. Service & Outreach, Sacraments & Worship, Servant Development, and Support & Infrastructure). If this type of sharing and cooperative effort has not been established in your parish, perhaps you can be a catalyst.
4. As with ministries, there are a number of **organizations and agencies** in the community that care just as much as you and your members. You are all trying, perhaps with somewhat different motivations and strategies, to serve neighbours in need. You and your members need to know which other groups are serving your area (e.g. food banks, other faith groups, community programs) so that you can do some coordination of effort to reduce duplication (and competition) and gaps in service. If they know your service exists and you know about theirs, referrals can be made and new services developed to fill gaps, and cooperative projects undertaken.
5. The Society is structured so that those providing the service (i.e. the conference members and special works staff) get all the support and assistance they need. The **particular councils and Toronto Central Council** exist only to provide this support, assistance, and guidance. You and your conference members can benefit in a number of ways. (Please refer to the Rule for a description of the role and responsibilities of the particular council and central council).
 - a. The opportunity to **share** successes and challenges at particular council meetings;
 - b. **Moving funds** where they are most needed. For most conferences, this means moving excess (more than about a 3 month reserve) up to the particular council. For some particular councils, it means requests for money to be moved down to the conference;
 - c. **Attending sessions** designed by the particular council or TCC to provide information or sharing opportunities (e.g. a session on Serving Longer-Term Neighbours in Need).

- d. **Maintaining close relations** with one or more neighbouring conference presidents and perhaps visiting other conferences to see other ways of doing things.
- e. **Attending Society events** (e.g. AGM or Annual Mass & Dinner, a special works open house) to better understand your Society and the wide range of works it undertakes (including shelters, recovery homes, & camps);
- f. Using the **resources** available through TCC office (416-364-5577) or the website (www.ssvptoronto.ca , see Materials Available)
- g. Request **assistance**, either one-on-one or through a speaker at your conference or particular council meetings.

VII Year at a glance

Each conference is advised to establish a calendar for the year, where you can enter:

- Due dates for reports or other material to your PC (monthly activity report) or to Central (Annual Treasurer and Secretary's reports, by end of February)
- Conference meeting dates
- PC meeting dates
- Scheduled conference events (e.g. Bundle Weekend, Verbal and/or written report to parishioners, Christmas collection, Christmas program, Marygrove Collection, etc.)
- Special events [e.g. retreat (generally during lent), AGM (generally on September 27), AGA (late June), workshops, etc.]

Setting up this calendar the first time will obviously require some time and effort but once developed can be easily maintained each year. It will be a great guide for a new president and a regular reminder to all conference members. The one page calendar could perhaps be printed on the back of each conference meeting agenda.

VIII. Records

a. Conference records – creation, retention, and disposal

- i. All documents belonging to the Society must be kept in good order, carefully labeled and stored in a secure place. Toronto Central Council is responsible for storing the membership applications and screening documents. Certificates of Aggregation and Institution should be held by the conference/council, however a duplicate copy should be kept on file at Toronto Central Council. Client forms, reports, conference membership lists, financial records, reports and minutes should be kept on file by the conference following the timelines set out below.
- ii. When documents are past their recommended retention date, they should be shredded prior to disposal. Client records must be shredded prior to disposal.

Members of the Society must take every precaution necessary to safeguard an individual's private and personal information. Failing to do so could lead to investigation and possible charges under Ontario's privacy legislation code of conduct.

.b. RETENTION AND ARCHIVING OF RECORDS

Conferences and councils are required to provide for the ongoing maintenance and safekeeping of all records that provide historical data related to governing documents. While the conference president is not responsible for directly creating and maintaining an effective system, he/she needs to ensure an effective system is in place.

Documents	Time Kept
Aggregation, Institution, Twinning forms	Perpetuity
Membership Application forms	Perpetuity
Canada Revenue Agency: Charitable Registration forms	Perpetuity
Minutes of meetings	7 years
Financial Records	7 years
Lists of members of the executive	Perpetuity
General correspondence during the mandate of any president	3 years past the end of the term of that president
Case records (inactive)	3 years
Annual Reports	Perpetuity

(i) Neighbour In Need records

- a. A record of service to each neighbour in need must be kept. This helps ensure accountability, as good stewards of donated funds, but, more importantly, helps to ensure effective and appropriate service to those in need. Be sure your system of record keeping:
 - i. Collects and maintains the information you need to provide appropriate service and accountability but does not inappropriately invade privacy;
 - ii. Is clear to all conference members and is relatively easy to maintain;
 - iii. Provides for security and confidentiality of the information;

- iv. Allows for the creation of monthly and annual summaries of service;
- v. Allows for relatively easy review (perhaps annually) of the service/support being provided to any neighbour in need.

IX. Looking Back & Looking Ahead

With the help of your conference members, set group and individual goals for the next year or more. The Rule (section 2.1.1) requires that every conference and council set aside one meeting a year to “evaluate its service to its members and to the poor...”. As part of this planning the conference should be:

1. Always searching for the needs in your area as well as discussing these needs with your conference and developing projects/plans to meet these needs;
2. Inviting new people to join the Society on a regular basis so that you will have a sufficient number of members to accomplish the conference work, bring new energy, commitment and viewpoints into the conference, and provide other parishioners with the opportunity to serve in this way;
3. Instilling in conference members the true spirit of the Society, the love of Christ in the person of the poor;
4. Encouraging conference members to take advantage of and seek out opportunities to further their knowledge in order to provide better services;
5. Helping build a spirit of cooperation between the conference and the rest of the Society, the Church and the community.
6. Building the leadership potential of members of your conference so that their skills and confidence continue to increase, ready to take on tasks and responsibilities today and leadership positions within the conference and the Society tomorrow.
7. Reviewing the effectiveness and appropriateness of your service to your neighbours in need, particular those receiving regular service for one or more years. **A booklet (Serving Longer-Term Neighbours in Need** available at www.ssvptoronto.ca) has been developed to assist your conference in making important but difficult decisions in this area.

X. In Closing

Although we, as a Society, strive to remain true to the mission, vision and values of our founders and patron saint, we continue to adapt to the changes

and realities facing our neighbours in need. We continue to grow, as an organization and as individual members, in our ability to serve those needs. With love, compassion, respect, joy and humility we continue to serve as the voice, hands and feet of Christ here on earth.

XI. Appendix

2.2.6 Duties of the Conference President

The president shall be dedicated to the service of the poor, to the needs of the conference, and to the spiritual and moral needs of the members.

The president should epitomize the Society's spiritual mission and, at each conference meeting, ensure that there is a reading, carefully chosen for the spiritual benefit of the members.

The president should be an experienced active member who has a good knowledge of the Rule and its application, and who understands and values the culture of the Society.

Ideally, the president of a conference should reside within the limits of the area (e.g. parish) served by the conference.

The president should not hold two presidential offices. If a conference president is elected to the presidency of a council, the conference must elect a new president.

As the servant leader of the conference, the president must:

- take the fullest, most active interest in the welfare of the members;
- support and assist them in their Vincentian actions as circumstances require;
- meet with any member who does not attend meetings to discuss the situation.

It is the president's responsibility to:

- maintain the membership of the conference and provide positive reinforcement to the members;
- encourage the recruitment of new members.

To realize the main objectives of the Society, the president should:

- allocate a reasonable quantity of charitable work and various other tasks to each conference member;
- make sure that all tasks are properly carried out.

The president should:

- avoid autocratic behaviour;
 - never claim, in the execution of his or her duties, special privileges or distinction;
 - act with a considerable measure of humility;
 - always keep in mind that the president is at the service of the members.
- To ensure the uninterrupted pursuit of the work to which much effort has been devoted, the president should personally see to the preparation of one or more possible successors.
 - It is important for the president to remain fully informed of the needs of those served and of the work of the members without, however, monopolizing the work.
 - As much as possible, decisions should be taken collectively to foster a community

team spirit within the conference both in its orientation and in its activities.

- The president ensures that links and communication are effectively maintained between the conference and the council to which it is attached.

2.2.2 Role and Responsibilities of a Conference

The main role of a conference is to group together Christians desirous of pursuing the Society's mission. A conference is a gathering of people similarly motivated to serve Christ by serving the poor. Working within the conference, members can nourish and renew their faith, and sustain each other each other through prayer so that each member will grow closer to God.

Within a conference, an environment should be created that will enable members to develop a sense of Vincentian spirituality, friendship and solidarity in their charitable activities.

The responsibilities of conference members are varied. The most important one is to bring comfort and aid to the poor. The fundamental activity is the person-to-person encounter with the poor through home visits, carried out by pairs of Vincentians. Home visitation demands the highest respect for the dignity of the poor. Vincentians are the guests of the persons being visited, as those they visit are the hosts.

Within the conference, to carry out its mission, members:

- set objectives,
- plan, develop and carry out activities,
- work as a team,
- make decisions by consensus.

Following their recruitment, new conference members should be instructed about the mission of the Society. This will include its Rule, spirituality, history, structure, objectives, main activities and special works. Within a conference, continuous formation should be provided.

Conference members should be made aware of, and become defenders of, social justice. They must be proactive in their defense of the poor.⁴

Vincentians should act as catalysts and be the conscience of their local community, as they cooperate with parish organizations, neighbouring conferences, other faith communities and social service agencies.

Vincentians must seek to avoid duplication and competition in the provision of services. The Society should play a leading role in cooperating with others because it cannot do alone everything that needs to be done. In all endeavours, assistance should be welcomed from anyone who is sincere and prepared to help, even in a small way.