

Society of St. Vincent de Paul
Toronto Central Council



Home Visitation Committee
Conclusions and Recommendations

January, 2006

Home Visitation

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Introduction:

Any proper consideration of where we are and where we hope to be must begin with a “Recall to sources: return to the origins of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul: first intentions, intentions forever.” (Pre-ambule to the Rule) We need to remind ourselves of what we are called to as Christians and in our vocation as Vincentians.

“At the outset they felt the need to ‘bear witness’ to their Christian faith by actions rather than words. They regarded the unfortunate as their brothers, whoever they were and whatever the nature of their sufferings. In them they saw the suffering Christ. They loved them both as men and as children of God. They recognized in them the dignity of men faced with the world and its miseries, and also their dignity as those to whom, first of all, the Kingdom of God is given.” (The Rule, p. 8)

“To find oneself one day wanting to make the effort to become a ‘brother’ (or ‘sister’) of St. Vincent de Paul, or a ‘Vincentian’ (however it is put according to place and language) is to translate into action a consequence of our Christian faith. It is not just the absolutely universal call of Christ to the spirit of charity. The specific characteristic of this call is the intimate desire personally and directly to participate in the service of the poor, by a contract between man and man, by a personal gift of the heart and friendship, and to do this in a brotherly community of lay people inspired by the same vocation.” (The Rule, p. 10)

As part of the process of developing a strategic plan, the Strategic Planning Committee, with the approval of the Board, struck a Home Visitation Committee with the following mandate.

“To consider the relevance and efficacy of home visits in the GTA in 2005 and beyond in terms of best serving:

- the immediate and longer term interest of clients;
- the mission and traditions of the Society;
- the stewardship duty we have to our donors.”

The committee consisted of 7 Vincentians from conferences of various sizes, geographic location, and socioeconomic locations. Included in the committee were a member of the Board of TCC, a pastor, and two staff members.

- It became clear fairly early in the deliberations of the committee that the question was not whether we should continue to do home visitations. Visiting those in need in their homes has been and continues to be the core of who we are and what we do.
- “In the beginning, in Ozanam's time, it was expressed as "the visitation of poor people in their homes", which is regarded as the prototype of Vincentian activity. The sense of this must now be translated into more modern language. It is not simply a matter of being content with "almsgiving"; it is necessary to reach personal dialogue with those who suffer (no matter what the suffering is) without the slightest trace of paternalism, in an attitude of mutual trust, with respect for people and that sacred place, their home, with a sharing of friendship and reciprocity of service, with all the delicacy of love.” (The Rule, p. 10)
- However, the need to address some inequities, some gaps in service, some inappropriate and/or ineffectual practices also became clear.

“Universality implies both unity and diversity. Forms of poverty change like the world itself and its different parts. In every place and at every moment there has to be a forward-looking appreciation of misery and of the different ways in which it can be relieved. The fundamental unity of the Vincentian vocation is open to all the disparities of actions constantly being re-adapted towards the same end.” (The Rule, p. 14)

The recommendations that follow are not intended to be critical of the work of any conference or Vincentian. Our members give generously of their gifts and time and often give service in very difficult circumstances. The recommendations are, instead, designed to build on what is working well and to help ensure that we, as a Society and as conferences and individual members, continue to seek ways to serve our neighbours in need more effectively and appropriately.

“Effective encounter with those suffering in so many different ways is not only a question of thinking things out. There is also the need for training, knowledge, technique in social problems, the psychology of those who suffer frustration, and experience of direct contact with the unhappy. The Society of St. Vincent de Paul has a mission to develop this technique and, like all parts of the Church, to make itself and its members available wherever they can serve.” (The Rule, p. 17)

“Faithful to its founders, it constantly strives to renew and adapt itself to the changing conditions of the world.” (The Rule, p. 19)

“Sharing does not consist merely in the distribution of material goods; it also implies that all our personal resources and potential of mind and heart, of time and influence, are placed at the service of others.” (*The Rule, Commentaries, p. 21*)

Conclusions:

1. **Home visitations:** vary from conference to conference and Vincentian to Vincentian in almost every possible way.
 - a. **Purpose:** Some Vincentians have come to the conclusion that many of those they serve don't really want to talk or to explore alternatives – they just want the voucher. In other cases, language barriers make meaningful home visits very challenging. In many such cases, the Vincentians have accepted the notion that their main function is to deliver/distribute material support.
 - b. **Frequency:** Some will visit once a month or more, while others (often due to a high demand for service) only visit the first time and then require that the person come and pick up a voucher at the church in future. The many clients who have come to see the voucher as part of their monthly budget expect a regular monthly visit.
 - c. **Quality:** Many Vincentians have made it a point to increase their knowledge (of local services, etc.) and skills (in assisting with budgeting, etc.) while many have not. About 20% of the 1200 Vincentians take advantage of workshops designed to help them be more effective in their service.
 - d. **Amount and type of assistance:** The amount of assistance provided varies considerably, depending partly on the level of need and available resources. In other cases, certain types of clients may be considered by some Vincentians to be less needy or less deserving. Wealthier parishes with less need are able to pay a client's rent or tuition or utility bills while a poorer, needier conference struggles to provide \$30 vouchers to those in need.
 - e. **Attitude:** A number of Vincentians have seemingly forgotten what called them to the Society in the first place. Presumably they joined because they wanted to act on their faith and beliefs. They saw service to those in need as a way to sanctify their souls. Some Vincentians have, however, drifted into seeing membership in the Society as just another volunteer activity. They will continue in this activity as long as not too much is required of them (e.g. attending regular meetings, going to workshops, learning new skills, taking on leadership roles). Because some clients can be challenging, uncooperative, or unappreciative, many of these members have become judgmental, inflexible, cynical, and frustrated.
 - f. **Benefit to the client:** Many Vincentians acknowledge that providing clients with a voucher every month for a long period probably isn't helping them to make positive changes in their lives. Such assistance often continues to be given, however, either because such clients make up the bulk of those the conference serves or because they aren't sure how else to deal with these clients.

2. Sharing resources: While many conferences are committed to sending up all funds in excess of a reasonable reserve, a number of conferences appear to not be committed to the concept of sharing their resources beyond the conference. This may be due to one or more of the following reasons.

- i. The pastor and/or the conference may feel that what is collected in the parish stays in the parish;
- ii. There may be a lack of awareness of greater need in other conferences or particular councils;
- iii. There may be distrust or a lack of knowledge re. Central's role/function, importance, or need for support;
- iv. There may be a lack of commitment to supporting special works programs, perhaps believing that home visitation is the only legitimate Vincentian activity.

Of course, "sharing resources" also includes sharing our knowledge and gifts with other Vincentians and through volunteer opportunities in our Special Works

3. Member development: Vincentians, like all volunteers who engage in challenging service to vulnerable people, need regular opportunities to develop their knowledge and skills and to renew their commitment to serve. Member development must be an integral, regular part of all conference and particular council meetings.

4. Need for change: We need to re-think how and why we serve those in need. Vincentians need to be helped to focus on short-term material assistance and a longer-term focus on helping the client to make some positive changes in their lives.

- a. Many Vincentians will resist this change and some will resign, on principle or because they are not willing to change their approach. It is always unfortunate when we lose a dedicated, long-serving member but we must change to meet new needs and realities. The committee is confident that most members will welcome these changes and will continue to serve our neighbours in need as effectively as possible.

Recommendations:

It is recommended:

- 1. That the above conclusions and the following recommendations form the basis of a Discussion Paper, to be sent to every member and discussed in depth at every conference and particular council.**
- 2. That the following recommendations be modified on the basis of input through the particular councils and then presented to Board for approval and implementation.**
- 3. That we develop ways to regularly stress the spiritual/vocational aspect of our work and the need to regularly re-commit ourselves to the service of God and our neighbours in need.**

“The source of the Vincentian vocation is both human and divine. It is the anguish experienced in seeing the suffering of another human being, the spontaneous reaction of sympathy, even the fury which surges in the presence of injustices undergone by our brothers in humanity. It is also the attitude of the Christian impregnated with the Word of God, living in the hope of the Paschal Mystery of the Resurrection, the bearer of the message of hope which contains all the human brotherhood for those who suffer and who carry their cross by faith in the mystery of the presence of Christ with the poor and afflicted.

The aim is both to help the unfortunate in the most humane way and, as far as possible, the salvage of their destiny as men. It is also, solely through the interior ways of grace and witness, the common salvation in participation in the Kingdom of God.” (The Rule, p. 10)

- 4. That the Rule be a regular source of inspiration, guidance, and instruction in each conference and particular council.**
- 5. That, whenever practical, those we serve be referred to as “our neighbours in need” or “our neighbours”, rather than “client”, since we receive from as well as give to those we serve, and that this shift in terminology be discussed at the conference and particular council levels.**

“The spirit of sharing shows itself at least in the wish to share something completely. One person gives his time and practices the virtue of availability, another gives of his money, another gives his knowledge, another uses his health, and still another offers the comfort which radiates from his person. Without exceptional heroism, every Christian, even the most needy, can take part in such sharing and, in doing so, will gradually and freely learn to give himself in the way revealed to him through the personal graces he receives. Sharing is something different from a present and altogether different from alms, it is made up of reciprocity and exchange.” (The Rule, p. 15)

6. **That every Vincentian clearly inform each neighbour in need on their first visit (using a standard handout, to be developed) regarding who we are, sources of funds, and ways we are able to assist in the short and longer term.**
7. **That the purpose of home visitations be more clearly articulated and that the statement of purpose include the following components.**
 - **Home visitations, as with any Vincentian contact with neighbours in need, involves meaningful, person-to-person contact.** “It is necessary to reach personal dialogue with those who suffer (no matter what the suffering is) without the slightest trace of paternalism, in an attitude of mutual trust, with respect for people and that sacred place, their home, with a sharing of friendship and reciprocity of service, with all the delicacy of love.” (The Rule, p. 10). Simply delivering or handing out vouchers is generally not considered to be Vincentian activity.
 - The first few visits to a neighbour in need will generally be to provide some material assistance to help the person through a difficult circumstance but as it becomes clear that the person wants or needs longer-term assistance, the focus will shift. In such cases, the Vincentians, generally in consultation with the conference as a whole, will consider the most appropriate way to assist this neighbour in need. Guiding such discussion and decisions will be the needs and goals of the neighbour in need, the longer-term best interests of the person, the resources (not only financial) of the conference, and our responsibility to be good stewards of donated funds.
 - Appropriate assessment of each neighbour in need, using a standard form (to be developed), carried out generally in visits two, three or four, will guide the Vincentians and conference in their decisions about how best to serve them.
 - Creative, appropriate ways (e.g. pantries), may be developed by the conference to serve those that the conference has determined are most in need of regular material support, thus freeing up (especially in very busy conferences) Vincentians to do home visits with those that the conference has determined require different forms of support and assistance.
 - Support/assistance to longer-term neighbours in need will be based on the longer-term best interests of the person, the person’s expressed needs and goals, and the decision of the conference.
 - Where a person chooses not to work with the Vincentians toward some objective that is meaningful to the person, the conference may have to advise the person that the needs are greater elsewhere and that we will no longer be able to provide material assistance.
 - That the information collected and maintained on those we serve be standardized (with process and forms to be developed) to help ensure that appropriate information is collected and that it is used and maintained appropriately.
 - That each conference determine its need for member development; that each particular council develop an annual member development plan, based on the needs of the conferences. Such plans should address the following aspects.

- ✓ Vincentian spirituality and spiritual growth;
- ✓ The Rule;
- ✓ The knowledge and skills of members, including knowledge of local resources;
- ✓ Effective, appropriate home visitations;
- ✓ Leadership development

As Jean Vanier observed, in order to serve those we serve, we need “compassion and competence”. Competence presupposes that the person has the needed knowledge and skills and is committed to maintaining competence.

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8. That conditions of membership in the Society of St. Vincent de Paul include:

- a. **participation in a minimum of one workshop/training session annually;**
- b. **going on a minimum of one home visitation per month (or twelve visitations per year), except where health or circumstances preclude this.**

9. That conferences that have few requests for assistance do a needs assessment within their parish to determine gaps in service and other ways they might reach out to and serve neighbours in need (including the lonely, the sick, the elderly)

“Commentaries: - The Society of St. Vincent de Paul is often accused of perpetuating or encouraging poverty, and even of willing that poverty continue to exist, in order to justify its existence and its activities, or even to soothe the conscience of its members.

Those who would make such accusations have forgotten that being poor does not always, or necessarily, consist in being short of material goods.

Being poor can also mean being physically or mentally handicapped, sick, crippled, old, ugly or illiterate. He is poor who is, or is made to feel, alone; in such circumstances are the immigrants, the transients, the orphans, the abandoned or rejected and all those who find themselves alone amongst an always indifferent and quite often hostile multitude.

Being poor may mean wanting to cry when others are laughing;

- not being able to go on holidays when everybody else is going;
- lack of freedom (prisoners, shut-ins, alcoholics, drug addicts.)
- being defenseless against attacks, insults or accusations;
- being the innocent victim of social or family quarrels.

He is also poor who, although blessed with an abundance of worldly goods, cannot communicate with those around him because he does not speak their language.

All such forms of poverty, and many others, exist all around us. We should be ready to relieve them and, if possible, wipe them out completely.”

- 10. That conferences be required to develop an annual budget, based on reasonable estimates of income, that will provide guidance as to generally how funds will be dispersed, including the percentage of funds that will be used for Christmas baskets.**
- 11. That, where a conference or individual member is deemed, by the President or the appropriate Particular Council President, to be behaving in a manner that is contrary to the best interests of those we serve and/or the Society, the person(s) will be informed that they are no longer meeting the conditions of membership. Where the decision is made to discontinue membership, the process described in the Membership Policy and described in detail in the draft National Rule, will be followed.**
- 12. Conferences should be strongly encouraged to have members “specialize” in areas.**
 - a. E.g. Two members might become more knowledgeable about dealing with clients with mental illness and would develop a list of contact phone numbers. Two others might learn more about addictions and related resources. Immigration, depression, budgeting, and job search could be other areas.
 - b. These pairs would then become a resource to the conference when clients experiencing those challenges are discussed.
 - c. Inservicing could be offered on the basis of specialty areas
 - d. Some members may find they are more effective in dealing with clients with certain types of needs/challenges
- 13. That conferences make a concerted effort to access the resources in their communities and at partnering with groups/organizations who can assist those we are serving.**
- 14. That further work be done in exploring appropriate, effective ways that Vincentians can serve their neighbours in need in addition to home visitations (including food pantries, working with schools, visiting seniors homes, etc.) and that recommendations in this regard be brought back to the Board.**