



Helping FINs face the Covid challenge

Vincentians make sure the needy are never alone during this difficult period



Over the past 18 months, the Friends in Need (FINs) cared for by the Society of St Vincent de Paul (SSVP) have had a rough ride. Many FINs are old, highly vulnerable and encouraged to stay at home so they may not fall victim to Covid. For them, the loss of social interaction took a toll on their mental health.

To address this, Vincentians have been reaching out to FINs providing support and friendship over the phone instead. When the national vaccination programme rolled out, Vincentians started to

The items in the carepack (personal protection gear, anti-bacterial wipes, biscuits, Milo, instant cereal drinks, coffee, an SSVP umbrella, medicated oil, medicated plasters, etc.) and packing in progress at Agape Village

follow-up on the vaccination status of their FINs, especially the elderly. The Conference of St Stephen even started a pilot programme to educate and encourage their FINs to keep up to date with their health screenings and vaccinations, helping to facilitate health

Continued on Page 2...



... Continued from Page 1

checks and visits to the doctor.

When safety management measures were tightened and physical meetings discouraged, cash aid was electronically transferred to FINs and essential aid delivered. SSVP partnered Engineering Good (an NGO) to help provide laptops to children of FINs who faced challenges in getting laptops for home-based learning. The tuition programmes run by SSVP Conferences also switched to online classes since the pandemic took hold.

During this period, Vincentians have been mobilised into urgent action especially when FINs, exposed at eldercare centres or in school, are suddenly served with Quarantine Orders and Stay Home Notices. Stuck at home, many FIN families do not have the familial network, financial resources or tech know-how to order a meal or groceries online. Vincentians, across the island, have stepped in

to ensure that the daily needs of the FINs were met and in instances of large cluster outbreaks, worked closely with the local Member of Parliament and grassroots network, arranging for daily meals and groceries to be delivered to the FINs.

Having made two successful nationwide carepack distribution to 2,000 FIN families from all 29 Conferences in June and December last year, the Society received positive feedback that the essential items given were very useful and well appreciated.

This spurred the Society to organise another carepack distribution in September with each pack containing personal protection gear, anti-bacterial wipes, biscuits, Milo, instant cereal drinks, coffee, an SSVP umbrella and must-have “fan favourites” - medicated oil, medicated plasters (“koyok”) and medicated cream!

Said Mdm Sahyah, 88, who is bedridden and lives alone on receiving the carepack: “Thank you very much for the Axe Oil. It came at the right time and saves me the \$\$\$. It’s really useful when I’ve migraines.”



The CHIJ St Theresa’s Convent girls with the cards they made for the FINs

Another FIN, wheel-chair bound Amy, said: “I really need the ‘koyok’, I put them on my legs every night to relieve my aches. Thank you so much.”

The carepack distribution project was also supported by CHIJ St Theresa’s Convent as the teachers and students wanted to reach out to our FINs by writing personalised cards with uplifting messages of love and hope. They also made pretty origami flowers to add beauty and joy to each carepack.

Many Vincentians helped put the carepacks together. Said Philomena Wee, who also brought a friend along to help with the packing at Agape Village: “I enjoyed myself thoroughly and will come back to help next year. It is heartening to see everyone working side by side, chatting and joking as they go along and cheering when they hit the 1000th carepack mark. Though I only know a handful of people, I felt a sense of belonging to this big happy SSVP family.”

SSVP would like to thank Temasek Trust’s oscar@sg fund for their continued support, funding half the cost of the carepacks in addition to the personal protection items. Our thanks also go out to our generous benefactors who donated to SSVP (National Council of Singapore) as well as Lego Singapore for donating Lego sets to our FINs. 



Vincentians delivering the carepacks

SSVP celebrates Feast Day at the Cathedral

150 attend Archbishop's mass while over 1,200 watch it on YouTube



For the second successive year, the Society of St Vincent de Paul (SSVP) had to limit physical attendance at its Feast Day mass due to Covid. The mass on 27 September was celebrated at the Cathedral of the Good Shepherd by his Grace, Most Reverend Monsignor William Goh, Archbishop of Singapore and Patron of SSVP.

This year marks 70 years since SSVP was revived in Singapore, having grown from one Conference to 31 out-reach centres, including 29 Conferences in various parishes. The late Monsignor H. Berthold was instrumental in reviving the Society in 1951 even though it had started serving the poor in Singapore in 1883.

In his homily, Archbishop Goh shared how SSVP continues to play an indispensable role in the

work of building a vibrant and evangelising missionary church in the context of Catholic200SG. Said the Archbishop: "During this pandemic, SSVP must find new ways to reach out to people who are in need. The great value of SSVP is that the work you are doing is really



one that has a personal touch, which big organisations sometimes and often cannot afford... Indeed, I know of many who have been so touched by your personal love that they've seen the face of Christ in you and have been converted to the faith."

SSVP welcomed 65 new Vincentians from 20 Conferences and the Youth Wing who took the pledge during the mass. The Society also honoured Pius Fernandez, Martin Lim and Maureen Ng for their dedication in journeying with the poor for 50 years as Vincentians. Eleven Vincentians were honoured for completing 25 years as Vincentians.

In her address, Florence Tan (left), President of SSVP (National Council of Singapore) reminded members of St Vincent de Paul's words to, "Make it a practice to judge persons and things in the most favourable light at all times and under all circumstances."

"Our help," she said, "may be only needed for a temporary reprieve but that timely help to our Friends in Need may be the pivotal point where we actually give them a hand up and lead them off a difficult path." 



Mr Pius S Fernandez and Mr Martin Lim from the IHM Conference celebrated 50 years of Vincentian service.

Pius Fernandez and Martin Lim are good friends and much of their friendship was built up over the years as Vincentians serving the poor in the Conference of the Immaculate Heart of Mary (IHM).

When Fr Berthold was parish priest of IHM, he called on parishioners to revive the Conference of SSVP which had stopped functioning in the parish after it was set up in 1955. The two heeded the call of late Fr Berthold and became members.

Recalled Mr Lim: "Those days, the poor were really very poor. They had no refrigerator, radio or TV. Their roofs leaked when it rained. Once I

even saw a family washing rice in the drain. I had a FIN with 9 children and expecting the 10th when her husband passed on. Our Conference helped the family get a stall in a school and supported them with some cash to start operations. A few years later, the eldest son finished his NS and started working. They thanked our Society for our help and said they could manage and didn't need further help."

Said Mr Fernandez, who was the Secretary of the Conference in 1971 and later served as VP and President: "Being a Vincentian is to work in the image of Christ and be Jesus to reach out to everyone who needs help."

Chance meeting changes lonely man's life

Vincentians and parishioners of St Mary of the Angels join hands to renovate his home and bring him joy



In July, two Vincentians from the St Mary of the Angels Conference were sharing a meal at a coffee shop with their Friends in Need (FINs) in the Jurong area. They were then joined by Mr C who knew the FINs.

The Vincentians discovered that Mr C, who is in his 40s, lived alone in a rental HDB flat after his mother passed away and had little contact with his siblings. He suffered from schizophrenia and was dependent on medication to help his condition. Mr C revealed that the medicine caused his mind to go “blank” frequently and as a result, he was unable to gain proper employment.

Although Mr C receives some financial assistance from the

Social Service Office, he struggles financially and has been unable to pay his rent for some months. When Vincentians visited him at his home, they found that his living conditions were bad. Not only was the flat messy, dirty, and disorganised, it was infested with roaches.

BEFORE

Mr C confided that his living environment made him feel depressed and this lowered his self-esteem. The Vincentians realised that even though Mr C wanted to do better for himself and clean his home, he was hampered by his mental health condition.

The St Mary of the Angels Conference immediately adopted

Mr C as one of its FINs and set out to improve his living conditions. The priority was to uplift his spirit and outlook in life and help him take the first step to live with dignity.

The Conference sought the support of parishioners and three volunteers quickly stepped up to help with Mr C's home makeover. Generous donors also gave needed household items like appliances while the SSVP Conference bought a new mattress and a bed to help Mr C get a better night's rest. All this was swiftly carried out over a weekend, and made possible because of Vincentians Mike and Nadine, who oversaw the entire transformation of Mr C's home.

It was all worth it as Mr C was elated to see how much his living space had changed at the end of the day.

AFTER

After the makeover, Vincentians continued to engage with Mr C over the phone and also paid him a visit a few weeks later. It was gratifying to see that Mr C had not only continued to maintain the livability of his home but extended this care to himself as he was making greater effort with his personal grooming and even had a haircut!

“My life seems to be brighter now and I would like to express much gratitude to SSVP,” said Mr C.

As for the Vincentians from the St Mary of the Angels, they are happy as disciples of Christ to have brought light and hope into Mr C's life. Their journey with Mr C, they said, has only just begun. They will continue to journey with him so that he may experience God's love through their engagement with him. 

Students bring cheer to FINs

CHIJ (Katong) Primary children provide care packs to SSVP FINs living in Marine Parade area

CHIJ (Katong) Primary's annual Gift of Love project in collaboration with SSVP Conference of the Holy Family took on a different form this year due to the pandemic. Previously, students from CHIJ (Katong) Primary would visit and bring joy to the Conference's Friends in Need (FINs) together with Conference members.



Although the pandemic prevented the students from visiting the FINs this year, the students, their parents and teachers were still keen to do something that would benefit the less fortunate in their community. They organised themselves to collect daily essentials including instant beverages, towels, bath products and dental care items, to put together 60 care packs for FINs living in the Marine Parade area. The care packs were distributed

over the last two weekends of July, and was well-appreciated by the FINs. The FINs comprise individuals and families, young and old from varying ethnicities and religions.

Said the principal of CHIJ (Katong) Primary Mrs Judina Cheong: "This year, CHIJ (Katong) Primary celebrates its 91st anniversary and the fourth centenary of the birth of the founder of CHIJ schools, Blessed Nicolas Barré. Our school theme, 'Shine in our Faith', epitomises the work done by our founder and the Infant Jesus (IJ) Sisters in 1662 when the first CHIJ was set up in Rouen, France, for poor children. This legacy lives on in our eleven IJ schools in Singapore. The Gift of Love project has benefitted 60 families and enabled our students to reach out in love and to be of service to others."

SSVP Holy Family Conference president Melvin Lum praised the joint project with the school. He said: "We have been collaborating with CHIJ (Katong) Primary on the Gift of Love Project for more than 10 years. Such community outreach projects give our Conference the opportunity to engage the wider community and in reaching out to the less fortunate living in our midst.

It also nurtures the students by providing them with such 'values-in-action' opportunities which hopefully will inspire them to embark on other opportunities to serve."

Primary 6 student Rachel Tan spoke of the lessons learnt from the Gift of Love project, saying: "I think that this project is very timely. Many people lost their jobs or are unable to go to work due to



this pandemic. So as Catholics, we should help the needy as much as we can. From this project, I learnt the importance of being generous. I think it is very important to help those less fortunate than us."

The FINs were happy with the care packs and thanked the school and the students for their thoughtfulness and generosity. "The items were very good and useful. Big towel, coffee, Milo and biscuits all very good. I'm very grateful to the students," said one of the FINs. 

SSVP supports Catholic200SG celebrations

This year, SSVP Singapore joins all Catholics here to mark the 200th anniversary of the Catholic Church's presence in Singapore. On 11 December 1821, St. Laurent Imbert landed in Singapore and planted the seeds of Catholic faith here.

Themed "Ignite and Shine with Faith" and organised by the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Singapore, Catholic200SG seeks to launch a new era of faith by engaging with Catholics and the community through festivals, talks and public events held across 2021.

SSVP is supporting Catholic200SG by organising and participating in events for Vincentians and the public including:

SSVP Day of Recollection (DOR)

SSVP's DOR is an annual retreat for Vincentians to prepare effectively for apostolic witness and service. This year's theme "To rediscover/renew/revitalise/light up our faith" was also aligned



Ms Adonara Mucek (top left) from the Youth Wing shared, "While this session brought us closer to our faith and God, I also found myself looking inwards, understanding more of how my own prayer life can bring both myself and others into God's love."

with Catholic200SG's theme. The Retreat, held on 20 Feb, was led by Fr Stanley Goh, a newly ordained Jesuit priest. Fr Goh provided a refreshing perspective on how to lift our faith to a higher realm. The Retreat ended with a sunset mass.

Ignitus! Social Mission with Love Virtual Exhibition

Co-presented by Caritas Singapore

and CHARIS, the exhibition was launched on 4 September. It showcases over 35 participating Member Organisations where visitors could visit virtual booths in a 3D environment. At SSVP's virtual booth, the visitor gets to know more about our social mission, the programmes and services Vincentians provide to the poor and disadvantaged and the impact the Society has made on our FINs.

What's next? Catholic200SG Festival

SSVP will be participating in the Festival on 7 December at the Organisation's Fair. The Fair will be an opportunity for members of the public to find out more about Catholic organisations. Vincentians will be on hand to share about our social mission and reach out to those who need our help. The Fair will be held at Catholic Centre (10am- 5pm).



My dad, my inspiration

When Martin Loh was young, he used to see his father busy at the typewriter on some evenings. His father was then the Secretary of the SSVP Conference of St Bernadette and he used to type out the Conference minutes which caught the attention of the young Martin. The spark was lit and through some of the stories and experiences that were shared on occasion at the dinner table, an insight into the work of the Society was built.

Watching TV shows like “Highway to Heaven” and documentaries on poverty further inspired him as he grew older. It seemed logical to him to become a Vincentian since the work of SSVP is directed to the poor.



Martin's dad and mum with his children

Five years ago, Martin now aged 52, joined the SSVP Queen of Peace Conference. In addition to doing the regular work of a

Vincentian, Martin stepped up when SSVP's National Council was looking for a Vincentian as its Treasurer. He had the right professional credentials and experience and Martin thought it made sense to marry both and willingly offered to be the Treasurer when duty called. He was elected Treasurer during the Annual General Meeting held on 28 May 2021.

Martin also continues to keep the Vincentian spirit in the family. When visiting FINs, he often takes his wife and daughters along. They also help him on days when the SSVP Conference runs the church canteen.

Martin does not think that his SSVP work has affected his time with his family. “I do not feel that my time with my family has suffered. When I am doing work for the Society, my daughters may be asleep or busy with other stuff (like schoolwork or playing their Nintendo), so there is no impact on my time



Martin Loh, newly elected Treasurer, SSVP (National Council of Singapore)

with them,” he said.

Martin's wish for SSVP

“What I do want to see at the Conference level is a larger number of youth. If they can join the Society they will be able to bring new energy and passion in making a difference in the lives of the poor, just like Frederic Ozanam did as a university student,” he added.

Martin finds great joy as a Vincentian serving the poor, even when it is by small actions.

“Serving them is to witness the miracle of what are seemingly small actions like providing financial and food aid, tuition and counselling. These actions can have a kind of butterfly effect whereby our actions can have a big positive impact on a person's day, week, month or life.” 



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My family's past struggles help me understand the poor better



When she was growing up, facing financial struggles at home was a constant for Jaime Koh (above), a 35-year old Vincentian. Her father was the sole breadwinner with many financial commitments. He had to pay for the education of his four children as well as large medical bills for her mum who was very ill. Even though he worried about putting food on the table, her father instilled in all the children that “education is the key to breaking out of the poverty cycle.”

Taking this to heart, Jaime worked hard and graduated from the National University of Singapore. Today she is the co-owner of an interior design firm. Jaime, however, did not forget her past and she has answered the calling to help others as a Vincentian.

Why SSVP?

“I felt the calling very strongly. My family had a lot of financial difficulties when I was growing up. We were always struggling with money, sometimes down to the last dollar. I've got out of my situation and I know how to relate to people who are poor... not everyone will have the experience that I had.”

When she joined the SSVP

Conference of Divine Mercy in late 2016, Jaime didn't really know much about what SSVP did apart from the fact that it “helped the poor”. However, she was gently eased into the role, first by “shadowing” and learning the ropes from other Vincentians. Later she became part of a team of Vincentians taking care of a few families of Friends in Need (FINs).

Early in her journey as a Vincentian, she made two realisations. Firstly, many FIN families faced problems that are not just financial, they are often beset with an insurmountable mountain of issues which may include mental health, addiction, matrimonial, abuse etc. Secondly, she found that she interacted well with the younger FINs.

Jaime joined the SSVP Youth Wing as well as the Tuition Programme for FINs and this is where she first met Nick (not his real name), when he was in Secondary One, and his sister.

Said Jaime: “Nick wasn't doing well at school and generally not interested in his studies when I was tutoring him... it was not something that he thought was important. I decided to share with him my story... how I broke out of

the poverty cycle and I told him: ‘No one can help you. You have to help yourself if you want to have a good life’”.

Unfortunately, there was much strife at home caused by an addiction problem, made worse with repeated relapses. But the Vincentian team from Divine Mercy did not give up. With continued befriending and support from the Parish Priest, a breakthrough was made that led to a sacrament of reconciliation which became the turning point for Nick's family. Today, the family is doing well. They recently purchased a flat and Nick has been doing well in school. He was awarded a best subject book prize for topping his level last year.

When asked about her Vincentian journey thus far and how it has impacted her as a person, Jaime said: “I have realised that it's not about how many touch points I've made, it's about just helping that one person, that one person who is in need. It may not even be financial. Especially during the pandemic, I've become more aware there will always be someone who is going through a divorce or struggling with mental health and you can be a friend to that person.” 