



# The Hunger to be Seen

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A CLOSER LOOK AT THE PEOPLE WE SERVE

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The theme for the 2022 Annual National Formation is **HUNGER**. The Formation Committee thought it would be a good idea to identify all the aspects of hunger that play a part in the SSVP mission to serve people in need.

This presentation under the title “**Hunger to be Seen**” is designed to take a closer look at who we serve as Vincentians. The relationship with the people we serve has evolved to reflect a more current world view and today we will identify where we started and where we are now in terms of the context of serving others.

# Historical view of the poor



The Bible referred to the poor many times in relation to the ministry of Jesus and His love and compassion for the poor. The poor are mentioned 178 times and referred to in other languages approximately 2000 times. They are described as the destitute, the sick, the lame, the blind and the outcast.

Until recently the common understanding of the poor was a group within society who cannot support themselves, are in debt and are visibly impoverished (shabby clothes, unkempt, often homeless, unemployed). In some cases they have been considered shiftless and unstable. Suffice to say that there is a strong connotation that is derived from the words poor and poverty.

In 1833, when Frederic Ozanam and his companions noticed the poor in the streets around the Sorbonne they saw a group of bedraggled men, women and children who were barely subsisting. They recognized them as the “poor” of their society. Their Christian sensibilities demanded that they respond to the need. Their view of the people they observed was shaped by the world they lived in.

*“Knowledge of the poor and needy is not gained by pouring over books or in discussions with politicians, but by visiting the slums where they live, sitting by the bedside of the dying, feeling the cold they feel and learning from their lips the causes of their woes.” Frédéric Ozanam*

When they formed the first “Conference” to go to the poor, they were guided by Sister Rosalie Rendu and within a short time they dedicated themselves to St. Vincent de Paul and the Virgin Mary.

# Quotes about the poor:



The following quotes by Sister Rosalie Rendu and St. Vincent de Paul provide us with some insight into their sensibilities about the poor.

*“The street and the stairs will be long and unfriendly, the poor often ungrateful. You will soon find charity a heavy burden, heavier than the jug of soup or the full basket. But you will still be pleasant and smile. Distributing soup and bread is not everything. The rich can do that. The poor are your masters and you will find them terribly exacting masters. So the more unattractive and dirty they are the ruder and unfair they are, the more you must lavish your love upon them. It is only by feeling your love that the poor will forgive you your gifts of bread.” St. Vincent de Paul*

*“Let us love the Good God very much. Let us not be sparing with our duty; let us serve the poor well, always speaking to them with great kindness. If you do not act in this way, you will be punished: the poor will insult you. The ruder they are the more dignified you must be. Remember, Our Lord hides behind those rags.” Sister Rosalie Rendu*







Ozanam was drawn to serving the poor by his need to live a Christian life. Those who wanted to follow Jesus were offered a clear path in His teachings. Luke sums up the message in this quote

*“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because of which he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind, to send out in freedom those who are oppressed, to proclaim the favorable year of the Lord” (Luke 4:18–19 LEB).*

Even today the definition of poverty offers a similar view of who are the poor in society.

**pov·er·ty ['pävərdē] NOUN**

the state of being extremely poor:

"thousands of families are living in abject poverty"

***synonyms:***

penury · destitution · indigence · pennilessness · privation · deprivation · impoverishment  
· neediness · need · want · hardship · impecuniousness ·

# Current view of the people we serve

## Natalie

Natalie is the 25 year old single mother of two children ages 4 and 18 months. Her partner left when she told him she was pregnant with her second child. She lives in a city in a province that is far from her family and has little or no contact with them. She works part-time to subsidize her social assistance but her lack of child care prevents her from working full time. Her income does not cover many of her basic needs and she relies on organizations that offer support. She feels isolated and exhausted. She calls the SSVP dispatch several times a month to request food and assistance with household bills.



# Marcus



Marcus is a 50 year old man who lives with his wife Angelique and their 15 year old son Jonas. Their life has been good and secure until recently when Marcus suffered an injury. He was cleaning his eaves and he fell off the ladder breaking his leg and causing a traumatic brain injury. Although his leg healed on schedule, he has not been able to resume his work due to frequent headaches and difficulty with short term memory. Unfortunately his workplace benefits did not cover an off site injury and he was not covered by his home insurance. The family has depleted their savings. Angelique is attending college and will graduate in a few months. She is confident that once she is working the family will get back on track but in the meantime they are grateful for St. Vincent de Paul services in their community.





# Purdeep

Purdeep was the first in her family to come to Canada. She had been here for 2 years when her father passed away, leaving her mother and her sister alone in India. They came to live with her to escape a life of destitution.

Purdeep's sister is 16 years old and her mother does not speak English. Her salary must support all three of them. Her employment pays her a basic rate so it is a stretch to pay rent, and feed and cloth the family. She needs help making ends meet.



# Roberto



Roberto and his wife Carla are second generation Canadians. Their parents came to Canada when the two were children. Both families settled in the city a few blocks apart and in time they came to know each other through the Parish. Now, almost fifty years after their marriage, they are retired. What they had not planned on when Roberto reached retirement was how much they would need to maintain a comfortable lifestyle. The government pensions combined are not enough to keep up with the cost of living. All their lives they were frugal and living within Roberto's salary and Carla's small sewing business. Now they need help to manage their basic expenses. A recent car repair has made it very difficult to buy food this month. They will need to rely on the food bank from the local SSVP.



# Carol



Carol is 40 years old. She is the single mother of a 3 year old son and a 14 year old daughter. She is a homecare worker who was recently injured on the job. She was lifting a client out of his chair and she twisted her leg, resulting in a deep muscle sprain. She is unable walk and she is off the job on leave for medical reasons.

Carol works for a private company and the benefits are low. She has applied for medical EI but her employer has disputed the injury and her claim is under investigation. She has gone 2 weeks without pay and she has used all of her meagre savings. She is worried that it will be several more weeks before her EI is approved. She has the support of witnesses so she is optimistic that she will receive the funds. In the meantime, she needs assistance.



# *What do each of these examples have in common?*



- **They are working people**
- **They have family**
- **Their situation may be temporary**
- **They are seeking ways to help themselves**
- **They are functional**
- **They are ordinary people with a need**

These are not the destitute helpless group that is usually associated with the term poor.

Statistics Canada informs us that 1 in 5 Canadians does not have enough food to eat and 23% of Canadians have to limit the amount they eat because of the cost of food. Canada has had the distinction of being in the bottom third of industrialized countries for child poverty. Currently 26% of children in our country live below the poverty line. That is 1.3 million. In total, 4.9 million Canadians live in poverty.

What these statistics do not accurately represent are those people in need who have not been captured in the census, mostly due to the fact that their needs are temporary and/or circumstantial. As the cost of living rises, the numbers go up and so does the impact on the population.

We can describe them as people in need at this time.

# The Psychology of Giving



We may think that volunteering our time to assist others is a simple human transaction. Giving has many dynamic implications. There have been over 500 studies related to the psychology of giving.

## *Here are few of the findings:*

- People who give to charitable causes are happier than those who don't, regardless of their gender and marital status, and the more they give the happier they are.
- People who are religious are more likely to give to charity
- There are gender differences: men receive a boost (increase in life satisfaction) when they become donors, women are happier when they give more of their income
- In households where women drive or participate equally in the charitable decisions the entire family is happier.
- Giving is good for the donor as well as the recipient.
- If we are in tune with just giving we are immune to the “special occasion” giving.

## *Motivation is key*

- If I am good and I give enough will I get a reward?
- It makes me feel good about myself (is that the best motivation?)
- Any form of gift that comes with an alternative motive is not a gift. It is manipulation and it exposes the “giver” as having an agenda
- When the giver expects gratitude it is not a gift.
- When there is judgement of the need the helping is corrupted.

What do you consider an appropriate motivation for giving?



# Language as a Change Agent



In the past few years, Saint Vincent de Paul Society has made the shift away from the word “poor” in favour of the term “people in need”.

The language that we use to describe others and ourselves is a powerful message. When we refer to an individual as someone who is poor we are doing them a disservice. We are putting them in a category that has negative connotations. The implication is that they are helpless, that they need saving in some way, that they are not able to help themselves, that they are inferior. The label of “poor” disregards the whole person.

## ***Language is also cultural.***

What one group considers to be a deficit may not be viewed as such from a different cultural perspective.

Describing a family who are newcomers to Canada as poor is not accurate and is not respectful to that family.

***The words we use send a message*** “We are here to help you” indicates a power dynamic with the power belonging to the helper. Reframing how we greet people and indicate our purpose is an important part of changing the relational dynamic.

**Bias is a problem that we all need to address. We are all biased in one way or another. Bias is a product of our terms of reference.**



We may think that we are not biased. We may think that we are not judgmental. The problem is that bias may be well hidden and we are not aware of the role it plays in our interactions. Our world view, our terms of reference are shaped by all of our experiences to the present moment, coupled with all the input that we have been exposed to by our caregivers, our families, our government, our religion, our neighbourhood, our schools, our friends and so on. All of this and more shapes who we are in the world. And that process shapes how we think. That includes the subtle messages that we plant into our belief system that can come to the surface without our awareness.

There is a way to deal with bias and that is to question our thoughts and behaviours as we encounter experiences such as new people and new circumstances. Expose yourself to new ideas and then examine your reaction.

**Bias is everywhere.** You are not the lucky one who escaped it.

# Respectful language is



- **INCLUSIVE**
- **VALUING**
- **NON-JUDGEMENTAL**
- **PROMOTES EQUALITY**
- **COLLABORATIVE**
- **RELATIONAL**

It is important to remember when serving others that there is a power differential between the giver and the receiver. Language is the tool that eliminates the imbalance.

*Here are some examples of how this works.*

“Everyone has ups and downs in life (inclusive) You are doing a good job managing your situation (valuing). How do you think we can assist you at the moment?” (collaborative)

“It can be difficult keeping up with growing children. It is always a struggle to keep them in clothes that fit” Have you had a chance to visit the SSVP Store? I saw a whole new inventory of winter clothes when I was there last week.” (inclusive, relational, non-judgmental)

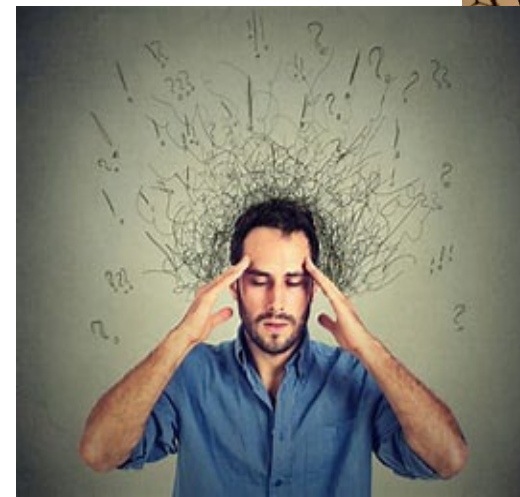
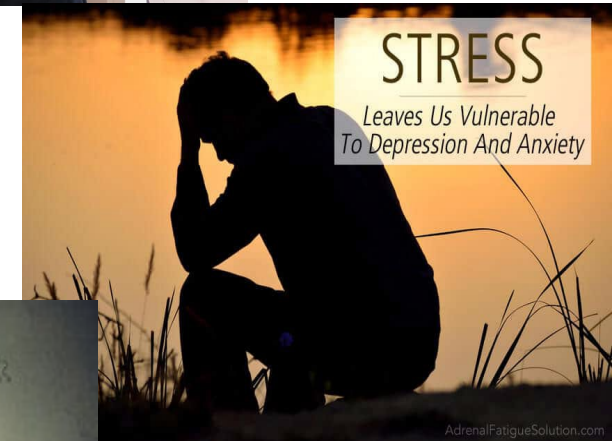
“Food is so expensive right now, especially fruit and vegetables. We are lucky to have all these donations from the local gardens. Would you like to have some of the fruit and vegetables for your family?” (collaborative, promotes equality, inclusive, relational)

*Can you think of some examples from your recent home visits that could be reframed using respectful language?*

# What are the implications of financial stress?



- Anxiety
- Depression
- Acute stress
- Physical ailments
- Disease (heart, diabetes, arthritis,...)
- Family breakdown
- Increase in intimate partner violence
- Increase in misuse of alcohol and substances
- Increase in gambling addiction
- Low self esteem, loss of confidence
- Isolation
- Loneliness
- Withdrawal
- Anger issues



# All of the implications in the above list are related to STRESS.



When we experience stress our body receives an alarm message from our brain that says “uh oh, we are in trouble. The world is not safe”. This alarm releases the stress hormone which is adrenaline into the human body to assist the individual to get through the difficult situation. Prolonged stress can turn into a cycle of adrenaline release that has a negative impact on the nervous system. The cycle is driven by the thoughts of the individual. Negative thinking becomes the pattern and it is the negative thoughts such as worry, fear, and despair that open the adrenaline tap.

Research on the effects of long-term stress indicate that it can cause heart and organ disease, physical pain, headaches including migraines, respiratory problems, and many diseases including intestinal issues such as colitis.

Stress also takes its toll on mental wellness. Anxiety and depression are at epidemic levels in our society. Individuals who are under extreme stress can become overwhelmed and this can be the beginning of a downward slide in their workplace and in their home life. The feelings of helplessness and hopelessness can manifest as anger. Individuals can begin to doubt their worth and their abilities resulting in low self-esteem and low confidence.

Loneliness and isolation are common by-products of mental health issues. Many seniors who live alone suffer from loneliness and need to have contact with others, but people of all ages can find themselves feeling alone and isolated from society. When life is difficult for many reasons there is a tendency to turn inward and avoid having to talk about what is happening. It is not uncommon for someone in need to feel ashamed about their current circumstances.

Loneliness can also stem from not being able to speak the language resulting in a lack of social connections. An individual may be separated from family and they may feel homesick and overwhelmed.

No matter what the reason loneliness can cause feelings of despair.



# A shift in thinking...



Vincentians are proud of the history of the Saint Vincent de Paul Society and their Catholic heritage. So many people have been served by the Society in Canada over the past one hundred and seventy-five years. There is much to honour and much to keep.

Times do change and society moves forward as consciousness is raised. We now understand that the people we serve are not at the bottom of society but rather, we are all together. We may have different experiences from time to time that create a need to call on the support of others but ultimately we are all on the same journey. No one group is above any other group and as a society we strive to push back at the notion that some are givers and some are receivers. The variable is life circumstances.

A guiding principle of Christianity is that we are all created in the image of God, and all are children of God. Equal in His eyes.

From a prosocial perspective, we are all responsible for contributing to a healthy community where all people are healthy, respected and valued.

**“When a clod of earth falls into the sea, my country is diminished.” Ernest Hemmingway**