



□ Celebrating Volunteers' Week at the Blackfriars Centre.

Society needs cash for urgent roof repairs

THE SVP Blackfriars Centre is in urgent need of a new roof which will cost in excess of £250,000. Without a safe, functional roof, the SVP cannot continue to carry out the good work it currently does at the Centre for the homeless, the disabled, the elderly, the mentally ill and their carers.

If you can make a donation to help repair the Blackfriars Centre roof, please telephone 020 7703 3030 or email info@svp.org.uk. In both instances, please quote "Blackfriars Roof donation". All support will be very gratefully received.



□ The popular Chilli Studios at the SVP Blackfriars Centre.

900 people a week use the Blackfriars Centre

THE SVP's Blackfriars Centre in Newcastle is already a thriving community, with approximately 900 people per week using the Centre, supported by five paid staff and a band of hard-working volunteers. The Centre houses an innovative project called Chilli Studios, providing support to those who are experiencing a wide range of diagnosed mental health problems, or social exclusion within their communities. 'Create to Change' is a programme working with design students from Newcastle University Architectural Course to redesign the Blackfriars shop area. The Centre also features three self-contained apartments for

women who have found themselves homeless. One woman, Sarah (name changed) was a semi-professional who lost her job and then her home. After time in a dingy bed and breakfast, she found her way to the SVP. With support and encouragement from Blackfriars staff, Sarah started volunteering in the Centre's community cafe and on reception, which boosted the confidence she had lost. At the same time, support workers linked her in to Job Centre Plus who sourced some employability training for her and she has now secured a permanent job with Marks & Spencer.

She is currently working with Blackfriars staff to plan her move into her own accommodation. The main hall in the Centre is used for numerous different keep fit activities for over 50's, from line dancing to Zumba to a Wednesday Tea Dance and also hosts a lunch club and 'disco' attended by a number of mentally and physically disabled people and their carers. A Music Appreciation Group meets weekly and the Women's Institute and local councillors hold their meetings in the upstairs meeting room. Sunday is a busy day, with four different Christian churches using both the main hall and smaller theatre for their services.

Nearly two centuries after the establishment of the first SVP group at St Andrew's Parish, Newcastle, the SVP is still flourishing across the diocese, bringing companionship, consolation, comfort and practical help to the disadvantaged of the diocese. ANITA BONIFACE reports.

St Vincent de Paul Society celebrates 170 years of helping people in need throughout Hexham and Newcastle

MEMBERS of the St Vincent de Paul Society (SVP) from throughout the diocese gathered at a Festival Meeting at St Cuthbert's, North Shields to mark two significant anniversaries - the 170th anniversary of the beginnings of the SVP within the diocese and the 170th anniversary of the parish SVP Conference of St Cuthbert's, North Shields. The first diocesan SVP Conference was established at St Andrew's, Worswick Street, Newcastle in April 1846 with the Conference at St Cuthbert's quickly following in December 1846. The Festival Meeting opened with Benediction and a period of reflection before the Blessed Sacrament. Tyne Central Council President, Mick Reynolds, spoke of his joy in recognising the 170 years of service from the SVP in the diocese in general and from St

Cuthbert's parish SVP in particular. The meeting was an intergenerational celebration with senior SVP members being joined, at the beginning of the gathering, by the Mini Vinnies (the youngest SVP apostolate made up of children aged 7-11) from St Cuthbert's Primary School. The Mini Vinnies opened the meeting with a short presentation of their extensive work which includes regular visits to Edith Mofat House where residents and Mini Vinnies have become great friends. Mrs Kerry Cottis, Mini Vinnies co-ordinator at the school, spoke about the commitment of the children, the great examples they give and their strong links with the parish SVP. Members left the meeting feeling inspired to continue their work into the future.



□ John Hall with members of St Cuthbert's SVP Conference



□ SVP Mini Vinnies at St Cuthbert's Primary School

Reaching out to aid prisoners

SVP Conference members today visit and befriend people who are lonely and isolated, providing company, practical support, and friendship. However, one Conference in Durham takes befriending a step further, visiting and supporting prisoners. St Dismas Conference started when the Prisoner Advice and Care Trust (PACT), made up partly of members of the SVP, decided to close and move to London in the 1980s. The SVP realised the need to continue the work and stepped in to carry the mantle of prisoner support in the diocese. Today members of St Dismas Conference support prisoners in the Young Offenders Institute and Durham Prison. Pat Morton is a member of St Dismas and explains that the work done is very varied. "We support the chaplain at the prisons, providing treats for prisoners

like Easter Eggs, chocolate biscuits at Christmas, and fulfilling unexpected requests. For instance, a prisoner recently broke his glasses and could not afford a replacement pair. We provided a small grant so that he could purchase new glasses, recognising the importance of this to the prisoner." Pat says that some members also support prisoners when they leave prison, helping them make the transition back into society. "That work is vital" she says.

Asked why the SVP has a special role to prisoners, Pat responds: "SVP members do more than social work. They visit for the development of the person, their spiritual development. Anyone can break the law and end up in prison and we are making them feel that they are still part of humanity, still part of the wider world." The effects of the visits, says Pat, is that the prisoners feel better, calmer and this also helps the staff.

Pat says visiting and supporting prisoners "makes you understand humanity more. It makes you more tolerant of people, it changes you as a person. It certainly changed me". To find out more about joining the SVP, or pledge your support for the vital Blackfriars Centre Roof, please call 020 7703 3030, email info@svp.org.uk or visit www.svp.org.uk



□ Face-to-face support at the SVP Approved Premises.

Generations of the same family have loyally served the society

JOHN Hall is the third generation of his family to belong to the SVP. Here he talks about how the St Vincent de Paul Society has been part of his family since the late 1800s:

My grandfather, Mr John Hall of Chirton joined the SVP in 1896. My father, who was born in 1891, joined in 1909 and became a Conference president in 1925 when I was born. I became a member in 1976 and have remained in the SVP ever since. My family got involved in the Society through the church. There was always a collection box at the back of the church which provided contact with the brothers. My family always had a great interest in helping the poor. I have clear memories as a lad of a time when both my mother and father were quite ill, but my dad still managed to pop out and make a visit to someone in trouble. As an SVP member he was always busy. I became interested myself because my brother was part of the Society,

and I already felt inspired by my dad. A few of my friends had joined as well so it was very much a community thing. What attracted me was empathy with the housebound and lonely. Things have changed over the years. We still visit the housebound and the sick, but the introduction of the NHS and the welfare state mean that most of our work is with the lonely, rather than giving out financial grants. We do also get refugees and asylum seekers who need help and support. We often see them at church on Sunday morning which is rewarding. As a member I feel a great deal of satisfaction when I am able to help one way or another. It is nice to be a member of St Cuthbert's Conference with its 170 year history, but really I just get on with what needs to be done together with the other members who are a great support. I would like the SVP to continue to be valuable in the community and carry on making an important contribution to people in need. Maybe I will encourage my grandchildren to join."



□ The Holy Island Camp has been running since the 1950s and it offers hundreds of children a chance for a holiday that they would otherwise go without.

Brief history of the SVP in the diocese

THE good work of the SVP and the sense of community it fosters, leads to a strong sense of commitment and vocation amongst its members. This means it is not unusual for someone to have been an SVP member for several decades. Bill Lawson joined the Society in 1967 and has been a Conference President, District Council President, Central Council President and National President. Bill said: "Although Conference numbers have halved since the 1960s, Community Support Projects (CSPs) which run services for local people in need, plus the flourishing of the SVP school groups, Mini Vinnies and Youth SVP, means that the SVP presence in the diocese is still strong. And there are still over 90 Conferences across the diocese."

Bill gives an outline of the history of the SVP in this very vibrant diocese: **1846:** Three Conferences were established in Newcastle - St Andrew's, Newcastle and St Cuthbert, North Shields in 1846, followed by a Conference, St Mary's in Sunderland in 1851. **1850s:** The Sunderland Conference was made up of 70 men. These men had their work cut out for them when in 1851 a cholera epidemic broke out after a ship coming from

the Baltic brought over a strain of the disease. These men spent much time in acts of mercy like caring for the sick and burying the dead. But in the spirit of true sacrifice, many of them themselves caught the disease and died. **1890s:** 12 Conferences in the diocese, including St Mary's Cathedral in Newcastle, with much work centred around feeding the hungry. This included for example, feeding 100 school boys whose fathers were involved in a very long Durham miners' strike. **1892:** Annual report states that the Conference of St Cuthbert's bought a sheep to slaughter and distributed its meat amongst the poor at Christmas for their festive meal. **1900s:** The SVP started to branch out into doing 'special works', known today as Community Support Projects. **1918:** The SVP was left a house in the countryside west of Newcastle which became a holiday centre for the elderly and poor. This holiday home remained in use for the same purpose until the 1990s. **1930s:** SVP started working with the deaf community. Today, the community have their own chapel and chaplain, based in the SVP's Deaf Centre, plus a social club with activities for older people, and a social group. Bill says that it remains "very vibrant". The Deaf Centre also houses an Asylum drop in run

by the diocesan Justice and Peace group. **In 1947:** A local Bishop received a letter from the Home Office expressing a concern for the number of Catholic boys on probation in Newcastle, and asked the SVP for help. The result was Ozanam House, a home which gives support and help to men who have either been in prison or are on bail. **1950s:** Holy Island Camp was started, a holiday camp which still offers hundreds of children from deprived backgrounds a chance for a holiday that they would otherwise go without. The Camp enables children from inner cities to experience outdoor living, and be close to nature. **1960s:** St Christopher's House added to Ozanam House, and together these two houses help ex-offenders make the transition back into community life after time in prison. **Today:** These special works, founded over the past century, are still running today. Nowadays, the SVP also runs the Blackfriars Centre and there are also currently five SVP community shops in the diocese which are run in areas of deprivation. Bill says that these shops "have a tremendous witness to the Society, they are the public face of the SVP". There are also 95 SVP Conferences in the diocese.



□ Ladies enjoying a tap dance class at the SVP Blackfriars Centre.