

Young Vincentians: Playing their part in the global family of Christ

For teachers wanting to encourage school pupils to put their faith into action, the Young Vincentian Programmes - the young people's apostolates belonging to the St Vincent de Paul Society (SVP) - can be of great assistance.

The three Young Vincentian apostolates, which consist of Mini Vinnies for children aged 7-11, Youth SVP for 11-14 year olds, and B-Attitude for teenagers aged 14-18, provide staff with guidance, liturgical resources, materials and activity ideas to help children find practical ways to become disciples of Christ. The comprehensive resources provided help pupils put into action key ideas such as social justice, good citizenship and the dignity of every person, in a Christian context. The groups are set up in schools with the help of a local Young Vincentian Development Officer (YVDO) provided by the SVP who is often a former head teacher and who liaises with school staff to help the process go smoothly.

Dee Mansi, YVDO for the Westminster Diocese and a former head of three schools, describes the Young Vincentian programmes as a way of developing the altruism and desire to do good which many young people possess. "It's not just a way of harnessing it, but utilising it, and maximising the pupils' potential not only for the future, but for the here and now," she says.

Children are encouraged to carry out age appropriate activities that put them in touch with people in need in the wider local community. For examples Mini Vinnies in one primary school made Easter cards for older residents in a local care home. Youth

SVP and

B-Attitude members

often pay visits to residential homes to befriend the older people. A Youth SVP group at SS John Fisher and Thomas More Humanities College in East Lancs provide a silver service afternoon tea at the local residential home. College Chaplain Tina Fishwick says: "It enables pupils to get a greater sense of the loneliness and need in their communities and gives them a 'bigger picture' of what it means to be elderly or vulnerable".

Young Vincentians often work alongside their local parish adult SVP group. This gives children a firm connection with their local church and community and a greater sense of belonging. Emma Heslop is a teaching assistant and lay Chaplain at St Peter's Primary School in Gateshead. Her group of 20 Mini Vinnies collaborate with their local adult SVP to collect food and toiletries for a local homeless project called Joe's Place. Heslop says that the Mini Vinnies is part of a 'life long journey' with the Catholic Church.

This sense of belonging that working with the adult SVP provides is emphasised by YVDO Jo Waller. Waller points out that the SVP is "an international network of charity, present in 150 countries around the world."

She describes how Youth SVP pupils in one secondary school were able to raise funds for the Nepalese SVP after the earthquake in Nepal. Likewise students raise funds for the SVP's Baby Feeding project in Sudan. "Being part of an international organisation

gives them a wider perspective of what is going on in the world".

As well as fostering compassion amongst young people, the Young Vincentian programmes can often reach children who are quieter, more reflective types and who may be less academic or sporty. Susan Wilson, a chaplain working in five schools across East Durham, says: "Often children who lack self-esteem, confidence or academic prowess seem to be drawn to the Young Vincentian programmes as they can be valued for who they are without any pressures."

Stephen Wheatley, Executive Head of Holy Rood and Divine Saviour Schools in Watford, says of the Mini Vinnies: "I think it appeals to all pupils because of the hands on nature of being a Young Vincentian. Children by their very nature are keen to get involved with the world around them and it is very powerful for them to see the impact their concern in action can have on those in need of our help."

The programmes are extremely flexible and can fit into the busy timetable of school and staff by being led by teaching assistants, parents and school governors if teachers' time is short. The groups can be run as a

Lunch time club or an after school club and often the pupils involved in the group can be ambassadors for other students in running charitable or spiritual initiatives across the school.

The programmes are easy to adapt and

can form an umbrella under which other initiatives can work, as well as contributing positively to Section 48 inspections which assess the RE component in Ofsted.

As Wheatley says: "The Young Vincentian programmes promote the principles of the SVP and are what we would want for all our children to aspire toward living in their adult lives. They are a way in which we can prove

to our children and their families that the key to Catholic Social Teaching is everybody playing their small part in the global family of Christ."

To gain assistance starting a Mini Vinnies / Youth SVP / B-Attitude group in your school, visit www.svp.org.uk, telephone SVP National Office on 020 7703 3030, or email youngvincentians@svp.org.uk.

