

The Society of St. Vincent de Paul is a lay Catholic organization whose mission is to live the Gospel message by serving Christ in the poor with love, respect, justice and joy.

My name is Denise Bondy and I am a Vincentian, that is, a member of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul.

Vincentians consider themselves called to service, our membership is a vocation. Our founders, Blessed Frederic Ozanam and his companions believed that they were called from their comfortable, middle class lives to do what Jesus asks each one of us: to go into the homes of those in our local communities and bring whatever we can to help those in need. This Society began in Paris, France in 1833 and was brought to Canada in 1847.

How did I get here? What is my personal call?

My story is that of a Vatican II convert. My family were non-religious but socially committed; I think of them as humanists. This was not enough for me, though. From my earliest years, I remember a need, a curiosity about God and the Church. I “shopped around” as a kid, looking for a spiritual home. I read about and worshipped with many denominations. But there was always something missing until I finally arrived at the beginning, at the Catholic faith. I was baptised here at St. John the Baptist during the Easter Vigil, in 1965, at the age of 19.

My Church was alive and well and open to everything, thanks to Vatican II! From my earliest membership, social justice issues were mine. Dick and I married young. I did just about every parish activity that involved children and families. Our own kids carried lists of foods we couldn’t buy during the Nestle boycott. We ‘adopted’ a Solidarity family in the Polish independence struggle. My parish was comfortable but so much of the world was suffering! So many people in Canada and right here in my community were in need!

Kids grew up and I returned to work full time in the local Catholic schools where I worked with students with special needs and became a worker advocate. When retirement time came, I wondered what God had in mind for me to do next.

God revealed my path to the Society of St. Vincent de Paul through Sister Elodia. A dedicated Vincentian herself, Sister didn’t insist that I join the Society, she just expected it. (Anyone who knew Sister knows that what usually happened was: Sister Elodia prayed and got what she expected.) My husband, Dick, was retired before me and had already joined SSVP. I thought that was his “thing”; Sister Elodia thought otherwise. Sister was responsible for many women becoming active Vincentians here in Amherstburg. How could we say no to her?

The first home visits were a bit scary. How would people receive us? What do I say to them? What if we encounter problems? Say a prayer and go! Remember what the Society teaches: Each one of us is poor in some way or another. We do everything we can to maintain the dignity of those we serve. We are living the Gospel and we will be transformed by Christ.

Guess what? It really works. I have received so much more than I have ever given. Meeting families who have been forced to ask for help is a humbling, personal experience. I know that children and adults, right here in Amherstburg, have food to eat and a bed to sleep in, thanks to the generosity of my fellow parishioners. I am so privileged to be the vehicle who brings these gifts!

The Society itself feeds me. We meet together to pray and share. We work for those who have no voice. No act of charity is foreign to our Society. We know our Church, as lay people, in our parish and beyond as we reach out through Conferences across our country and the world. My Society is committed to “making no distinctions of creed, ethnic or social background, health, gender or political opinions.” The Society of St. Vincent de Paul in Canada is led by a woman, Penny Craig of Windsor ON. I like that. It empowers me to believe that as a lay person I can lead or follow, as God chooses. I pray that God will continue to call persons of faith and social conscience to the Society of St. Vincent de Paul.