

## SOME THOUGHTS FROM DEPAUL INTERNATIONAL

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I want to start by acknowledging that Depaul International would not have grown as it has if it were not for the Congregation of the Mission and the wider Vincentian family, as you will see in the course of the next ten minutes. Thank you for that opportunity and thank you to Fr Gay for the invitation to speak to you today.

Shell Oil has a business plan that looks 100 years ahead. It can predict the tipping point when it will become uneconomic to continue with fossil fuels and will therefore focus its attention on alternative sources of energy in order to continue to trade successfully. Shell, like most successful global companies, thinks both long term and big. We need to do the same. We need to think big! The Vincent de Paul family is arguably a bigger brand than Shell Oil and certainly older than Coca Cola. It faces its challenges like any organization but it has immense riches in its history, its spirituality, its people and its assets.

My plea is for creative fidelity to the poor. How will we as a Vincentian Family respond together to the rising levels of poverty across the world, whether that poverty is absolute or relative? Depaul International has accepted Vincent's challenge to work with the poorest of the poor — especially with the homeless poor. However, in facing up to this challenge, Depaul International works best in partnership with the Congregation of the Mission and the broader Vincentian Family. We believe that is the future. I think we have uncovered a model of working with the poor which embraces the talents of the different parts of the Vincentian Family but respects their differences. It is a model which puts Vincentian Values to the fore, is transparent in governance, embraces all faiths and none, is not subject to the whims of personalities, is sustainable and, most importantly, it seems to work!

A ten-minute presentation is not a long time to give you a full picture of Depaul International, its work and its aspirations for working with the Vincentian Family. With that in mind I have written this longer background paper giving more detail on our evolution as a group of charities and some contact information.

## HISTORY

### *Partnership of Vincentian Family*

The Depaul Group of charities began life in London as a partnership between three Vincentian groups: the Daughters of Charity, the Society of St Vincent de Paul, and The Passage Day Centre. These three partners were brought together by Cardinal Basil Hume to tackle the growing problem of youth homelessness across the UK. The aim was to develop services for those in crisis, i.e. sleeping on the streets, but also to find a way to reintegrate these people into society so that they could have a place to call home and a stake in their community.

The reason that Cardinal Hume chose the Vincentians for this work is that they have a long and respected tradition of working with the poorest of the poor and, equally importantly, they could be relied upon to deliver.

I was the first employee of Depaul back in 1989 and I worked alongside a Director appointed by the Daughters of Charity (Sr Sarah King-Turner) to develop a whole series of homeless services working with people who were being turned away by other agencies. These were people with active drug problems, people addicted to alcohol, those with mental illness, prostitutes. We kept the barriers for entry to our services as low as possible. The focus was on the individual rather than any system.

At that time the board of trustees of the charity comprised was of different members of the Vincentian Family and at an operational level many of our staff and volunteers were drawn from the Daughters of Charity, Congregation of the Mission, SVP, etc. The Vincentian charism was strong because of the people involved and the history and tradition that they were bringing to bear in the day-to-day life of the charity.

Within five years Depaul had grown into a national homelessness agency in the UK. As it started to develop and find its feet, gradually the religious and lay members of the Vincentian Family began to withdraw, either to focus on other priorities or in response to a decline in their own numbers. Rather than the majority of board members being from the Vincentian Family we now had two out of fifteen. At a management level most Vincentian staff had moved on to new ministries. It was a time when Depaul could easily have lost its way and moved toward more secular values and language. Many charities start in a church crypt but lose all connection within a generation — was Depaul simply one of those, or, was the Vincentian ethos we had taken for granted worth fighting for? Could it survive when the big Vincentian personalities had moved on?

### ***Time to choose – Vincentian or secular?***

It was at this point that we decided to consult about our Vincentian origins and ethos, and more importantly, to write things down rather than leave it to oral tradition. All trustees and staff were given a copy of the biography of St Vincent by Jose Maria Roman and invited to reflect on Vincent's life and mission, and also to reflect on our own experience as a partnership created within the Vincentian Family.

### ***Depaul International's Vincentian Vision, Mission, Values***

What emerged from that consultation was a clear consensus that it was the Vincentian spirit, which gave us life and unity of purpose. Out of that came some powerful benchmarks, which have formed the backbone of our values statement and underpin all of the work that we do to this day.

- Action, not words
- Poorest of the poor
- Non-judgemental
- The poor are our masters
- Innovative unto infinity
- Taking risks

The process also helped us to assert our own Vincentian character. We are not Vincentian because any religious order or lay association has ownership or authority over Depaul. We are Vincentian because we choose to be and because it gives us a sense of purpose, a philosophical and spiritual framework, and a way of working with the poor.

### ***Formation within Depaul International***

Over the last twenty years we have worked very hard to make sure that our values statement is not something that we pin to a wall but rather it is something lived at a day-to-day level. Fr Hugh O'Donnell and the Daughters of Charity in America have helped us in the formation of a week-long residential course, part of which is based in Paris, which introduces staff and trustees not only to the history of Vincent, Louise and Frederic but also develops their skills in taking a leadership role in the promotion of Vincentian values wherever they sit in the organisation. This is all the more remarkable because over 90% of our staff and trustees are drawn not just from the Catholic faith, but from all faiths or none and this is reflected in the

attendance at our formation courses. The Vincentian story is a very compelling one and it catches the imagination of all of our staff and clients. We do not evangelise but we also do not apologise for our inspiration and Catholic roots. I am delighted that Fr Gay has invited us to develop other courses with the Congregation of the Mission, and I hope the benefit will be mutual.

## **WHAT WE DO!**

### ***Depaul International***

Depaul International is the parent company of the Depaul Group of charities. As the Group Chief Executive Officer I have three responsibilities

- To ensure existing subsidiaries work together effectively and efficiently
- To protect and nurture our Vincentian Vision, Mission and Values
- To develop new subsidiaries where invited by the Vincentian Family

### ***Where we work***

At the moment Depaul International works with the poor and marginalized in five different countries - UK, Ireland, Slovakia, Ukraine and the USA. We have over 400 full time staff and a similar number of volunteers helping over 7000 people a year. There are over 70 projects in direct management and 40 others we collaborate with. This includes accommodation projects for single mothers and babies, homeless families, hospice care for the elderly, drug and alcohol rehabilitation, homeless day centres, outreach for street children, medical centres, and training and employment projects.

### ***Role of the Vincentian Family***

None of our growth or success to date would have been possible without the direct involvement of the Vincentian Family. For example in the Ukraine, Slovakia and USA the Chair of the respective charities is a member of the Congregation of the Mission — Fr Vitaliy Novak in Ukraine, Fr Augustin Slaninka in Slovakia and Fr Bernie Tracey in the USA. The nursing care we provide in Slovakia and Ukraine is in partnership with the Daughters of Charity. The volunteers who give out the soup to street children in the Ukraine are from the AIC. It is the Society of St Vincent de Paul in Ireland which

provides support to our clients both in the hostels and also as they move on toward independence. Depaul may take the lead in the development and management of projects but it is co-dependent on the involvement of the Vincentian Family. In addition Depaul International and each of its subsidiaries have appointed representatives from across the Vincentian Family onto its trustee boards. This is to ensure that we continue to build our Vincentian connections but also promote good communications and transparency.

### *To find out more*

For more information about our work please visit [www.depaulinternational.org](http://www.depaulinternational.org) which has links to all of our subsidiaries.

## **WHAT DOES THE CONGREGATION OF THE MISSION AND THE VINCENTIAN FAMILY OFFER DEPAUL INTERNATIONAL**

### *Ongoing Formation*

Most importantly the Congregation of the Mission and the Vincentian Family offer Depaul International the prospect of ongoing formation of our trustees, staff, volunteers and clients, based on their own historical tradition. At the same time this has to be formation which is inclusive — accommodating all faiths and none. This requires great sensitivity but we have made great progress. I look forward to working with Fr Hugh O'Donnell and others on new programs, which will complement existing ones.

That is not to say that formation should be passive. Chaplaincy has played an important role in the development of our charities in Ireland, Slovakia and Ukraine and we would like that to grow. We would also like to see a greater involvement in formation of governance bodies with an agreed role description setting out what we expect of a CM who is appointed to respective boards across the Depaul Group.

### *A solid and safe base from which to build projects for the poor*

One of the most difficult problems facing any charity — especially if it is intending to operate in a new country — is where to start! Where can I find a room? Where can I set up an office? Where can I set up my computer? How do I get around? How do things work here? Who do we bank with? What legislation do we need to comply with?

The hospitality of the Vincentian Family in this regard has been tremendous. If you feel welcomed and safe, then the task at hand is so much easier. Your communities in Ukraine and Slovakia excel at this. They made it easy for us to do our job during the start up period and were always available when problems arose.

### ***A global and local understanding of differing poverties and cultural contexts***

As an international organization the Congregation of the Mission has an interesting perspective on global geo-politics. However, where you excel is in your country or even regional understanding of differing poverties and cultural contexts. Although we carry out thorough research before we open new projects, I can safely say that without the help of Fr Paul Roche in Ukraine and the rest of his community we would have made some dreadful errors. They showed us charities already working on the ground. They talked from their experience of the poor they were visiting and the homeless they were meeting. They educated us about the complex relationship with the Orthodox Church.

We still made mistakes but not as many as we could have. The information you take for granted is gold dust to a charity like Depaul International. It would take us many years to build up the same database.

### ***People***

Fr Vitaliy Novak has grown Depaul in the Ukraine from one project to seven in three years with plans for two more cities in the coming year. He is young, charismatic, passionate, a good communicator and has a heart for the poor.

Br Peter Campbell worked tirelessly on the legal registration, fundraising and ensuring the local communities' acceptance of our first project in the USA. Quiet, unassuming, modest — totally committed to the disadvantaged — an effective bridge between the rich and the poor in the same way that Vincent was.

I could go on and on! There are some exceptional people in this Congregation and probably more potential to be unleashed as I look upon you. We know that we are only borrowing these great assets because eventually they will be called to do other things. But when it works to our mutual benefit and, more importantly, for the benefit of the poor, these kinds of personnel exchanges are invaluable.

### *Networks*

In addition to great people the Congregation of the Mission has great networks. Sometimes it is at a political or diplomatic level. Sometimes it is through the business community or other voluntary groups or religious orders. Through these networks we have built a partnership with the Orione Sisters to deliver some projects together in Ukraine. Through another we got the President of Ireland to visit our projects in Ireland and highlight particular pressing poverties.

### *Resources*

It would be neglectful not to recognize other resources, which the Vincentian family has given. The numerous empty convents we have turned into housing projects, the gift of free offices in a building owned by the SVP in Ireland, the seed money provided by different provinces in the USA which allowed the Charity to get a foothold there. For all of this we are deeply grateful and our aim is to return the investment tenfold as our own fundraising takes hold.

### *Encouragement*

This is probably the easiest and least costly thing to give but more important than anything. If you want the Vincentian mission to expand you have to encourage a 1000 seeds to grow. It is something you do well, so keep it up!

## **WHAT DOES DEPAUL INTERNATIONAL OFFER THE CONGREGATION OF THE MISSION AND THE WIDER VINCENTIAN FAMILY**

### *The opportunity to reach out to more poor people*

Depaul International is not a religious order nor is it a lay association. We are a service provider specializing in homelessness and related poverties. We do not get distracted from that fact. We are not about evangelizing or proselytizing, that is the work of others in the Vincentian Family. As a result we can work more easily in parts of the world where there are religious tensions. For example we do not present a threat to the Orthodox Church in Ukraine or Russia as we are not formally connected to the Catholic Church but constituted as an independent charity with Vincentian roots.

In Northern Ireland we work with young people across the sectarian divide — both Catholic and Protestant — because we are independent of church and state.

We have experience of creating the management infrastructure and the capacity to involve other members of the Vincentian Family in our work without them having the overall responsibility. If resources are agreed we can grow a charity quickly.

### ***Strong project development skills***

Depaul International is good at project planning and delivering on what it promises. We are keen to involve all of our Vincentian Partners in that process but we are clear that we are in charge. Obviously these skills are more developed in the older and larger charities within the Depaul Group but part of our work is to bring local managers up to the same standard. Fr Vitaliy for example has learned a lot from mentoring and training opportunities across the Depaul Group and we aim to build this capacity.

### ***Professional management team – process rather than personality driven***

Again this is about training and development plans, which will grow the skills of leaders and staff at all levels of the organization. Strong and charismatic personalities are important in any walk of life but especially when you are trying to get things off the ground. However, many charities collapse once their founder leaves so we have to plan at an early stage for process to take over from personalities - graveyards are full of indispensable people!

### ***Fundraising from a broader audience – government and corporate***

We are used to working with the government and with the corporate sector. We understand how they operate and the contract culture they expect. It means that we have a bigger pool to fundraise from in order to achieve our goals.

### ***Our own experience of the Vincentian charism***

I hope that as well as learning we have something to give to the Vincentian Family and in particular to the formation of other Vincentians.

## **WHAT HAS WORKED SO FAR**

In summary

- We have grown significantly in a very short space of time
- We have a strong sense of shared mission across the Vincentian Family we work with

- We have developed a well respected formation program centering on Vincentian Values
- We have involved those of different faiths and none
- We have learned a lot

## **WHAT NEEDS MORE WORK**

Often Vincentian partnerships can be difficult to manage as nobody wants to write anything down — but we do need to agree who is doing what and where the responsibilities begin and end.

We need to better understand what we have in common as a family but also what makes us different e.g. evangelization is not the role of Depaul international but it clearly is the role of the Congregation of the Mission.

We need to meet and talk more as a family at a global and local level in order to allay fears and suspicions. Sometimes with the best will in the world mistakes will be made. These should not be allowed to fester and in the event of a disagreement there should be some recourse to arbitration.

We should collaborate when we can but recognize that sometimes we may be in competition for resources. That could be money, people, buildings or influence. Competition is not a bad thing if we respect each other.

We need an agreed plan in order not to do too much too quickly but at the same time we need to seize the day.

## **FINAL THOUGHTS**

In my job I get to visit a lot of provinces and the most vibrant it seems to me are those that balance their spiritual and evangelical mission with direct action for the poor. In my view both complete the same circle.

Please take the potential of the Vincentian family seriously. I know that you do, but I also know that it can be hard work at times. We are much more powerful working together than we are separately.

Government, foundation and corporate funders from the Western hemisphere increasingly demand transparency, value for money, sustainability, accountability and a quality of service. In developing services for the poor, if you do not have a partner like Depaul International, then you may have to invent one.

Finally I return to my first remarks. Think big! We have a global perspective and potential but we might need to face up to significant changes over the next 100 years let alone 350. Let's be there for the poor! I hope that Depaul International will be in every province in every part of the world working alongside the Vincentian Family and that we get the best out of the charism we share.