

# SVP mission to put faith into action and help people in need

**H**ELEN O'SHEA will be the 19th national president of the St Vincent de Paul Society (SVP) in England and Wales when she takes up the mantle from Adrian Abel this November.

As the first female national president-elect of the Society in England and Wales, Helen describes her journey from first hearing about the Catholic charity in her home town of Grangetown, in Cardiff, to her recent election to presidency.

Helen speaks passionately about her calling to join the SVP. Having been aware of the organisation as a young child whose family had been active in the charity, she then found herself motivated to join after listening to a lectern appeal by SVP members in her local parish of St Joan of Arc in north London.

"I was inspired by the clear message of the SVP to put your faith into action and help people in need. There was an awareness that there were people in my own local community who really needed help.

"Joining the SVP seemed to be a practical way of doing something more to demonstrate my faith. It was ultimately a way to live out my faith by doing something positive about some of the poverty and vulnerability that was evident around me."

And so the seed was sown. However, there were challenges as Helen had three small children to raise at the time.

"Juggling the care of three young children, I could only attend meetings when my husband or someone else could mind the children.

"Visiting people in need at home and in care settings is a

## PROFILE

Anita Boniface meets **Helen O'Shea**, the SVP's first female national president-elect

core part of the SVP work and I could only really do these visits at the weekends.

"However, an opportunity to volunteer as conference treasurer arose, and as this was something I could do from home it seemed a suitable office to take. So that was my next step."

Helen's journey continued. As her children grew more independent, she had more time on her hands and felt she wanted to contribute more to the SVP.

She began to volunteer at national office, firstly helping with administration and then, as she had a legal background and experience in writing, she became involved in the bid applications for the SVP's fundraising department.

"Being immersed in national office gave me another transformative perspective. Up until that point I was working mainly in the local community of the parish, doing local fundraising, using money to help people locally. I wasn't fully aware of the history, mission, vision, community support projects, or international work of twinning until I joined national office as a volunteer.

"As I was writing bids I had to put into words what the SVP was about; not always easy because it is such a complex organisation! I had to explain what effect our members had on the ground and this was challenging as all conferences work in different ways

and have a variety of impacts depending on the nature of need they are responding to. But at the heart of all conference action is seeing Christ in the poor, and showing respect, and compassion for the poor."

Seeing Christ in the poor and recognising the dignity of all people is at the heart of Helen's Christian faith which is very much the context in which she grew up.

"My Catholic faith has always been a really big part of my life. I was brought up a Catholic, my family were all Catholic, and I was educated at Catholic schools," she says.

"Quite a lot of what I did as a young person revolved around the parish and the church. I was a Girl Guide in the parish. I sang in the choir. It was all to do with local community Catholic life."

Talking more specifically about her faith she says: "My faith is something that was given to me as a gift, but which I have had to work at times and which I still have to work at. And like everyone else I have struggles when things seem very difficult. But I do work at it, and it is an integral part of who I am."

Living out the Gospel message through her SVP work is something Helen considers a vocation. She describes the Vincentian vocation as having aspects both unique to the individual member, and common to all members.



Maintaining history and mission – SVP national president-elect Helen O'Shea, left, with Mary whom she visits and befriended

"As an individual you get the calling and you act on it. But you also have affinity with those suffering the effects of poverty and disadvantage, you want to do what you can to help people who are in need. That is common throughout the Vincentian family. And there is something hugely uplifting about being part of a bigger organisation, with the same roots, the same ethos. Everyone working towards the same aim, inspired by St Vincent de Paul.

Helen feels that some people will experience a secondary call, within their initial call to become a member. She says: "I was called to the SVP and then other callings came. I think it is important to listen to those callings, and see what you can offer. Everyone can bring something to the SVP and officer and leadership roles are important. It's not for everyone but if someone can see themselves in that role then I would encourage them to have the courage to do it, to follow that call. You may think there is someone else better equipped or qualified. But in the end you will have a tap on the shoulder or a moment when you have to say to yourself: 'Maybe this is the moment I have to listen to a higher authority.' Why are you expecting other people to do it for you when you believe in what the SVP does? Rather think about how best you could be doing what you can to help other people most."

As a wife and a mother, Helen feels these vocations complement her Vincentian vocation. "I think family life equips you for the outside world. It's not al-

ways smooth. People have problems and difficulties at different times, including me and we all have times we need someone to listen to us. We all need support."

As the first female national president of the SVP in England and Wales, Helen feels passionately that she has an important place as a women breaking new ground in leading the organisation. "I am of course a feminist as I believe in equal rights and opportunities for all. I think it's great to have women in key positions, just as it's good to have men in key positions. There are an awful lot of women in our conferences who do the SVP work all the time. I think women are already playing a larger role in the Church generally, and I think this reflects that. And it is a good representation of where we are."

She adds: "I do think that sometimes women can look at things in a slightly different way. It's good to have a balance, it's good to have diversity and to have different sexes, ages, backgrounds looking at things – it's really healthy."

Looking to the future, Helen is enthusiastic about taking to the helm of the organisation.

She says her priorities "must be to find ways of being relevant in the modern world, yet maintaining the history and the mission that has always been the absolute core of SVP work".

"We are one body with a mission, guided by our history, guided by our faith. But there are many different ways we can act that out. Visiting and befriending are incredibly important and the heart of our work, but how else can we reach out to others in need? We need to seek and find the hidden poor, like prisoners and refugees, to and to ensure our projects have a real impact for those in need, while at the same time attracting new members who might be interested in other ways of working."

■ If you would like to support the work of the SVP in helping vulnerable people, either by making a donation of becoming a member, e-mail: [info@svp.org.uk](mailto:info@svp.org.uk) or telephone: 0207 703 3030. Visit: [www.svp.org.uk](http://www.svp.org.uk) for more information.



# OPEN DAYS

21<sup>ST</sup> SEPTEMBER, 17:45 ONWARDS (SIXTH FORM)  
7<sup>TH</sup> OCTOBER, 09:00 – 13:00 (3–13 YEARS)  
4<sup>TH</sup> NOVEMBER, 09:00 – 14:00 (13–18 YEARS)



## STONYHURST

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