

'Bums off seats': creating a community of care

"Our church is thriving because our parishioners are encouraged to coordinate and drive activities and explore their unique gifts in a prayerful, enthusiastic, collaborative and welcoming community of love and care," say Beth Rigby, Margaret Coombs and Fr Daniel Jayaraj from All Saints', Chermside.

At All Saints', Chermside, we have focused on developing a 'bums off seats' and 'all are welcome' model of church in the last 18 months. Excitingly, this model, with its focus on developing and empowering volunteers, has led to both spiritual growth and an increased number of people engaged in church and community life.

At All Saints', Chermside we have parishioner and wider community volunteers coordinating and driving a range of initiatives, including an op shop; an emergency food relief pantry; a soup kitchen; a 'Coffee and Craft on Tuesdays' outreach ministry; regular Bible studies; a 'Little Saints Playgroup'; a '501 Community Club' fellowship lunch; and, appeals, such as Operation Christmas Child.

Whenever our volunteers gather, they pray to start each activity. Our volunteers are also given operation guidelines so they know what tasks need to be done and how. We are never shy about asking other organisations for help. Being dedicated to prayer, clear about expectations, bold and collaborative has helped to grow our various ministries and develop the gifts of our people. Our ministries are evolving as our parish practises love and care centred on Christ.

Op shop

Our op shop started last year and runs every week day between 9 am and 1 pm and is driven by both parishioner and wider community volunteers. One of our young volunteers, Anna, visited the op shop one day to purchase items. She was so pleased with the quality and cost of the fashion items that she purchased \$80 worth of clothes. After one visit, she became one of our regular volunteers, and assists at the op shop when she is not studying at UQ. She likes to describe our op shop as a 'from basement to fashion bombshell'.

All op shop proceeds go toward funding our outreach ministries. All donated items are dropped off to us and are sorted and displayed by 12 friendly regular volunteers. While much of our stock is sold, our volunteers also give clothes and household items to people who drop by who are in need, including single parents, people experiencing homelessness; people who have fled family and domestic violence; former prison inmates and patients leaving The Prince Charles Hospital.

COMMUNITY BUILDING

Projects that intentionally bring people together to simply get to know one another. This community engagement approach is typically less strategic and more organic than other approaches.



Originally the basement space was rented by an external business, but upon a church review last year, we decided to transform the space into an op shop. The op shop's set-up, including equipment and storage, was largely funded by community grants, which were written and submitted by one of our volunteer op shop coordinators, Jan.

Parish pantry

Our pantry started over 30 years ago. It was open for a few days a week, but since last year it has been open Tuesday to Friday every week between 10 am and 1 pm. During the COVID-19 period, our pantry has assisted 1194 individuals, couples and families, as there has been a significant increase in need since April. Once a month we also open the pantry just for international students, with 30-50 students coming on these specially dedicated mornings.

Approximately 20 volunteers lovingly make up food packs for people that are designed to last two days, and include a number of tinned items, cereal, long-life milk, pasta, biscuits and other non-perishables. We also distribute fresh bread and produce with these packs. We work with our parishioners and other organisations to ensure that the pantry is always well stocked with diverse products, including items donated by the Parishes of Stafford, Aspley-Albany Creek, Nundah and Wilston; Share the Dignity; Second Bite (Coles); Oz Harvest; and, the Fijian/Hindu Community.

Soup kitchen

Our soup kitchen is open every Monday and Wednesday evening between 5.30 pm and 7 pm. Our soup kitchen has 10 to 12 volunteers who share the cooking, serving, set-up and pack-up tasks. We put much love into the food we prepare and make sure that we mix-up the main meals served, which variously include curries, lasagne, shepherd's pie and roasts. Once a month, the good people at our local Nando's provide food for our soup kitchen guests, bringing with them their yummy chicken. The meat for our soup kitchen is donated by our friendly local butcher, Rode Meats.

Diverse people are welcome to our church hall soup kitchen, including people experiencing homelessness, international students and people who are feeling isolated. The soup kitchen gives us an opportunity to bring people together and provide TLC to people who really need it.



'Coffee and Craft on Tuesdays' outreach ministry

Coffee and Craft on Tuesdays also started last year and is run on the first and third Tuesday of the month between 9.30 am and 11.30 am in our church hall. Like our op shop, this ministry is run by both parishioners and volunteers from our wider community. The craft group is an outreach and social activity, involving the wider community and, on occasion, guests from our soup kitchen. This group also creates blankets and beanies for rough sleepers, as well as other items.

Bible studies

Our parish runs four Bible study groups for parishioners and the wider community. During the COVID-19 period, our Bible study groups meet online; however, they are usually run in people's homes or on the church site. Our Bible study groups have been running for years and are coordinated by Parish Council. Studying the scriptures is important for our church's spiritual growth.

Little Saints Playgroup

Our Little Saints Playgroup has been running for over 15 years. Our playgroup is very multi-cultural and meets every Monday between 9 am and 11 am during term time. Five volunteers help coordinate craft, art, singing and play activities for up to 12 children and their carers weekly. Mums and dads use the time to relax and chat over a coffee onsite while their kids are having fun playing. We registered our playgroup with Playgroup Queensland last year in order to include the wider community.

'501 Community Club' fellowship lunch

Six to eight volunteers run our '501 Community Club' fellowship lunch once a month. Approximately 30 people attend each luncheon, paying \$10 for a yummy meal and fun social event, with proceeds going towards funding programs such as our Operation Christmas Child initiative.

Operation Christmas Child

Our church has supported the Samaritan's Purse Operation Christmas Child appeal for over 20 years. This initiative has grown, with over 200 shoe boxes filled with kids' items annually, including something to wear, something for school, something to cuddle, something to play with and a hygiene item, as well as a personal note.

We have over a dozen volunteers assisting with this appeal throughout the year, including sourcing shoe boxes and donated items and wrapping and assembling boxes. Parishioners are very generous with their donations of both gifts for the boxes and money to cover postage. We have several gifted sewers who are kept very busy preparing garments for the boxes during the year.

Top 10 tips for engaging the support of volunteers and the wider community

1. Invite parishioners and people from the wider community to be involved in every facet of your church's ministries to develop a 'community of care' and be open to new ideas.
2. Engage parishioners and people from the wider community to review what is and isn't working and be open to change things that need changing collectively.
3. Encourage parishioners and people from the wider community to identify and explore their unique gifts and to step out of their comfort zones.
4. Ensure that the contributions of parishioners and people from the wider community are acknowledged and that they feel appreciated for their contributions.
5. Ensure your volunteers feel supported and empowered by equipping them with clear guidelines for each ministry, while also letting them coordinate and drive activities.
6. Ensure volunteers have access to the resources they need, including equipment, shelving, furniture, stationery and space.
7. Start everything with a prayer and provide a laminated prayer for volunteers to pray together at the start of every initiative and event.
8. Collectively foster a community that is intentionally and warmly welcoming to everyone.
9. Be bold – don't be afraid to contact other organisations and seek their support for donations, such as [OzHarvest](#), [SecondBite](#) and [Share The Dignity](#); local businesses, such as butchers, greengrocers, restaurants and bakeries; other parishes and faith groups; community groups; and, elected representatives in your area.
10. Find out what community grants are available and apply for these, including council, state government and RSL Club grants, to help fund your ministry.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- What examples of partnering with other organisations come up in this case study?
- What tips stand out to you as particularly important learnings?

MORE INFORMATION

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