

Finding and supporting volunteers in parishes

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IN GENERAL, PEOPLE ARE happy to volunteer but shrink away from the two extremes of “we are desperate for help” and “you can do whatever you want”.

People are prudent about how they share their time. Will I be waiting around with nothing to do? Will I be asked to do too much with no direction or support? What is the point of this ministry or group? Am I recognised for my efforts? Are there appropriate safety standards in place for me and those I work with?

To review your current practices, your first checkpoint is the excellent resources available at Volunteering Australia: <http://www.volunteeringaustralia.org/volunteering-resources/volunteer-managers/> and the NSW Centre for Volunteering <http://www.volunteering.com.au/for-organisations/managing-volunteers/>.

These websites offer best practice, provide great tips, and ensure due diligence and safety for both volunteers and those they are supporting.

The following can act as a checklist to assist:

Step 1: Put supports in place before you get started

Strong support by parish leadership in ongoing communication, spiritual guidance and presence is critical. Ensure ministry leaders are appropriately formed, trained and supported in dealing with volunteers.

Establish clear policies and documentation including a code of conduct, volunteer engagement forms, database, clear role descriptions and contracts, work, health and safety standards, appropriate checks, e.g. Working With Children Checks and Police Checks.

Parishes would benefit from having a volunteer coordinator or team to oversee volunteer recruitment and retainment.

Step 2: Be clear on what you want and who you want

What is at the heart of the role? How is it building up a community centred in Christ, and evangelisation – drawing people into communion with Christ?

Are we clear on the skills, qualifications, age and health requirements, checks needed, time commitment and number needed for the ministry?

This is also a good time to consider what gifts, strengths and passions would suit the role and what benefits they will receive by stepping forward, e.g. learn a skill, make friends or serving God's people. This can help target who to invite.

Step 3: Advertise, invite and hold information sessions

There is much that can be done here, but one rule is: promote in seven different ways, repeating your message seven times!

Broaden advertising to schools, sporting groups, local volunteer groups, e.g. Rotary and your local council.

Information sessions are a great way to help people dip their toe in the water before jumping in. They reinforce why this role matters, what is involved, what support is offered, the impact you will make and the skills you will gain.

Step 4: They signed up? Follow up!

When someone signs up, it is critical that you follow up with a big thank you, clear instructions of what is happening, a reminder of the mission they are supporting and clear contact details.

Step 5: Orientation, training and commissioning

At orientation, it is good to offer an overview of their ministry – what is the effect of their work? How is it an act of service? How does it help the community and reign of God?

Offer formation in being stewards, not ‘owning’ their role. Be clear about the goals and overall strategies of the role. Ensure they know what to expect and what is expected of them.

Commissioning should be during a public ceremony. This both acknowledges the individual and informs the community that the leadership has authorised them to carry out their role.

Step 6: Commencement

Commencement procedures are critical to offering a good first impression. Are volunteers checked in, greeted, introduced to others? Is there time to connect them to the mission and to prayer? Are they thanked?

Step 7: Review and next steps

A good review process includes elements of intentional reflection – on service, self, and next steps – with group discussion. Each year, it is good to offer formal acknowledgement such as expressing gratitude in a Mass, a community meal or day, or a retreat.

Finally, pathways to develop as leaders or additional skills within ministry help sustain your volunteers.

If your parish offers clear policies, entry paths and support, you will build confidence among people to step forward and remain within your sphere of volunteers. And don't forget to say thank you!



OLMC student Annie Gittany uses an umbrella to shelter Sr Ailsa Mackinnon RSM and Dr Geoff Lee MP at the opening. Image: OLMC Parramatta.

New Ailsa Mackinnon Community Centre opens at OLMC Parramatta

THE NEW AILSA MACKINNON Community Centre at OLMC Parramatta was officially opened by Dr Anne Bunde-Birouste and blessed by Bishop Vincent Long OFM Conv on 17 February.

The special afternoon event was attended by Sr Ailsa Mackinnon RSM, Sisters of Mercy Parramatta, members of the College Board and Alumnae, College staff, students and parents, as well as a host of special guests, including Dr Geoff Lee MP, the state Member for Parramatta.

The centre is named after Sr Ailsa Mackinnon RSM, who was Principal of the College from 1990-2004.

It features an indoor multi-purpose sports and gathering place with seating for approximately 1200 as well as four teaching and learning spaces, a roof top outdoor sport area and a gymnasium.

Sr Ailsa said she was honoured to have a building named after her and pleased that it is a community centre dedicated to physical education. “To call it a community centre speaks volumes about the importance of community to OLMC,” she said.

“It's also a beautifully constructed building that is light and airy with plenty of space for physical activities. Students are encouraged to reach their potential at OLMC and it is important to have facilities such as this building to help enable this.

“I feel that naming buildings after Sisters of Mercy helps to keep the history of the College alive and reminds the community of the importance of living the Mercy values.”

In his address, Bishop Vincent congratulated Sr Ailsa, who is Vicar for Consecrated Life in the Diocese of Parramatta. “This building is truly magnificent and an icon. It has set a very high standard for other civic buildings nearby,” he said.

“This is a celebration not just of a building but, above all, talents that will be developed, lives that will be transformed, relationships that will be affirmed and enhanced.”

Internationally respected for her expertise in social change, Dr Anne Bunde-Birouste is the driving force behind Football United – a program that uses the magic of the ‘world game’, together with other strategies, to inspire young people, to foster their educational engagement and to promote social justice and cross-cultural harmony.

Anne is Convener of Health Promotion at the University of NSW School of Public Health and Community Medicine and is passionate about demonstrating how sport can help young people build self-esteem and forge strong community bonds.

OLMC's Principal, Stephen Walsh, said the community was very excited about the opportunities the brand new community centre will bring. “The magnificent new sports facilities and contemporary learning spaces will perfectly complement the mix of learning areas already in use at the College,” he said.

“It will be especially wonderful to have a space large enough to fit the whole school and guests; it will further enhance our very strong sense of community.”

The Centre is the final element of an ambitious master plan which began in 2008 and saw the construction of the Janet Woods Building (featuring multiple, fully equipped Science labs, a new library, state of the art Food Technology spaces and a botany room), a new dedicated Student Centre, a Dance Studio and the purpose-built Christina Creede Music Centre.

Established in 1889 by the Sisters of Mercy, OLMC Parramatta is a leading independent Catholic girls' school that provides contemporary learning and academic excellence in the rich Mercy tradition.

The College is hosting an Open Day from 10am-2.00pm on Sunday 12 March and an Enrolment Information Evening on Tuesday 21 March.

For more information, visit: www.olmc.nsw.edu.au