



WHO ME? WHY IN THE WORLD SHOULD I BECOME A VINCENTIAN LEADER?

Vincentians have a general misunderstanding of what taking on leadership positions within the Society truly means, especially when it comes to assuming the office of president of a conference or council. Members might not appreciate the benefits of assuming the role of a Conference or council leader. With this in mind we sought input from a number of Council presidents around the country who were selected randomly. This paper is based in large part on their feedback and experiences. Believe it or not, leaders told us there were personal benefits to be gained from serving as a conference and council president and of course there are benefits to the Society which translate into being better able to serve those in need. Please read on.

Growth in Personal Spirituality and Fellowship

Our Mission says we lead men and women to join together to grow spiritually. As Catholics, we should all have spiritual growth as a priority in our lives. We are called daily to know, love and seek to imitate Jesus, the ultimate servant leader. He tells us that without Him we can do nothing. As Jesus took Peter, He takes us and, although we can give Him little, He takes it and multiplies it as He did with the loaves and fishes. As one assumes the leadership role, Jesus is there to guide and help. Leadership is a wonderful opportunity to grow closer to Jesus and He generously provides.

Consider that *serving as president of a Conference or Council provides a different platform from which to enhance a leader's own spiritual life and allows leaders a unique opportunity to promote spirituality to other Vincentians.* It gives leaders the opportunity to associate with other leaders and develop new friendships while at the same time sharing common experiences and exchanging ideas.

It also allows leaders to broaden their perspectives and skills, some of which are even transferable to the job or business world. Serving in a leadership position allows a member to gain a greater appreciation of the worldwide network of charity that was the vision of Blessed Frederic. If you are considering such a position, it is important to incorporate prayer in your discernment process in order to open yourself to the opportunity and prepare the Conference/Council for new leadership.

Benefits to the Society

At the same time leaders provide a major service and benefit to the Society. Without leadership, service to the poor becomes ineffective and chaotic, and sustainability of individual Conferences and Councils becomes a concern. St. Vincent de Paul stated that for charity to be efficient it must be organized. It is a time-tested truth that leadership is as important to the service of the poor as any other role in the Society.

Leadership is essential to help make the Society a more effective source of help to the needy and allows fresh ideas to be brought into the operation of Conferences and Councils. It helps take the stress off other Vincentians and enables one to move the Society forward by promoting the Rule and the formation of goals and objectives.

Using Time Wisely Through Delegation

Among the concerns expressed to us for why members are reluctant to step into leadership by running for conference or council president is that leadership positions take too much time away from family and career, involve too many expectations, require too many meetings, and that there is not enough training and formation available. As presidents and leaders we depend on others and as members we follow our Rule that tells us family and business needs come first. As a first among equals and as servant leaders *presidents help others to grow into leadership roles by appointing officers and committee chairs so that leadership becomes a team effort*. They should consider people of diverse gender, ethnic and racial background in their leadership team. By spreading the work among officers such as vice presidents, secretaries and treasurers, and by making use of committees, the work can be shared and others become vital parts of the leadership team. Presidents do not need to attend all committee meetings. They appoint committee chairs who will accurately report back to them and to the membership. Committees provide the opportunity to identify capable candidates to move into future leadership roles thus ensuring succession of good leaders.

Building Experience

One of the recommendations we offer is to move the timing of the presidential nomination process and election up by several months. A number of leaders who responded to our request for input agreed. *We recommend beginning the nomination process one year in advance of the expiration of a president's term and holding the election up to six months before the start of the term of the new president*. The natural question is: Why should this be done? There are many professional organizations that elect presidents a year in advance so that there is a president-elect for up to one year before his or her term begins. *It gives an incoming president more of an opportunity to learn what has been going on, both the good and bad, and helps foster objectives going forward*. It allows for a much smoother transition. It allows newly-elected presidents to not only develop more knowledge about the Society but also size up membership in order to feel comfortable with selecting officers and appointing board members and committee chairs.

Developing Knowledge

Some qualified Vincentians think they won't know what to do or how to handle the position of president or any other leadership position for that matter. Resources available from the National Council office that will assist Vincentians include:

1. The Rule
2. The Manual
3. Standards of Excellence
4. Governance: Council/Board handbook
5. Conference and Council President handbooks
6. Guide to Diversity/Multicultural Issues handbook
7. Council President and CEOs/Executive Directors: Process for a Successful Partnership document
8. National Mentoring Program materials
9. DePaul University's Values-Centered Leadership Course (online)¹

¹ <http://leadership.depaul.edu/vcl-level-i.html>

Recommended resources from your local Council may include:

- Bylaws
- Legal documents (e.g., 501(c)(3), 990s, etc.)
- Job description(s)
- Annual budget
- Year-end financials from previous years
- Minutes from Council board meetings from previous months and years

These are concise handbooks and documents that provide all a leader will need to know about the Society's rules, procedures and policies – documentation that will put to shame many large commercial organizations. *In addition, the Society has developed a Governance Training Program available to all members.*

Recommended activities for presidents-elect during the transition period:²

- Participate in the National Mentoring Program.
- Observe local board meetings.
- Meet with current president to discuss (Arch)Diocesan or District Council operations on a monthly basis.
- Meet with current president to discuss activities at regional, midyear and national meetings.
- Meet with current leadership team to discuss the inclusion of gender, ethnic and racial diversity on the future board.
- Attend regional, midyear and/or national meetings.
- Attend Invitation for Renewal leadership retreat.
- Meet with your region's National Vice President (in person if possible).
- Meet with National Council member.
- Include past president as ex-officio member of your future board.

Focus on Diversity

Given the changing demographics in the United States, Conferences and Councils should reflect the local demographics of the parish to which the Conference belongs. Current leaders should encourage minorities to take on leadership roles in Conferences and Councils and encourage talented minorities who are exhibiting leadership abilities to assume more active leadership roles.

Potential Future Leaders

Leadership is a process that comes with experience and has to be nurtured over time. Current leaders should take on the challenge of identifying potential leaders and providing them with opportunities that can prepare them for future servant-leadership roles. This could take the form of pairing them with current or former leaders while offering them responsible roles in events, services or initiatives in the Conference or in the parish, and by encouraging them and giving them helpful feedback. These potential leaders will need to be mentored by a current or former leader to help them embrace Vincentian spirituality and increase their knowledge of the Society. They should be exposed to Vincentian materials like the Rule, the Manual and Standards of Excellence, encouraged to participate in regional or national events and get involved in some of the recommended activities for presidents-elect during the transition period.

² Assuming a six-month overlap with president and president-elect.

Leadership in the Society is based on an understanding of our Vincentian vocation and our spirituality. Its success is based on servant leadership and an ability to listen and promote group decisions. The servant leader is servant first. It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve and a conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead. The best test is: Do those served grow as persons; do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants? And, what is the effect on the least privileged in society: Will they benefit or, at least, not be further deprived?

After you have reflected on the above discussion and prayed about how you can serve the Society, take a look at our proposed plan of action. Let the Holy Spirit lead you.