

From Your Servant Leader

July 27, 2017

Every year at this time, Vincentians around the country ask if they are “invited to come” to the National Assembly. Let’s clear this up.

Yes.

Every Vincentian is invited. There are no leadership requirements or tenure requirements. Paid staff members are welcome, in fact encouraged, to attend along with volunteers.



The National Assembly is a commitment of one’s time and dollars, no doubt. We try to keep registration fees to a minimum, and much of the fee is for meals provided for the event. Transportation costs vary depending on where you live in relation to the event (this year in Tampa, next year in San Diego, after that Denver and St. Louis) and we move it around the country each year to make it accessible to you whenever we can. Some people drive; in fact some Councils rent a van and drive together. Others fly to attend, which can save time and in some cases is actually less expensive than driving.

Many Councils and Conferences budget annually for one or more leaders to attend because they recognize that the coming together of Vincentians results in sharing of best practices, providing the national governance, learning from vendors and partners, and all the rest of the usual “convention” experience.

But National Assembly offers something unique.

I draw your attention to the spiritual devotion aspect of our annual gathering. We pray, certainly, but we could go to Mass at home. But there is something almost mystical in all of us being together in worship. The singing is amazing. The local Council brings out its best choirs and music to support the liturgy. Masses are led by Bishops in some cases, and always outstanding homilists. My experience however is that apart and in addition to all this is a shared spirit that keeps us together as Vincentians in our devotion, our service and in our commitment and friendship to each other.

Maybe the key is friendship. I see Vincentians in a family reunion setting each year, people who have met over the years in committee work or simply by praying and eating together, forming friendships with people from around the country. Isn’t it comforting to know that somewhere else, there’s a volunteer (or many!) working just as you are on the same Society goals and projects? Who understand the dynamics of our faith and service in a home visit? Who share the same charism in all its complexity and service to God? Let some other convention try that!

Participants often come in teams or at least pairs. This allows them to share what they have learned back home and to reinforce with each other what they experienced. It allows them to “divide and conquer” when it comes to the fabulous breakout session periods when you can’t decide which presentation to attend! It also helps back home with succession planning when the vice president or other future leader can shadow the National Council Member (voting delegate) leadership and governance process.

As I wrote above, staff too is welcome. Executive directors especially have some National Assembly time to themselves to talk about HR and employee relations issues. They don't vote but often they can advise their volunteer leaders with their continuity in the ED position. Staffers responsible for finances and program support of volunteers back home learn just as well as volunteer participants, and may be in a position to share even more. Staff also can meet their professional peers from across the nation and share what's working, challenges and ideas. A meeting in person at National Assembly often leads to year-round phone calls and emails that help both continue to learn and support their volunteer Vincentian leaders.

Imagine if out of nearly 100,000 Society members, we could attract thousands instead of hundreds (and growing) at our National Assembly? Other groups make this happen regularly. It takes planning and budgeting, and a sincere desire to have some fun together! It also takes a commitment to learning, sharing, and worshipping as One Society. We work every day in our local neighborhoods but we also see value in coming together. The regional meetings have been growing as well. But they are not a formal part of our governance in the Society, so there's an added element of discussing and voting together that makes a good National Assembly.

The best indicator of our growing success in attracting more Vincentians each year is that many who come once then return almost every year. We must be doing something right! Check it out for yourself this August and come on down to Tampa. Bring a friend. Better yet, bring a busload!

Yours in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Dave B.", with a stylized flourish at the end.

Dave