

Church Council takes a risk for International Students

The phone call came on Thursday 16th April. Our welfare support ministry was closed for another week, but there was something urgent and totally genuine in Malini's voice that got to me. The following morning I listened to a painful story of dashed dreams and exploitation from these two young Indian women.

Malini* and her more confident younger friend Madhu* named their pain and pleaded for the practical help they had not received from their much loved local Catholic church. Unsustainable \$1,000/mth private tertiary college course fees, \$75 weekly rent well overdue, a stolen purse, no jobs and no food left in the cupboard.

They left our office an hour later with an armful of groceries, \$30 Share Vouchers each and an edited Employment Resume without the spelling and grammar errors 'passed' by their education provider.

The next day, I was visiting one of my people in hospital. There I met two more young Indian women (friends of this family) who told me similar stories. They have subsequently had their resume's edited and tidied up to hopefully improve their employment chances.

On the following Monday evening Malini (an experienced Nurse) and Madhu (a Social Work Masters Graduate) were guests at our family dinner table – a spur of the moment invitation prompted I'm sure by the Spirit. We didn't know it, but ours was the first 'Australian home' they'd been invited into in four months of life as Overseas Students in a strange place called Melbourne and it was also Madhu's 25th birthday. She thanked us for giving her a party even though we didn't know it!

That week I took an idea to my Church Council and they said 'yes – let's try it!' We proposed a free Dinner for International Students with Malini and Madhu as chief cooks.

As the idea 'grew legs', donations from passionate St John's members flowed in to more than cover the cost of food and drinks. Footscray Market traders (Muslim, Buddhist and Christians) gladly contributed with generous support as we told the story. Invitations were posted on Facebook and handed out to unsuspecting train travellers at Essendon station.

Three weeks later, we were delighted with a wonderful evening. 60 people enjoyed a sumptuous South Indian banquet; half were guests and half were church members who had come to listen, share and exercise a ministry of hospitality. During the night we opened the Op Shop and declared everything free! Our Op Shop has never seen such joy or delight. The stage of our hall was loaded with Food Bank groceries which were gratefully claimed. The prayer corner was equally popular with candles being lit all night. Malini proudly announced to us that she had secured a job as a Personal Care Assistant.

Reviewing these events as a pastoral response to presenting need, we're wondering what may come next? We learned again that it is good to take risks for God!

[* Names have been changed for privacy]

Rev Mark J Dunn

St John's Uniting Church Parish
Essendon <"}"}"}><
Cnr Mt Alexander Road and Buckley Street
(Melway 28 G4)

Manse 32 Nicholson St Essendon 3040

Home/Office 03 9375 1065

Ch Office 03 9370 9263

Mob 0409 009 443 **Email** mark@dunn.id.au

www.stjohnsessendon.org.au
