

St Laurence House:

Alan Soutar

Since St Laurence House was established in 1978, many parishioners of St James' Church and Christ Church St Laurence have been actively involved. Over this time there have been challenges and setbacks, but also many achievements. Most importantly, there have been many thousands of children and young people who have had their lives influenced for the better.

I joined the Management Committee four years ago, when I retired from the corporate world. At the time, Anne Cogswell was just taking over the chair from Ruth McCance, and Anne passed the baton to me last November. I took it on with a little trepidation—would St Laurence House be able to carry on the good work of the many capable people before us?

Our focus has always been on medium term accommodation—looking after our clients over several months or longer. We are driven by our mission of **getting homeless children and young people back on track**. We provide a caring, stable environment where those in need can learn the living skills previously unavailable to them, a necessity to enable them to reach their potential. This year, 19 percent of our clients identify as indigenous. 61 percent are 17 years or under. Every time we have a real success, such as a child attaining a university placement when this previously seemed unachievable, we feel a remarkable sense of achievement and satisfaction.

The team is led by Executive Officer Nigel Parker, who has held the post for over 10 years. Under Nigel, St Laurence House is active in liaising with other service providers engaged in the sector, as he also sits on the board of Y-Foundations (the sector's peak representative body for homeless youth services) and My Foundations, the only

provider of community housing in NSW focussed solely on youth accommodation.

Last year, Her Excellency the Governor Margaret Beazley became our Patron. This further boosted our efforts, and we are looking at options for a fuller relationship in due course. While the Governor is Patron of many organisations, there is no doubting the sincerity of her support.

But we cannot rest on these laurels—there are still significant challenges ahead.

We survived a NSW Government initiative in 2014 to rationalise agencies, seeing the number of services providing medium term accommodation in NSW drop from sixteen to only four. St Laurence House is one of the smallest. Unfortunately, the funding we have received since then is also at a substantially reduced level.

In 2012, the Federal Government introduced requirements that the home-services sector hire more qualified staff and bring wages, over an eight-year period, up to parity with other sectors. This is a welcome initiative—however, through a quirk in the finance stream that comes to St Laurence House, we have missed out on the additional government funds required to pay these wage increases.

We stand in stark contrast to most other service providers, who have a higher proportion of government funding relative to the amounts they must raise themselves. Overall, we have had to work hard to keep our head above water.

We survive because of the generous support of our benefactors. The NSW government supplies only 70 percent of the costs to run our facility. To keep us afloat, the balance must come from our benefactors and fundraising—a total of \$125,000 annually.



Alan Soutar and Nigel Parker
Image supplied

We have an end-of-financial-year-appeal in June and a Christmas Appeal in December, as well as our Big Event and Shrove Tuesday pancake nights.

Despite the funding challenges, our organisation has grown over the last couple of years. The main house has been renovated and an additional bedroom added, thanks to a generous donation and active support from the Property Industry Foundation. Further, we now have a total of five one-bedroom units that serve as transitional accommodation when clients are ready to move on. But as we have expanded, so too have our costs, yet government funding remains the same.

With the needs of our clients at heart, the drive to increase our professionalism and effectiveness has been ongoing. A new initiative is now in train to improve governance standards across the whole sector. St Laurence House is engaged in a major three-year programme to review and update all its processes, planning and staff training. The aim is to achieve a robust and healthy organisation that provides best-in-class service, capable of meeting any challenge, such as COVID-19. But this renewed focus comes at a cost in time for the Management Committee, a cost in focus for the Executive Officer and staff,

The Road Ahead

and a financial cost in engaging an external independent assessor.

The quality of governance we are aiming for is the same as a much larger organisation. With our 10 beds, we still require the same professionalism and governance as an organisation with 100 beds, or more. Meanwhile, we have only three permanent staff on the payroll, though they are ably supported by casual staff. Looking ahead, growing St Laurence House is our best option. Going from one fully-serviced house to two effectively halves the costs on each house.

Homelessness remains a vital issue for all governments, as it must, but there has been less funding for medium term accommodation such as ours.

There are early signs that the pendulum may

be swinging back again. With a renewed interest in medium term accommodation by the Department of Communities and Justice (which replaced the Department of Community Services), we will be pushing strongly for further funding to expand our activities. There is no doubt about the effectiveness of such further spending—the social return is evidenced in repeated studies.

Another option is to work more closely with other organisations, but our own model is working well, and we have a good team headed by a competent Executive Officer who is engaged, connected and respected. And we have strong backing from our benefactors.

We continue to examine our options for the best way forward. In the meantime, while St Laurence House remains a Special

Ministry of St James' Church, the financial support comes from individual benefactors both within and outside the congregation, as do the members of the Management Committee. Greg Murray as Secretary, Rod Ravenscroft as Treasurer, and myself are actively involved in the administration. Now, additional skills are required on the Management Committee, particularly mental health skills and IT skills, and we would also welcome a new member who identifies as Aboriginal. Please get in touch (see p. 24) if you feel you can contribute—we still have plenty of work ahead of us!

We will be providing further updates in due course. In the meantime, your support and encouragement, in whatever way it is provided, is so much appreciated.

Alan Soutar is Chair of St Laurence House and a parishioner at St James'.

NEXT EDITION

The next edition of St James' Connections will be published on Friday 4 December 2020.

Deadlines (advertising and editorial): Monday 23 November

Contact: 8227 1301 or brooke.shelley@sjks.org.au

Parish Contact Directory

Address – Level 1, 169–171 Phillip Street, Sydney, NSW 2000
Phone – 8227 1300 Web – www.sjks.org.au Email – office@sjks.org.au

RECTOR.....	The Reverend Andrew Sempell.....	8227 1303 (m 0419 018 225)
ASSOCIATE RECTOR.....	The Reverend John Stewart.....	8227 1304 (ah 9410 3077)
DIRECTOR OF ST JAMES' INSTITUTE	Christopher Waterhouse.....	8227 1305
HEAD OF MUSIC	Warren Trevelyan-Jones	8227 1306
ORGANIST	Alistair Nelson	8227 1308
OFFICE ADMINISTRATORS	Dianne Ward/Jonathan Elcock	8227 1300
ACCOUNTANT	Michelle Chan.....	8227 1302
COMMUNICATIONS & MEDIA MANAGER....	Brooke Shelley.....	8227 1301
ST JAMES' CONNECTIONS EDITOR.....	Brooke Shelley.....	brooke.shelley@sjks.org.au
COUNSELLING @ ST JAMES'	Loretta King.....	8227 1300
PASTORAL CARE COORDINATOR.....	Chris Cheetham	0407 017 377
FACILITIES MANAGER	Tony Papadopoulos	8227 1312