

19 February, 2019

Sisters future-proof support for people in remote and regional Australia

The Missionary Sisters of Service (MSS), established by Fr John Wallis in Tasmania 75 years ago, has launched an initiative that will see their important work in remote and regional Australia continue beyond the life of the Sisters.

To mark the new stage in the work of the MSS, grant applications will be invited for community projects which can make a difference in the lives of isolated, and often forgotten, Australians.

The Sisters have set up **Highways and Byways**, which will expand its reach across Australia, taking over the works of the John Wallis Foundation, which the MSS established in 2010. In the coming year **Highways and Byways** will allocate more than \$90,000 to small grants and community programs. It is hoped that this figure will increase each year.

“Seventy-five years ago the four founding Sisters entered risky territory having very meagre resources but a powerful commitment to begin a mission which would take them into the lives and homes of people beyond cities and towns,” said Stancea Vichie, MSS Congregational Leader.

In the past 75 years the Sisters have worked in the most remote parts of Australia as well as in urban areas. They have sat around the kitchen tables of people from all walks of life, supporting families and communities. **Highways and Byways** makes this possible for decades to come.

Highways and Byways continues the work begun by the MSS. A snapshot of this work in the last two years includes:

- Offering low cost art classes to disadvantaged members of the Peak Hill community in central west NSW. This created a rare social engagement opportunity for people who are often isolated.
- Supporting Port Augusta’s 80-year-old Country Women’s Association to continue by providing transport to meetings and activities for many of the older and marginalised younger CWA members.
- Helping in the putting together of bedding packs for homeless young people in South Australia, ensuring they have a clean sheet, towel, doona and pillow when couch surfing.
- Helping a very small Aboriginal community on Cape York Peninsula, which has been struck by many deaths in recent years.
- Facilitating wreath and cross making workshops at a prison in Western Australia. The wreaths and cross were sent to families of prisoners, particularly Indigenous prisoners, who could not attend funerals and were affected by grief.
- Helping to fund a coffee machine in Tatura Community House in Victoria to provide unemployed community members with a practical skill, but the effects of which have gone much further. The Community House Co-ordinator remarked:

“This morning I sat in with the Coffee Hub Club which ran for nearly two hours and once again was amazed at people sharing their life’s challenges, life solutions and friendship. Though improving social connectedness and reducing isolation were not the primary intentions of the space, we thought training would be, it has probably been the best value spent here in Tatura on mental health wellbeing ever!”

The MSS story began on Tasmania’s remote Bruny Island when a young Fr John Wallis was visiting the Hawkins family. He was challenged by the cries of the mother who asked him, “Why can’t we have Sisters to help us ... Does no one care about us people of the bush?”

The Sisters expanded from their beginnings in Tasmania to rural areas of New South Wales, South Australia and Queensland. The MSS have been, and continue to be, a strong presence in the Toowoomba Diocese, which covers the south west corner of Queensland. There are currently 3 MSS living in and a part of the Toowoomba community.

Highways and Byways Executive Officer Liz McAloon said the focus of grant allocations for the coming year would be in areas where the Missionary Sisters of Service have worked for many years – this means specific regions of **western Queensland, southern and western NSW, South Australia and Tasmania**.

“We have always gone out into the world, looked at the signs of the times and responded, and that’s what **Highways and Byways** is doing today,” Stancea said.

The new entity, **Highways and Byways**, means for the first time donations will have full tax-deductible status.

If you would like to see the work of the Sisters continue, and donate to **Highways and Byways**, please visit highwaysandbyways.org.au.

Application forms and grant guidelines are also available from highwaysandbyways.org.au or phone 03 9873 5520. The grant program is not limited to church organisations, but open to any group meeting the grant guidelines.

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