



CATHOLIC ARCHDIOCESE  
OF MELBOURNE



HOME

ARCHBISHOP

WHO WE ARE

CATHOLIC FAITH

EMPLOYMENT

CONTACT

NEWS AND EVENTS

FEATURES

GENERAL FEATURES

## General Features

### The Caroline Chisholm Society supporting mothers

17Share

Fiona Basile, [Kairos Catholic Journal](#), Wednesday 14 May 2014

*For 40 years the Caroline Chisholm Society has supported mothers and families facing a range of issues, writes Fiona Basile.*

At the heart of the Caroline Chisholm Society, a not-for-profit based in Moonee Ponds, Caroline Springs and Shepparton, is the story of an inspirational woman; a story that has positively impacted the lives of many women and children in the Melbourne and wider community.



Helen Cooney, chief executive of the Caroline Chisholm Society, explained: 'There is a story of a woman called Flora who was going to catch a ferry from Circular Quay in Sydney. Caroline Chisholm noticed that Flora was intoxicated and quite distressed and when she approached Flora, was told to "go away".'

'Rather than leave her, Caroline told Flora that she was going on the ferry too and would come with her. As it turned out, Flora was pregnant and had intended to throw herself from the ferry. Knowing who Flora was, and having already sensed this was her purpose, Caroline, without judgement, simply accompanied Flora, to make sure that she did not kill herself and the baby. When they got to the other side, Caroline helped Flora with accommodation that night, and later worked with her to ensure that she had stable long-term accommodation and then helped her in the development of skills to increase her employment opportunities.

'This story of Caroline Chisholm resembles what we do here,' said Helen. 'We support families from the moment they learn of their pregnancy until their children go to school—we provide pregnancy counselling and support, material aid for mothers and

## Features

- [Ecumenical and Interfaith](#)
- [Youth News](#)
- [Catholic Heritage](#)
- [Education](#)
- [General Features](#)
- [Life](#)
- [Marriage & Family](#)
- [Migrant and Refugees](#)
- [Mission](#)
- [New Missal](#)
- [Social Justice](#)
- [Vocations](#)
- [WYD 2013](#)
- [Theology of the Body](#)
- [Media](#)
- [Anti Poverty](#)
- [Recipes for Life](#)
- [Year of Grace](#)
- [Year of Faith](#)

children such as clothes, toys, prams and food, and then ongoing family support until the child reaches school.

'When offering support to mothers and their children, they can either come in to the office where there's always an open door, or one of our support workers can go and visit the family in their home; it depends on the client's needs.'



The organisation was founded 40 years ago by a group of volunteers who 'wanted to make a difference to people's lives'. One of the original founders, Frank Smit, who was present at the organisation's first meeting, is still on the board. The organisation now has 20 staff and more than 100 volunteers, which is crucial to its success.

The Marys', as they are affectionately known (Mary Brosche and Mary Reilly), have been volunteering at the Moonee Ponds office for the past 14 years. They come in each Thursday for a couple of hours to sort the new and pre-loved clothes that are donated daily.

Glenda Rumble, the volunteer coordinator for the past five years, explained that many of the clothes were handmade. 'We have a team of nearly 30 women in the community who knit and make things specifically for us. They might make a pair of booties or a crocheted rug, with some of our helpers able to churn out about eight pairs of booties a week. It's amazing!

'We also have a school program where students come in for a few hours to help sort the clothes into the right boxes; they do a great job.'

Helen explained that the women accessing the services at Caroline Chisholm Society faced issues of poverty, isolation, homelessness, difficulty with pregnancy and parenting, family violence and mental health.

To deal with the increasing issue of homelessness, particularly among single mothers, the society established the Handy Helpers program in the western suburbs. This program aims to provide volunteer handymen who can repair things around the home to ensure the families' safety. It also helps the women to develop healthy relationships with men, and to help foster good relations between the mothers and landlords in order to prevent homelessness in the first place.

Helen explained that the organisation was in the process of raising funds for a new, bigger, purpose-built office in Mount Alexander Road, Essendon, which would help meet the many needs of the clients who visited their premises.

'It's important that our space be safe and comfortable for the mothers and children visiting us, along with the volunteers who are here helping us out. The fit-for-purpose building will allow us to set up specific spaces that cater for the different services we provide; for instance, comfortable rooms for client meetings, a spacious bathroom with changing facilities, and adequate space for the sorting and processing of clothes, prams, toys and food.'

Helen is thankful for the support shown to the organisation, particularly by the volunteers and the broader community who provide regular contributions.

'It's amazing how well-known we are in the local community,' she said. 'We regularly receive donations from local clubs or groups and there are a range of companies that give us food for our families. People walk in daily off the street to donate material goods.'

Helen said word of mouth had been vital in the organisation's existence, success and continued growth. 'There is a strong sense of community involvement and we're deeply embedded in the local community,' she said.

The organisation has a street stall in Puckle Street, Moonee Ponds, each fortnight selling new and handmade clothes. Volunteer Tess Fogarty has been manning the stall for the past 40 years, providing information to passers-by while selling the clothes—they also have a stall at the annual Moonee Valley festival.

'Local GPs and health professionals also regularly refer clients to the society,' said Helen.

'Should a mother or her children require further assistance, we'll be able to connect her with the right people within the wider community; this is why it's so important that the whole community be involved.'

The Caroline Chisholm Society provides pregnancy counselling and support, material aid and ongoing family support for mothers and their children up to the commencement of school.

If you would like to donate or volunteer, or if you are a mother and would like to access its services, call (03) 9361 7000 or see [www.caroline.org.au](http://www.caroline.org.au)

Photos: (Above) Volunteer coordinator Glenda Rumble and chief executive officer Helen Cooney at the entrance to the Caroline Chisholm Society office in Moonee Ponds (Below) 'The Marys', Mary Brosche and Mary Reilly, volunteering at the Caroline Chisholm Society, by Fiona Basile.