

NEWSBEAT

NEWSLETTER FOR THE PORT
PHILLIP EAST PRESBYTERY



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OP SHOPS

AND THE AMAZING WORK
THEY DO

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Crib Point's Op Shop 20th Anniversary

by Colin Watt

In August this year, the Western Port Uniting Church (UC) Parish (consisting of the Balnarring, Crib Point and Hastings UC's) Opportunity Shop at Crib Point celebrates twenty years of exceptional community service.

Following several months of shop-fitting by diligent church members, the Op Shop was officially opened by Rosy Buchanan MP on 16 August 2006. Through the generosity of the Burley family, the Parish was initially granted occupancy of the shop, then in 2018 the Uniting Church in Australia via the Parish purchased the property in Disney Street, Crib Point. Subsequently, the Shop was re-dedicated during a Parish Service at Crib Point held on Sunday 30 September 2018.

Since then, the Op Shop has faithfully served local communities trading five days a week with dedicated volunteer church and non-church staff. They regularly receive donations of household goods, clothing, and sundry items. The Op Shop is now highly regarded across the Mornington Peninsula for its friendly staff, a wide range of excellent quality merchandise and annual donations and grants to the Parish, church agencies and projects, schools, kindergartens, welfare bodies, sporting groups and emergency services.

From the Shop's inception, there has been a regular group of enthusiastic volunteers who operate as a team, drawing on their extraordinary skills and talents, working towards common goals to ensure the Op Shop's success. More would be welcome to join our team at any time. They are passionate, dependable, and committed to maintaining a sincere, safe, and inviting Shop environment, devoting much of their personal time and expertise in supporting this essential community service. When sorting donations around the worktable, they often engage in warm hearted chat and share stories about items reminding them of grandparents.



Recently, a Committee of Management (CoM) was created consisting of church and non-church volunteers which provides leadership, direction, and accountability in Op Shop operations. It has a fundamental relationship between the Western Port UC Parish missional activities and community needs and expectations.

Lately, the Parish has appointed a Volunteer Manager who oversees the general daily operations of the Op Shop and provides a vital liaison and reporting link between the volunteer workers, their team leaders, and the CoM.



Some donations are allocated to welfare bodies who distribute them to people in necessitous circumstances following natural disasters and hardship. As people visit, it has become a useful place for sharing Parish activities and community information.

It is expected the Op Shop, with the support of the Parish and community, will continue to fulfil this essential community service well into the future.



Our Op Shop fulfils several social, economic, and environmental purposes in the vibrant Crib Point community. It is very much about people and is itself a place of purpose. It has become a meeting hub for people, is a source of premium quality, sensibly priced sales, and a drop-off facility for superfluous items that otherwise may well go into undesirable landfill.



The Quiet Ones Who Keep it Going

by Lukas Harry

When Carolee Ratcliffe first suggested opening an op shop at Narre Warren North Uniting Church, the idea wasn't exactly welcomed. "Everyone laughed at me," she recalls. Despite this, a small group persisted anyway.

What began as a Saturday morning garage sale, packed up and stored away each week because there was nowhere to leave it, slowly grew. A shed gave them proper sorting space. Saturdays became Fridays and Saturdays, then Thursdays, then Wednesdays too. Today the shop runs three days a week.

The shop's outreach has grown alongside it. Through a voucher system, people in need are assessed and referred through local support services, then given goods to the value of their voucher. The shop also contributes to the Andrew centre Hampton Park Uniting Church's community Christmas lunches and other local needs as they come up.

Almost nothing goes to waste: broken electricals are tested and stripped for parts, batteries and cords are recycled, and unsellable clothing and shoes are sent on for recycling overseas.

But for Carolee, the real value of the shop is harder to put a dollar figure on. "A lot of people come up here, they need to talk to someone, or they've just lost a partner," she says. The everyday comfort and connection we can give through the op shop is, "the part I like best."

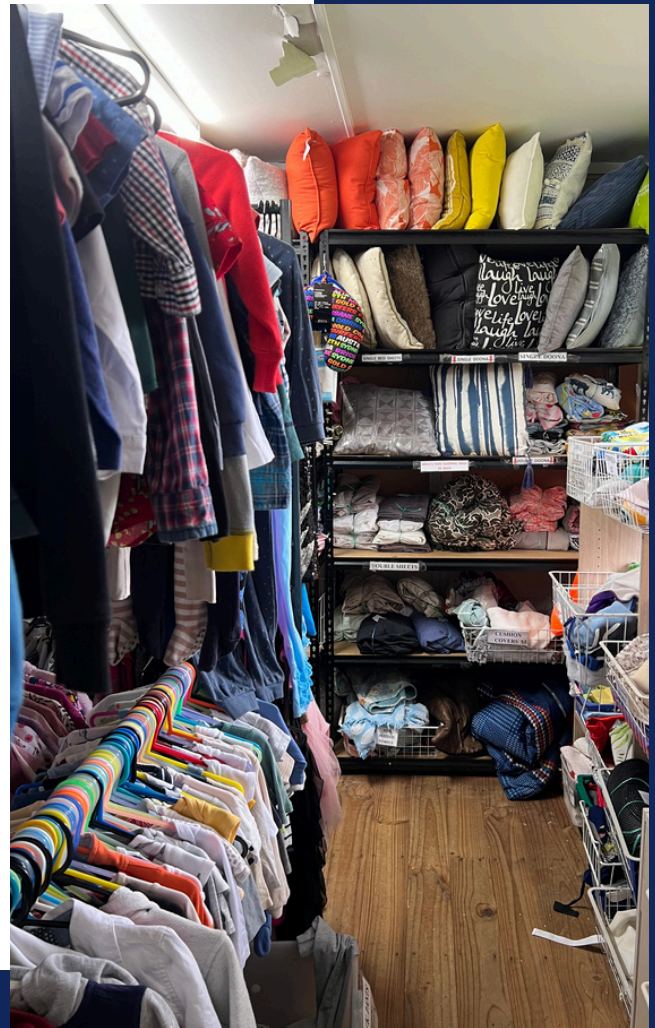
This is the vibe that seems to be felt well beyond the volunteers themselves. Carolee said most common way customers describe their Op Shop, as friendly. People wander in and end up staying an hour or two, just pottering around. It's part of why customers come back, and, she says, part of why so many of her volunteers do too. Some say they look forward to coming in every week, drawn as much by the company as by the work itself.



It's also, Carolee says, a place where quiet service tends to go unnoticed. She points to Doris, a volunteer who tends five garden beds for the shop's outreach work. "She's not one that stands up to say, I do this, I am this," Carolee says. "She just quietly achieves, and she does so much work."

A few weeks ago, Doris turned up at the shop with a birthday cake. It was her birthday, and rather than let it pass quietly, she'd bought a cake and brought it in to share. Carolee called the other volunteers together, and what started as a quiet Wednesday turned into an impromptu celebration. It's the kind of community the Narre Warren North op shop has built: one where people feel just as open to bring in their joys and celebrations as they do their struggles.

Carolee's hope for the op shop is simple: that it keeps going. Many of the volunteers are getting older, and it is unknown who will step up to carry the work forward. But she's seen this community find a way before, growing a garage sale into a what it is today. She holds onto the same quiet faith that carried the project this far: that when the time comes, the right people will step up.





We Can Always Listen

by Lukas Harry

For 32 years, a church-run op shop in Springvale has been quietly doing something bigger than selling second-hand clothes.

The shop began in 1994 after a handful of elders from Springvale UC visited an op shop at another church and decided to start their own. It began small.

Today, coordinator Llyn Howden says its purpose has grown into something with several layers: financial support for the church, a way to keep usable goods out of landfill, and, most of all, a connection point with the local community.

Located just a couple of blocks from Springvale's main shopping strip, the shop draws a steady stream of local walk-in customers, along with others who travel further for its low prices. We have "very low prices," Llyn says, something made possible by having volunteer helpers and owning the building.

But the real value of the shop often has little to do with price tags. Llyn described a recent incident in a mini-market involving a regular op shop customer, a woman from a Middle Eastern background who has "a pretty hard life."

"Our pastor, Nyok Gai, who's Sudanese, started talking to her in another language," Llyn recalls. "I said to him afterwards, 'What language was that?' He said, 'That was Arabic. She and I were talking in Arabic.' It was just lovely to see the interaction with this lady. Her face just brightened up."

"We can't fix things, but we can always listen to people, which is very important," Llyn says.

That spirit extends to the shop's helpers, who work rostered shifts and gather for a weekly working bee. Llyn says many of them value the friendships they form there - with each other and with customers- as much as the work itself.

The shop's reach goes further than Springvale. Some customers buy clothing specifically to send to family overseas, particularly in Asia; it's part of what Llyn describes as a very multicultural customer base. The shop also donates goods to local schools, a nearby Scout group, and anyone who walks in with a genuine need.

The biggest challenge isn't demand; it's sorting through donations that aren't always wearable. But Llyn and her team of helpers take it in their stride, part of the rhythm of a shop that has run this way for over three decades.

Her hope for the future is simple: to keep going, and to keep doing what the shop already does well. Thirty-two years of low prices, quiet listening and unexpected connections; that's no small feat.





More Than Fifty Years of Providing For Church and Community

by Lukas Harry

When Uniting by the Bay's op shop first opened its doors in 1972, business was slow. Fifty years later, in 2022, the shop celebrated that milestone with a joint anniversary function bringing together congregation members and op shop volunteers, a fitting nod to a shop that has become as much a part of the community as the church itself.

COVID forced the shop to close its doors more than once, but it has bounced back in a big way. Takings climb year on year, something shop manager Iris Maris puts down to generous donations and the genuine care shown by its volunteers, more than 50 of them, most of whom have no connection to the Uniting Church at all. Some attend other churches. Most are retirees or pensioners looking for a sense of purpose, flexible hours, and new friendships.

That volunteer effort funds more than just the shop's own running costs. Takings support a full-time minister for a congregation too small to otherwise afford one, and 25% of the shop's annual profit goes directly to charities and community organisations, from Camp Quality and Doctors Without Borders to local fire brigades, lifesaving clubs and emergency relief funds, 25 in total last year.

In a suburb with no other full-time churches left, the shop has become one of the last steady signs of the church's presence.

The shop's reputation has grown well past word of mouth. It was recently featured by [YouTube channel Retro Rescuers](#), who named it the number one op shop in Melbourne, and shoppers regularly share their own finds and praise on social media.

Ask Iris, though, and the reasons customers keep coming back sound a lot simpler: low prices, friendly volunteers, and the thrill of never quite knowing what you'll find.

"I only take my donations to this op shop," one regular has told her. Others simply say the staff feel like family.

But it's not just a place to shop. People come in looking for something to wear to a special occasion, dealers hunting for a resale bargain, browsers after a chat, and sometimes someone doing it tough who just needs something warm, or a blanket, to get them through. When that happens, Iris and her team give it away, no charge, no questions.

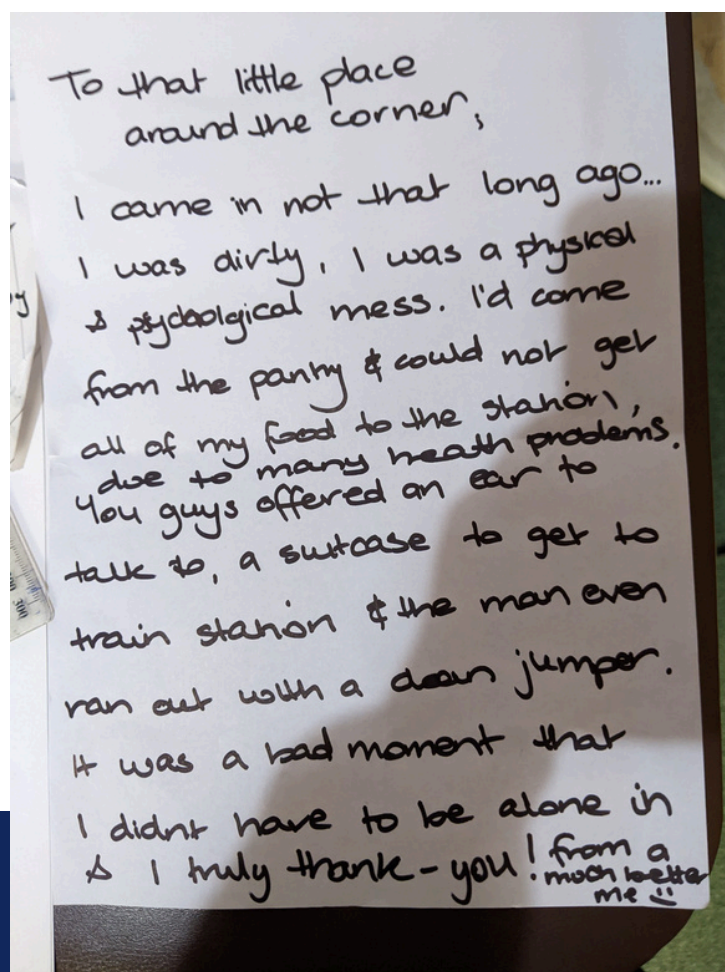
One moment has stayed with her longer than most. A gentleman who had just received a terminal diagnosis came into the shop, and Iris called the church's minister, Sam, to come and talk with him. Sam sat with him for nearly an hour. By the time the man left, he was smiling, having found, in the middle of an ordinary shopping trip, a moment of real peace. "This was truly an amazing outreach that wouldn't have been possible without the op shop being in place," Iris said.

Looking ahead, Iris has bigger hopes still: a space where people could sit down with a cuppa and someone to talk to whenever they need it.

It would take more resources than the shop currently has but given how many people already walk through its doors each week, it's a mission she believes is worth chasing.

For now, Iris's advice to newcomers is simple: come and see for yourself. Old-fashioned values, old-fashioned bargains, and volunteers who are always happy to help, or just to talk.

The team recently received this note below, a lovely example of the outreach and support a caring op shop can offer the local community.



A Note From the Editor

Putting together this edition, one thing struck me again and again: just how much good is happening in the op shops across our Presbytery. These aren't just places to find a bargain, they're funding ministries, supporting local charities, and becoming genuine places of connection and care for people who might never otherwise walk through a church door.

If your church doesn't run an op shop of its own, that doesn't mean you can't be part of this. Consider reaching out to a church nearby that already does, there's often room to volunteer your time, donate, or simply learn from what they've built. Sometimes the best way to grow a mission isn't to start something new, but to support what's already working well.

If you'd like to get involved, links to each op shop are below.

Western Port UC Parish Opp Shop

<https://westernport.ucavictas.org.au/uniting-church-op-shop/>

Narre Warren North UC Op Shop

<https://dosomethingnearyou.com.au/cause/uniting-church-op-shop-narre-north-narre-warren-north/>

Springvale UC Op Shop

<https://springvale.ucavictas.org.au/op-shop/>

Uniting By the Bay Op Shop

<https://unitingbythebay.org.au/op-shop/>

I'd like to just quickly add, the biggest part of what makes these op shops run are the volunteers and the people who manage it all, which unfortunately I wasn't able to capture much of in the photos. But please know there are many beautiful people behind this work.

Lukas Harry

Comms Officer for PPEP

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*Newsbeat edited by Lukas Harry and
Judith Haskins*



*Unfortunately I was unable to get many
photos for this Newsbeat so here is a
throwback to some lovely art from
Murrumbidgee's Art exhibition earlier in the
year*