

Coming to the table

International students taste church hospitality, writes *Antony McMullen*

The Reverend Mark Dunn says that it all started when a phone call came to his office from some students in real need. The following morning he listened to a painful story of dashed dreams and exploitation from 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 own congregation.



A night of friendship, food and faith



Unsustainable \$1,000 per month private tertiary college course fees, \$75 weekly rent well overdue, a stolen purse, no job and no food left in the cupboard... The students left the St. John's Es-

sendon office an hour later with an armful of groceries and thirty-dollar SHARE vouchers each. They also carried an edited employment resume without the spelling and grammar errors 'passed' by their education provider.

Later, Malini (an experienced nurse) and Madhu (a social work masters graduate) were guests at the Dunn family dinner table – a spur of the moment invitation prompted by the Spirit.

The Dunn's didn't know it, but theirs was the first 'Australian home' the girls had been invited to in four months of life as international students in a strange place called Melbourne.

Mark then raised an idea to the church council. He talked about students suffering in Australia. He talked about three young Indian women studying in our country, sharing a single bed in a small room – all they could afford.

In the end, the council said "Yes – let's try it!" The call for Christians to be hospitable to those from abroad won the day and the plans were made. A free dinner for international students with Malini and her friend Madhu assigned as the chief cooks!

Donations from passionate St John's members flowed in to cover the cost of food and drinks. Footscray market traders (Muslim, Buddhist and Christians) gladly contributed with generous support as they heard the story. Invitations were posted on Facebook and handed out to train travellers at Essendon station.

Lionel Parrott, former head of Monash University careers service and active Uniting Church member at Montrose, attended.

"This is a wonderful example of the church in action," he said. "The generosity displayed by members of St. John's was fully appreciated by the students."

Other Uniting Church members attended. Rohan Pryor, fresh from coordinating the massive National Christian Youth Convention, is about to undertake research for the tertiary chaplaincy initiative that comes out of the University of Melbourne. He is looking at the provision of tertiary chaplaincy around the Synod. Hitting the ground early, he was

busily taking notes while talking to the students who attended. Many of the students are studying at private for-profit colleges. These colleges have been criticised lately in *The Age* and elsewhere in relation to poor teaching and learning standards as well as a lack of student support facilities. One



Reviewing these events as a pastoral response to a presenting need, the church is wondering what may come next.

**Names changed for privacy*

— they suffer disadvantage and struggle to make ends meet, particularly those from poorer families —