

# An opportunity for community joy and connectedness through Blessing of the Animals



Celebrations, special occasions and community events play an important role in building a sense of community. They acknowledge diversity and bring people together in an increasingly fragmented and busy world.

## Benefits of organisations that celebrate pets

- Establishes new and positive connections between divergent community organisations and individuals
- Confirms importance of socially responsible pet ownership through a celebrative reminder of the human companion animal bond

An important celebration in both the spiritual and animal calendar is the “Blessing of the Animals Day” on October 4, also known as World Animal Day. It celebrates the feast of St Francis, a 12th Century saint who had a famous affinity with animals and the love of all creatures.

Lorraine Hawkes has been organising the Blessing of the Animals Day at the Anglican Church of St James the Great, East St Kilda, Melbourne for the past 15 years.

*“When we first began the service, we had a total of 25 people and six animals. I believed that we needed to be outward, rather than inward looking so I began to advertise the Blessing and looked at ways to expand it. It’s gone from being a church based event to a community one.”*

*Lorraine Hawkes, Organiser, Blessing of the Animals event*

The Blessing of the Animals begins with a brief church service after which people and their pets parade through the streets to the churchyard gardens where they are met by two priests. Each animal receives an individual blessing and a St Francis medal for their collar.

“It’s like a carnival!” Lorraine says. “People and their pets have been coming for years. There are lots of activities, scones, tea and a sausage sizzle. People arrive from everywhere. This year we’ve had visitors from Dimboola, Victoria; Townsville, Queensland and Penola, South Australia and many attendees from local and country areas. It’s lovely because everyone is enjoying their pets together.” Subzero, winner of the 1992 Melbourne Cup, has presided over the event on four occasions since 1995 including 2008.

Port Phillip Council, also hosts a Blessing of the Animals ceremony. Councillor Janet Bolitho said that modern lifestyles can create loneliness, isolation and a sense of vulnerability. The Council and local groups were keen to promote the power of pets in improving residents’ health and wellbeing.

*“This is particularly the case in Port Phillip. According to the 2006 census statistics, lone households comprise 40.8 per cent of all households, slightly down from the 42.1 per cent recorded in 2001, but still a remarkable number and much greater than the Australian average.”*

*“That’s why pets provide such essential companionship to so many people. The Blessing of the Animals ceremony is just one of the ways this can be publically acknowledged and celebrated.”*

*Cr Janet Bolitho, Port Phillip Council*



## Tips

- Identify whether any local community groups or churches are celebrating World Animal Day and support and promote their activities

## Web Links

St James Church - [www.stjamescommunity.org.au](http://www.stjamescommunity.org.au)

Port Phillip Council - [www.portphillip.vic.gov.au](http://www.portphillip.vic.gov.au)