

# Funding for Link to Life

■ By Jamie O'Brien

A recent application made to the Lotteries Commission to help fund the expansion, renovation and refurbishment of The Living Centre in Burswood was successful.

A cheque was last week presented by Western Australian Premier Geoff Gallop to Chief Judge of the District Court and Chairperson of the Fund for E.A.I.T.H. Antoinette Kennedy.

The Fund for E.A.I.T.H. is an incorporated Charity set up to raise funds specifically for The Living Centre - the families, affected, infected through HIV, representing the word Faith.

The Living Centre provides a unique support to individuals, carers and families of those living with HIV/AIDS in Western Australia.

The centre provides an accepting non-judgemental presence that supports and advocates for all those living with the illness and enables them to grow in their journey.

The centre was founded in 1988 and is funded by the Archdiocese of Perth, through the annual Lifelink appeal, in addition to donations and the support of its many volunteers.

Steward Walter, Director of the centre, said the name "The Living Centre" was chosen to reflect the changes in direction, and the term members, not clients, is used to describe the family that exists there.

Services of the Living Centre began when Rosemary Brennan, a nurse from Silver Chain, was providing 'hands on nursing' from the boot of her car in 1988 to many people dying from HIV/AIDS related illnesses.

After she retired, Mrs Brennan approached then Archbishop of Perth, William Foley, who agreed that help was needed. Archbishop

Foley assigned Marist priest Fr Lou Malloy from Sydney to assist with the growing workload.

Visiting homes, hostels, hospitals, and even the odd park bench, they provided support and comfort wherever it was needed.

At the time HIV/AIDS was at the height of its epidemic in WA before treatment was readily available.

In the past 18 months, the Centre itself has lost more than five of its infected members.

"There was a great fear and ignorance among the wider community," Mr Walter said.

Mr Walter said since then, the status of the illness has changed rapidly.

In 1995/96, because of the advances in medical knowledge and medications, infection with the HIV+ virus moved from being a terminal illness to an acute/chronic illness, with those infected living longer, although in many cases, compromised and isolated lives.

"A vast majority of the HIV/AIDS community are still isolated," Mr Walter said.

"When the Centre was founded, women made up 0.5% of the HIV/AIDS community, where as now this is more than 75%," he said.

At the time an advisory committee was formed by the Archdiocese under the direction of Centrecare.

The Sisters of St John of God became involved and with the help of Sr Helen Connolly began helping Fr Malloy and Mrs Brennan with the workload.

The SOSJG owned a house in Wembley and started to set it up as a drop-in centre, for both the infected and affected.

Because of the prejudice at the time, the local community took up a petition against the Centre and the Town of Cambridge refused to grant an operating licence.

The SOSJG sold the Cambridge property and used the funds to



**Premier Geoff Gallop presents the cheque to Chief Judge of the District Court and Chairperson of the Fund for E.A.I.T.H., an incorporated Charity set up to help raise funds for The Living Centre.**

Photo: Jamie O'Brien

purchase land to build the present premises in Burswood.

Pastoral Care co-ordinator Phil Carrier has been involved with the Centre since about 1990.

"It is really about presence," Mr Carrier said.

Part of Mr Carrier's role at the Living Centre involves pastoral counselling, running a meditation group once a week, visiting the prisons, hospitals, homes and also facilitating talks at parishes, schools and other church agencies.

"We try to take people out of their isolation and help them to accept themselves as they are," Mr Carrier said.

When the new Centre opened in November 1991, volunteers were providing care for about 15 people.

The house was originally designed

to assist up to 22 people. This has now increased to 137.

"The number of members has certainly increased also in the last three years because we're making contact with people," Mr Walter mentioned. "This is being done by visiting hospitals, the WA AIDS council and GP's so that they know they can refer people to us." As director at The Living Centre for two years, Mr Walter said the experience has been life changing.

He came from a corporate background and after serving some time as a voluntary Board Member, decided to take on the full-time position.

"You learn to re-evaluate your priorities in life and all of a sudden people become more important than measuring every dollar," he

said. The Centre provides lunch four times a week and also works very closely with a number of religious, medical, government and non-government agencies that provide support to the HIV/AIDS community.

"It is part of an integrated approach to improve the lives of infected and affected people."

Like so many other Church agencies, the Living Centre operates through the services of about 40 volunteers, in addition to the five permanent staff.

"The Centre could not survive without the team of dedicated and hard working volunteers," Mr Walter said. **For more information, or to volunteer, please contact Linda at on 9470 4931.**