

Advocacy for Aboriginals

■ By Anthony Barich

Archbishop Barry Hickey is set to open a new agency to help indigenous people cut through red tape when dealing with agencies like Centrelink and HomesWest.

The new agency, Daydawn Advocacy Centre, will be staffed mainly by volunteers with experience in such matters and will not only deal with individuals but, as the Archbishop says, it "will seek to have a voice in Aboriginal policy decisions both at government and Church level".

"As a Catholic agency it will work closely with our Aboriginal Ministry and Council to bring about reconciliation and full Aboriginal participation in our parishes and organisations, as Pope John Paul called for at Alice Springs 20 years ago," Archbishop Hickey said.

The Archbishop first approached Catholic Pastoral Centre manager Julie Williams to set it up, who then enlisted Sr Dolores Coffey RSM, who has worked to establish the Centre since July and will be its director.

An official opening date is yet to be announced but it is expected to be early 2007.

Sr Coffey attended the recent "Dreaming from the Heart" conference in October 2006, a gathering organised by the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders Council to mark the 20th anniversary of the late John Paul II's meeting with indigenous Australians in Alice Springs. She says the experience of that conference helped her realise the importance of her new role. It gave her a heightened sense of responsibility not to betray the Aboriginal people's trust in her new role.

"John Paul II gave the Aboriginal people great hope, a great confidence," said Sr Coffey, a Sister of Mercy involved in all areas of education for 41 years.

She said the Alice Springs conference gave a glimpse of the rich contribution the "deeply spiritual" Aboriginal people can make to the life of the Catholic Church.

"They were able to give genuine expression of their culture through the liturgy and Eucharist," she said.

Daydawn Advocacy Centre will be based in a rented building at 205 Beaufort St in Perth which belongs to the Aboriginal Advancement Council.

"I'm hoping it will help with some of the key aspects to liaising with government and non-government agencies, networking with Aboriginal leaders, assist with legal matters and link marginalised groups with decision makers," Sr Coffey said.

There will be personal counselling and referrals, and the centre will also look at personal care advocacy, Church submissions on Aboriginal matters and Catholic Church policy in relations with Aboriginal people.

It will also aim to promote social reconciliation as well as the Ngoongar language and culture.

"It will also advocate to ensure that Aboriginal people will have access to resources, services and opportunities which contribute to their wellbeing," she said.

"I have to wait to see what they really want, these are the dreams and schemes, to listen to the people and ask them what they want too. We need to look for common ground, and be prepared to stay the course of undertaking whatever needs to be achieved."

Sr Coffey said the idea for the Daydawn Centre was the Archbishop's idea, stemming from "his great sense of justice and feel for the people".

"It's a lovely thing to have in your Archbishop," said Sr Coffey, who comes from an Irish background.

The Daydawn Advocacy Centre will be opened the same year on which a special anniversary falls.

May 27 2007 will be the 40th anniversary of the national referendum when, as Sr Coffey related, over 90 per cent of Australians voted to acknowledge indigenous Australians as citizens and to give the Commonwealth Government the power to make laws regarding indigenous people.

"It is referred to as the first stage of the reconciliation movement in Australia," Sr Coffey said.

"The Centre aims to support Aboriginal people and encourage them to seek their rightful place in Australian society."