

Champion of life retires

After 37 years promoting the culture of life and love through natural family planning, 23 of those years as Director of Natural Family Planning and later Natural Fertility Services, Mrs Ann O'Donnell has retired.

At a farewell morning tea last Thursday, Archbishop Barry Hickey spoke of the community's "enormous debt of gratitude to Ann and Tom for their work".

Ann's husband Tom shared the work with her, both in accepting more responsibility for their young family in the early years and in being a board member of Natural Fertility Services.

Ann and Tom were recent arrivals from Scotland and had four children when she became a founding member when Natural Family Planning was formed at a big conference in Perth in 1968 in response to Pope Paul VI's encyclical *Humanae Vitae*, which reaffirmed the Church's universal teaching about the relationship between life, love and human sexuality.

As Archbishop Hickey recalled at the farewell gathering, a lot of confusion had been generated in the lead-up to the release of the encyclical.

(At the time, the media were heavily promoting the contraceptive pill and the drug companies' philosophy that the way to build strong marriages and happy families was to drug women every day, although they did not put it quite so frankly.)

Dr John Billings was invited from Melbourne for the conference which was sponsored by the Redemptorists and supported by Majellan Clubs to deal with people's confusion and concern.

Dr Billings and his wife, Dr Evelyn Billings, developed the Billings Ovulation Method, the first of a number of accurate and reliable natural family planning systems to enable couples to achieve and space conceptions.

Last month an international conference in Rome awarded John and Evelyn Billings, who have been



After 37 years of service with NFS, Ann O'Donnell has retired.

married for more than 60 years, an honorary doctorate for their lifetime of scientific achievement in reproductive health.

In his response, Dr John Billings said that their method not only promoted a culture of life, but "its very nature also promotes a culture of love".

It is a feature of natural family planning Ann O'Donnell recognised at the outset and promoted tirelessly for 37 years.

She gained a national reputation for her passion, her wisdom, her faith and her signature expression "the reality is..." as she dealt with the endless myths about natural family planning propagated in the media and all too often in the medical profession.

When it became necessary to create a national organisation to participate in Federal Government funds provided for family planning purposes, both Ann and Tom O'Donnell participated.

Archbishop Hickey referred to the lingering belief in the Catholic community that the Church had not got things right, but said that now there was a growing awareness that other approaches were not really supportive of marriage and there was a resurgence of interest in NFP.

Ann O'Donnell said that about five years ago things were moving very slowly, but a simple advertisement in *The West Australian*, asking "Trying to get pregnant?"

brought a stream of inquiries from women who, after years of taking the pill, could not conceive. Many were not Catholics.

She was pleased to observe that couples who formed this new client base quickly learned to appreciate the "culture of love" that goes with natural family planning.

At about the same time, she developed a series of programs for schools based on the Church's teaching and curriculum. They were inundated with requests to present the programs in Catholic schools from 2000 onwards, and in more recent years there had been requests from non-Catholic colleges.

The new approaches had resulted in a four-fold increase in activity for teachers and presenters.

As well as training NFP teachers in WA, Mrs O'Donnell presented training programs for health workers in the Philippines and in Pakistan. She said she was grateful that the Church had taken the stand it did in 1968, and after 37 years of being involved in a society suffering massively from marriage and family breakdown, growing infertility, and lost understanding of the real beauty and love associated with human sexuality, she was even more convinced of the truth the Church's teaching.

The final word came from Archbishop Hickey: "On behalf of the Church in Perth and on behalf of the Bishops of Australia, I thank you for your outstanding work."