

# Emmanuel Centre's 25 years of hard yakka

■ By Anthony Barich

It was appropriate that Archbishop Barry Hickey celebrated the Emmanuel Centre's 25th anniversary Mass under a few pergolas that co-founder Fr Paul Pitzen had bought for \$30 each at WA Salvage's closing down sale.

A gusty wind tested the sandbuckets that held the pergolas legs in place during the Mass at St Francis Xavier Primary School last Sunday, but they held firm – just like the Emmanuel Centre.

The Centre has survived on the skin of its teeth, and God's providence, since Archbishop Launcelot Goody gave co-founders Barbara Harris and Fr Paul the abandoned and vandalised St Francis Xavier Primary School to base their operation in 1981, the International Year of Disabled Persons.

As the co-founders tell it, virtually nothing was being done in the Church – or society, for that matter – to include disabled persons in everyday activities so many of us take for granted.

In the Church, that included Mass and the sacraments. The Emmanuel Centre – Emmanuel meaning 'God is with us' – was designed not as

an institution where employers dealt with clients, but where disabled people and their families helped each other in an inclusive, participatory community. Barbara, at the time a lecturer at the Catholic Pastoral Institute which trained teachers, only ever planned to be co-ordinator for no longer than three months.

Laughable problems with lack of funds to fix basic things like the photocopier made Barbara question whether there was any point in continuing on with this organisation.

But the third question in *Breaking Down the Barriers* – a discussion booklet put together with the late Fr Jim O'Brien, triggered a life-changing experience for Barbara.

The question read: "Do you (the disabled person) want someone to talk to about your life within the Church?"

It was then that, in the responses, she heard the stories of people's experiences in the Church – and how isolating they felt.

Kids with disabilities weren't being accepted into Catholic schools (or public ones either), but what irked Barbara was the lack of leadership shown in this area.

So it was at a meeting at St Francis Xavier Primary School, attended by about 100 people, where the decision

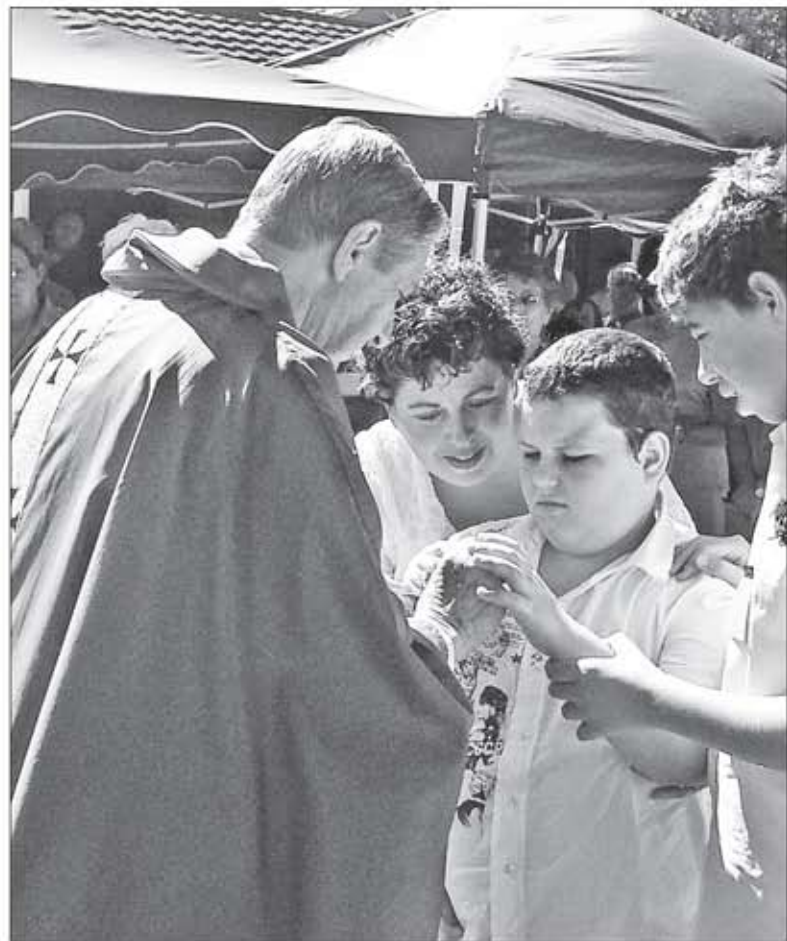
to form the Emmanuel Centre was born. It was held under candle-light as the lights went out – typical of the struggles the organisation has gone through just to stay alive.

But as Barbara says, their reliance on providence and God's help actually enhanced the faith of those involved. Despite the success of the organisation, both Fr Paul and Barbara hope to witness the self-destruction of the group: Because if those within the Church, including schools and parishes, operate the way they profess to by accepting people with disabilities without making it a charity case, then there should be no need for the Emmanuel Centre.

Barbara says acceptance and facilities for people with disabilities, both in the Church and society, are better than in 1981.

As St Paul told the Corinthians: "The body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts; and though all its parts are many, they form one body. So it is with Christ.

For we were all baptised by one Spirit into one body." So should this credo apply to the way the Church, and indeed society, should operate – as Barbara says: "We should look after each other as a matter of course. I've been told it's naïve and simplistic, but so is Jesus' message."



**Big moment:** Archbishop Hickey gives first Holy Communion to Nathan Parker during the Mass to celebrate the Emmanuel Centre's 25th anniversary.