

CALLED TO BE



WOMEN OF **INTEGRITY**

LIVING THE **DREAM**

FOR THE **KINGDOM**

Sisters of the Living Word

1975 - 1995

and beyond . . .

by Genevieve Shea, SLW

When ninety women simultaneously make the same choice, there must be a powerful dynamic at work. When those women span more than forty years in age and experience, their shared decision implies vision and values of cosmic scope. This was the case when the Sisters of the Living Word began as a religious congregation in August 1975.

Earlier, in the 1960's, Pope John XXIII had urged religious to be aware of the signs of the times. He and his successor, Paul VI, saw the need for what they termed, "adaptation and renewal of religious life." The bishops of the world, in Vatican Council II, articulated this call to renewal.



Annamarie Cook, SLW, Foundress

Annamarie Cook, Provincial Superior of the Sisters of Christian Charity during these years, provided leadership giving direction in adaptation. The sisters began to see more clearly their reason for being religious. They expressed this in their "Credo for Renewal," formulated in 1968.

The sisters saw service as rooted in Baptism and shared with all Christians. They saw themselves as "women come to new life, being challenged to full womanhood." Each Sister felt called to bring "to the world her unique contribution which is love." As religious they

shared the vision and, with it, the responsibility to shape their lives accordingly. No one dreamed this vision would lead to a totally new religious congregation.

By 1975 Annamarie Cook's unique spiritual leadership brought her and her sisters to a major decision. Other members of the international Congregation of the Sisters of Christian Charity did not share their view of "the signs of the times" and of how religious are to meet the needs of today's world.

In July of that year Annamarie Cook and Jean Krieter, with two other representatives from the Sisters of Christian Charity, were called to Rome. Here the representative of the Sacred Congregation for

Religious and Secular Institutes stated that there were two incompatible views of religious life. The solution suggested was to separate and begin a new congregation. This was done on August 18, 1975.

Within two years the Sisters of the Living Word unanimously adopted their "Mission Statement." This stated their reason for being. They were to "reflect and affirm the Word in the world, the Word who continually frees the oppressed and gives new life." Their lives would declare the power and presence of the Living Word — Cosmic, Inspired, Incarnate.

An early consequence of this declaration was a new awareness of how to meet the needs of the poor and the oppressed. Many of the sisters remained in the field of education; others reached out to the homeless and the abused, the illiterate, the elderly, and the homebound. In every area they began to read the signs of the times, to be for today's world a reflection and an affirmation of the life-giving, freeing Word.



Many sisters, like Judiann Derhake, remained in the field of education.

Being in touch with the poor and the oppressed gave the Sisters of the Living Word a growing awareness of our kinship with all of creation. As they grew in reverence for the Living Word, they grew also in appreciation of all creation as an expression of that Word. The Stewardship Statement, adopted unanimously in 1984, is testimony to that awareness.

"We the Sisters of the Living Word, reverence all as gift. We commit ourselves to live simply, trust in Providence, joyfully nurture life and effectively realize our interdependence and mutuality with all of God's creation. Rooted in the Word, we are instruments in the transformation of the world for the sake of the Kingdom."

Both the Mission Statement and the Stewardship Statement grew out of the concurring effort to develop Constitutions for the Sisters of the Living Word. On the day of their beginning Annamarie Cook had presented a "Basic Document" as a guide for living in the new congregation. This document was compiled from position papers the sisters had prepared with proposals submitted to the General Chapters of the Sisters of Christian Charity. The proposals had all been rejected, but the basic principles were of lasting value.



Each sister shared in developing an Interim Constitution.

After the founding meeting in August, the sisters scheduled another general meeting for the Thanksgiving holiday. At that time they outlined the major divisions of the proposed Constitutions and formed committees to prepare preliminary suggestions. In December the entire group met again to begin writing an "Interim Constitution." This document would guide their living during those first years.

In 1977 a Constitution Committee was formed to coordinate the efforts of the community in writing what would become the expression of their lived experience as Sisters of the Living Word. Each year the entire community met, and still meets, to hear, consider, and vote on matters pertaining to life in the congregation.

From the beginning, decision-making was seen as a communal responsibility. Not only the Leadership, but the entire membership, was to be involved in major decisions affecting life in the congregation. The sisters recognized that demands of social justice and peace concerns would require a shared position statement. The Church documents, *Justice in the World*, *Economic Justice for All*, and the *Peace Pastoral* of the Bishops of the United States, had helped shaped awareness of the "signs of the times." In 1983 the Sisters of the

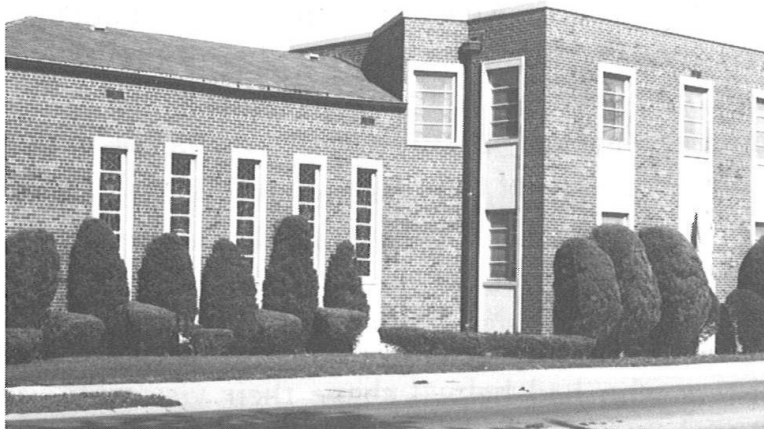
Living Word adopted a process for developing a corporate stance on major issues. Such events as our country's involvement in the Gulf War were occasions to activate the process.

One of the consequences of the 1975 separation was a form of "homelessness." Traditionally, most congregations have what is known as "motherhouses." There was

no way the new congregation could establish that kind of headquarters for the leadership of the fledgling community. At first the five members of the Leadership Team lived in St. Gregory Convent in Chicago. Within a few months they contacted Rev. Donald Ahearn, pastor of St. Juliana Parish in Chicago. St. Juliana Convent, no longer housing sisters, was only partially used by the parish. This convent was rented as the central office of the Sisters of the Living Word.



Several sisters meet to share pros and cons of a corporate statement on the Gulf War.



St. Juliana Convent, Living Word headquarters until 1990.



The former Ridge School became the Living Word Center. The Northwest Suburban Montessori School, established in 1964, still rents the west wing of the building.

By 1981 a move was begun to find a permanent site. An intensive search led to the 1985 purchase of the Ridge School building that the city of Arlington Heights put on the market after the school closed. A massive reconstruction project was finally completed in 1990. The Leadership Team and the central office staff moved into the *Living Word Center* in February 1990.

By this time, too, the Constitution Committee had led the congregation through the various stages of writing their rule of life. Every sister had contributed her insights to shaping the content of the constitutions. The final text, written by Annamarie Cook, was sent to Rome for approval.

On August 6, 1992, Cardinal Joseph Bernardin presented the Sisters of the Living Word their document of final approval as a religious congregation. At this liturgy each sister received her copy of the Constitutions and renewed her vows as a member of the newly approved congregation: the Sisters of the Living Word. The day was a culmination of seventeen years of sharing vision and values, shaping a new way of "reading the signs of the times", a new way of "reflecting and affirming" Jesus, the Living Word.

Their vision had led to a separation from the congregation of the Sisters of Christian Charity. It did not, however, lead to a separation from the sisters who had helped shape their vision. Judith Moran, SCC, Provincial Superior in Wilmette, with several other Sisters of Christian Charity, joined the Sisters of the Living Word in celebrating the mysterious ways of God's love. A wall plaque representing Mary

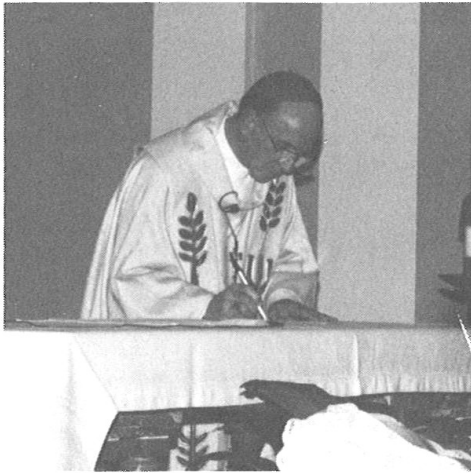
and the child Jesus, hangs in the Living Word Center. Next to it is a relic of Blessed Pauline von Mallinckrodt, foundress of the Sisters of Christian Charity, and an accompanying note:

Dear Sisters,

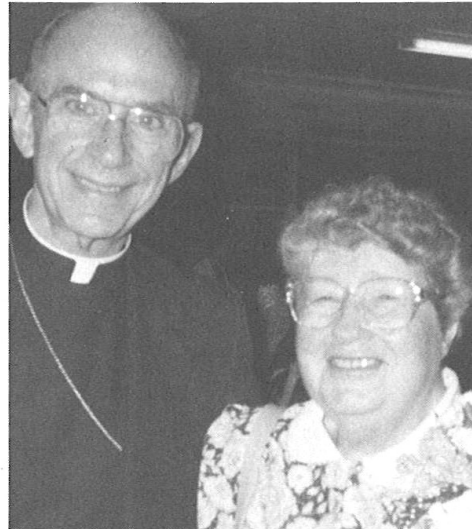
Please accept this little gift as a token of our love and continued interest in your community. Just as Mary presents her Child, the Living Word, to the world, we hope that in some way we, daughters of the Immaculate Conception, have helped you, Sisters of the Living Word, to continue to spread His Word to the world.

Lovingly,

(signed) S. M. Judith and Sisters



On August 6, 1992, Cardinal Bernardin presented the sisters with the document of final approval as a new religious congregation: the Sisters of the Living Word.



Cardinal Joseph Bernardin shares with Annamarie Cook the joy of August 6, 1992.

MISSION STATEMENT

*As Jesus was sent by the Father,
in the Power of the Spirit,
so are we sent as Sisters of the Living Word.*

*We reflect and affirm the Word
in the world, the Word who continually
frees the oppressed
and gives new life.*