

The Brotherhood has begun the first phase of a unique three-year project designed to assist poor families in a way which has never before been attempted in Australia.

The project arose out of a strenuous year of discussions and planning between the members of the various departments in the Brotherhood who have been trying to help poor families for many years.

Despite the sustained efforts of social workers and youth workers, neither the social system nor the economic conditions of some families changed. We provided family counselling, money, clothing and adolescent and children's activities, yet the families remained poor and very often were stripped of their dignity and self-respect.

The crux of our new thinking is that poverty is not a matter of personal inadequacy but of inequality and lack of opportunity.

A man on the minimum wage (\$51 per week) with four dependent children, living in a private home (at least \$20 per week rental) will always be poor and, in some cases, will have to rely on welfare help. In the past, Brotherhood relief payments, although given with great sympathy, were inadequate and spasmodic because of the huge demand on our resources, and did little to enable families to reduce inequalities or extend their opportunities. We set out to find a way to relieve poor families of the all-encompassing anxiety of 'making-ends-meet' so that they would be freed to take advantage of the opportunities which our society offers and to create new opportunities for themselves.

"Open-door" goes

The resources of a voluntary agency such as the Brotherhood are, of course, limited. Therefore it became necessary to restrict the numbers of families so that we could provide more adequately for them. We decided to close our previously 'open-door' and concentrate on 70 of the families we have worked with in the past. We have combined the staffs of the social work and youth services and the old Mission House in Fitzroy Street, behind the Brotherhood headquarters, houses the new project.

Our task is to provide this group of highly vulnerable poor families with adequate resources to improve their social and economic condition. These resources include a multi-disciplinary staff with many different skills, a basic guaranteed minimum income, and a building which the families can use to provide opportunities and activities which society has previously denied them.

Participation and practice in decision-making are the key-notes of the project. In general, the centre is 'activities' rather than 'problem' oriented and the families themselves will decide which activities best fulfil their needs.

A new approach



A sewing group for women is one of the activities of the new Family Centre

by Concetta Benn

Some activities are already underway — a sewing group for women, a painting and repairing group for men, and various holiday activities. Counselling services are still available for families but greater emphasis is placed on task achievement, building family strength, and improving individual skills. For example, the best way to improve the lives of an unskilled worker and his illiterate wife is to retrain the worker so that he earns more money and obtains greater job satisfaction and to teach his wife to read and write.

Gathering data

An essential part of the project is that the families, with the staff, collect basic data about their patterns of living and their social condition. Although there is a great deal of information about the numbers of people who live in poverty, there is little information about the quality of their lives or the ways in which they cope with their difficulties.

It is hoped the families themselves will collect this information (assisted by a research worker) and will use it to inform the community about poverty. The current Government enquiry into poverty could provide the families with an excellent opportunity to present this evidence.

The centre began to operate fully in the Mission

House on November 27. It is open six days a week from 9 a.m. to 10 p.m., and staffed by people from various professions supplemented by a wide range of volunteers with a variety of skills.

This project is an attempt to find a new approach to poverty. There is mounting evidence that the traditional social work methods of helping poor families do not eliminate poverty.

It is not possible for the Brotherhood to provide for all poor families in our community, but our aim is that the family centre will provide evidence for a social action and community education program which will lead to more humane social provisions for all poor families.

A project such as this involves a great deal of expense and hard work, but if it has the far-reaching effects that we predict, the money and effort will be well worthwhile. The active encouragement of other welfare organisations and the support we have received from our many contributors have helped to sustain us through the arduous planning phase of the project.

We hope to retain this faith in our efforts by reaffirming the traditional roles of the voluntary agency — experimentation and demonstration as a basis for social reform.