

HER WORK

The Christ Child Society was officially started in 1887 in Washington DC. As word of Mary Virginia Merrick's accomplishments and zeal spread quickly, people in other cities across the United States wanted to establish Christ Child chapters in their cities, to provide services to children in need in their own communities. Today there are 42 Chapters operating across the country with just over 6,000 members, all serving children in need. Mary used to say *"the Christ Child Society was set in motion by love, and love is a mighty impetus."*

She was a pioneer in lay social action and specifically in lay social action by Catholic women, at a time when women had few opportunities and rarely held lay leadership positions in either the church or in society. She often said *"much can be accomplished when God is by your side."*

"Miss Mary" was very progressive for her time, as the Society served children in need regardless of race or creed during a time of segregation in America. Not content to serve only those seeking assistance, she sent her "friendly visitors" out into the neighborhoods to see first-hand what the needs were and then, motivated by her personal motto "to see a need is to fill it", she found the means to mitigate those needs. In her lifetime she founded fresh air programs to send inner-city children to the country, libraries in jails and reform schools, settlements houses, boys & girls clubs, summer camps, free dental clinics, legal services for immigrants, and a Convalescent Home for children with illnesses or special needs, one of the first in the country.

Mary had a vision for a national organization from the very beginning and as the work of the society began to increase and spread she realized the need for solidarity in the organization. In 1916 Mary took action to have the branches that had begun in other cities federated into a national organization. She served as the organization's National President and did so until poor health forced her to resign in 1948, she remained the president of the Washington Chapter until her death in 1955. Under her direction the Society remained true to its Motto – "Laborare Est Orare", "to work is to pray" as well as its unofficial motto – "To see a need and fill it."

Although Mary was bedridden or confined to a wheelchair for most of her life, she had an inner fire, a drive that led her to accomplish much, disabled, yes...Frail, no! She was a strong-willed, independent woman who was driven to see her Society succeed and serve children in need. Yes she often struggled with her pain and physical limitations, but she did not let them stop her, she depended on her God, and in turn, He allowed her to accomplish great things in His own and only Son's name.