

National Committee for Professional Standards

Summary statement – *Towards Healing*

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The abuse of children by church personnel is appalling and is criminal. It should never have happened and it is crucial that we all take the many steps necessary to respond to the needs of all victims and to put in place robust preventative strategies, now and into the future.

We appreciate the courage victims have shown to come forward. It's not until you sit with somebody who has been abused and hear and feel some of their pain that you begin to realise the long-term effects of child sexual abuse and the pain suffered by victims. I have sat with many victims and with parents who have felt guilty that they did not protect their children. I am deeply ashamed of the appalling actions and the crimes of some Church personnel.

Towards Healing is a pastoral, non-legal response to help those who have been abused. It is a process in which each victim is treated and supported as an individual.

Towards Healing is based on seven principles: *Truth, humility, healing for the victims, assistance to other persons affected, a just response to those who are accused, an effective response to those who are guilty of abuse, and prevention of abuse.*

The setting up of *Towards Healing* gave victims an alternative to the civil or criminal processes and may have shown victims that the Church was beginning to understand the effects of abuse and was willing to listen to victims.

We have given the Victorian Parliamentary Inquiry access to all of the *Towards Healing* files, and representatives of this Inquiry attended our offices to inspect them in detail. We complied with a further request for specific files. We have nothing to hide and I believe that the review of our files will have demonstrated the integrity of our processes.

The Church's strong preference is that all allegations of criminal conduct are reported to and investigated by the police. It is also my strong personal belief that matters of child abuse are best dealt with by the police or civil authorities.

Many people don't want to go to the police, for a wide variety of reasons, even though we strongly encourage them to do so. In a significant number of cases victims eventually agree that they are willing to go to the police and if that is the case, we help them to do that.

A key question for this Inquiry is how to respond to victims who do not want or cannot go to the police. I believe that the Church cannot turn its back on these people and that we need to own the problem and offer a way forward. For some victims it is important that the process is a process offered by the Church, and *Towards Healing* is very clearly a process that the Church is put in place.

Where the person chooses to remain with the *Towards Healing* process, they are offered an assessment which is independent of the Bishop or Congregation Leader of the alleged perpetrator.

One of the important parts of *Towards Healing* is the facilitated meeting between the victim and the Bishop or Congregational leader who is the relevant Church Authority. It gives victims a chance to have their say to the current leader of the diocese or congregation involved. I have witnessed the great benefit this can bring to victims. It enables them to have their say in person, and to be heard by somebody in leadership, receive an apology, talk about ways they can be assisted in the healing process and ask questions about the offender.

It also enables the Church Authority to respond pastorally to the victim and to give consideration to the needs of the victim and their family. In this face to face encounter a Church leader knows the pain and brokenness of the victim in a way that never leaves them. No longer is abuse just a statistic – it has a human face.

This process has helped the leaders in our Church to come to a deeper understanding of the long-term effects of child sexual abuse.

There have been many different ways we have helped people. The Church, for example, has paid HECS fees for people or paid for people to go back to TAFE. However, some people don't want these sorts of things. They want financial assistance, and we provide it, considering the particular needs of each person.

Some victims report that the *Towards Healing* process has increased their suffering. We are open to any suggestions to avoid that risk. Many victims are moving from harrowing silence to sharing their story for the first time, which is a traumatic experience.

As a Church we are committed to recognising our failures and taking responsibility, as I am personally. I am appalled that abuse happened. I am sorry and saddened that our early responses were too slow and inadequate, and that we completely lacked insight into the prevalence and effects of child abuse.

When I first became involved in the late 1980s I did not properly understand or appreciate the extent of the problem and the devastating effect of sexual abuse. I was certainly not alert to the deception and cunning of predators.

Unfortunately as a Church we simply could not believe that a priest or religious could do such appalling things and we trusted their assurances that they had not offended or, if they had, that they would not do so again. It was also a time when we naively believed that offenders could be cured, especially when assured of this by professionals.

The learnings from *Toward Healing* have informed our protection and prevention strategies and alerted the Church to significant risk factors. Two of our key documents *Integrity in Ministry* and *Integrity in the Service of the Church* have been compiled to promote best practice in behavioural standards across the Church.

We are open to suggestions as to how to improve the process and we look forward to this Inquiry and the Royal Commission making recommendations in relation to such improvements.

I hope that some of the recommendations from this Inquiry will include enhanced mandatory reporting and child protection legislation, as is proposed in the Church's *Facing the Truth* submission, across all states and territories.

Above all, I hope that this Inquiry will help victims and assist them in finding the healing they need and deserve.