

National Council of Churches in Australia

**“SAFE AS CHURCHES?”**  
**National Ecumenical Consultation on Sexual Misconduct and**  
**Abuse in Australian Christian Churches**

4th-6th March 2004, Canberra

**SETTING THE SCENE**

by

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I have been invited to share my experience as a bishop in dealing with sexual misconduct in the Church. Let me begin by sharing with you five “episcopal dilemmas”.

Dilemma 1

***The Bishop's role: Shepherd or Judge?***

How involved should the Bishop be with survivors of sexual abuse?

The dilemma is perhaps clarified using the image of shepherd and judge.

The bishop is called to be the shepherd and therefore to care for both the complainant and the respondent while the evidence is being considered. But when a recommendation has been made by the Diocesan processes the Bishop then sits in judgement as to the final decision.

Dilemma 2

***The Bishop speaks: Transparency or Confidentiality?***

The church, the public and clergy's "right to know" versus the confidentiality and sensitivity towards both complainants and respondents.

Dilemma 3

**The Bishop of whom: the Clergy and/or the People?**

The Bishop as “Father in God” to the clergy versus the Bishop as the shepherd of all God's people.

In the Anglican tradition the clergy expect that the Bishop will care for them and the Bishop may find it very difficult to be seen to take a step back from the clergy in order to handle a complaint of abuse with impartiality.

## Dilemma 4

### **The Bishop and the Media: “Do not ask for whom the bell tolls, it tolls for thee”**

Our experience is that the bishop is the appropriate person to speak to the media.

How much information do we give to the media? The media will report regardless of whether we do or do not participate. But we must be carefully briefed. e.g., How is natural justice protected and people's confidentiality and privacy respected?

When the media referred to a psychologist who was convicted of sexual offences against an under aged child as author of the Inquiry Report on sexual abuse in the Anglican Church but virtually ignored his role as University lecturer or Government psychologist: to what extent does the Bishop cry, “Unfair! What about his other professional roles?” And, to what extent does the Bishop seek to comment and defend the Diocesan Inquiry Report? Commenting may in fact reduce the public's confidence in the Inquiry Report and processes. But failing to comment may seem like the Church's endorsement of criticisms of the Report.

## Dilemma 5

### **The Bishop's time management: Too much sex! or Why is the Bishop spending so much time on sexual abuse issues?**

Most of the clergy and lay people have little understanding of the complexity and time consuming nature of dealing with these complaints. Complaints which, in Tasmania, occurred mostly 15 to 30 years ago. Yet not to deal adequately with these complaints denies justice and compassion to both complainants and respondents and will inevitably result in further damage to the survivors as well as diminished credibility and correspondent negative publicity for the church. The bishop will also need to dedicate significant time to the pastoral care of the congregation(s) where the abuse occurred.

### **MY RESPONSE TO TWO PERSONAL QUESTIONS:**

#### **1. *What has been my personal reaction to sexual abuse within the Church?***

- ***It has been one of overwhelming sadness.***

1. Sadness at the pain and suffering of survivors of abuse
2. Sadness at the betrayal by priests of their vocational calling and vows
3. Sadness at our delays and difficulties in responding to the needs of survivors of abuse
4. Sadness at aspects of the public criticism by some survivors of our efforts to support survivors
5. Sadness at a staggering sum of human suffering. This deep sadness has caused me to change, to become more conscious of the pain of others.

e.g. The signing of my letters to victims: I normally sign off my letters "Yours sincerely in Christ's service, Shalom" but when writing to a victim I realised that their very abuse had been portrayed as though "in Christ's service". I also realised that the meaning of "shalom" could be misconstrued as facile, as playing down their suffering. I now sign off my letters to survivors of abuse with: "Yours sincerely".

## **2. What have I learnt of myself? - I could not manage this alone.**

It is not possible for the Bishop to manage sexual misconduct matters alone.

1. The complexity of the issues: there are pastoral, legal, financial, media and administrative matters involved.
2. The particular relationship of the Bishop to the clergy: this makes impartiality problematic for the Bishop if working alone.
3. The doctrine of forgiveness is so fundamental to the Christian tradition that the tendency of the Bishop may be to apply it too early or to accept an offer of contrition by the accused as being sufficient for dealing with the issue.
4. Not many bishops would have training in dealing with this sort of behaviour when they assume office.

e.g. A priest breaking down and pouring out his heart in confession to the new bishop is a most profound moment. However, a bishop trained and experienced as a counsellor in the area of sexual misconduct may be sensitive to the possibility of being manipulated.

A team of trusted and suitably gifted people must manage these matters in a known process with the Bishop. We must work with other professionals.

## **CONCLUSION**

I recently released a Bishop's vision for the Diocese of Tasmania in a booklet form entitled "a healthy**church** ... *transforminglife*". Some ten days later I held a Service of Prayer and Reflection for all those who have suffered abuse. This Service was entitled "Out of the Depths" and the Order of Service was published in booklet form.

At the end of this Service a woman approached me with her husband and asked if I would sign both the "healthy**church** ... *transforminglife*" booklet and the "Out of the Depths" Order of Service booklet. I duly signed both the booklets. I was curious, however, and I asked if there was any particular reason for having the booklets autographed. The woman replied that when she heard my "*transforminglife*" launch address and read the booklet she was enthusiastic about its content but wondered whether this would just be another document collecting dust.

"But", she commented, "now that I have seen you do the second booklet ("Out of the Depths"), I believe the first one. Thank you."

The credibility of the Church depends on our commitment to making it a healthy church, a safe church.

May God help us to achieve this through our vital NCCA Conference 'Safe as Churches?'

Shalom

Bishop John Harrower