

SOURCE DOCUMENT

OUR CHURCH A SAFE COMMUNITY A SHARED COMMITMENT

AWARENESS RAISING PROGRAM



Each person in every Catholic Church community is being asked to become involved in a new program to make our church a safe community for all by working to prevent abuse.

Our aim is to ensure that all communities and organisations within the church are safe and enriching environments for people of all ages, with special concern for children, young people and vulnerable adults.

We believe that a commitment to follow the example of Jesus by respecting the dignity of each person will assist us to work together for the protection of all and for the prevention of any form of abuse – physical, sexual, emotional or spiritual – within our church communities and organisations.

We believe that a safe environment is more likely to result if each member of the church community becomes involved in an awareness raising program highlighting the serious and long-term effects of abuse of children, young people and vulnerable adults.

In July 2005 the National Framework *Creating Safe Environments for Children* stressed that 'Risk Management and other preventative strategies rely upon people understanding how child abuse can occur, knowing what to look for, and accepting a sense of well-being for children'.

OUR CHURCH

A SAFE COMMUNITY

A SHARED COMMITMENT

is an Awareness Raising Program being launched by the Catholic Church at the conclusion of Child Protection Week in September 2007. The Program looks to the prevention of abuse by all members of the Catholic Church – employers, employees, volunteers, priests and religious.

CHILD PROTECTION WEEK IS AN INITIATIVE OF THE NATIONAL ASSOCIATION FOR PREVENTION OF CHILD ABUSE AND NEGLECT (NAPCAN)

The NAPCAN theme for 2007 is *Take a Child Friendly Challenge*

'In child friendly communities, everyone will accept that the safety and well-being of kids is everyone's responsibility. For child friendly communities to be a reality, we need to engage the whole Australian community to get involved, and help make a positive difference in children's lives.'

THE NATIONAL COMMITTEE FOR PROFESSIONAL STANDARDS IS TAKING STEPS

- To engage the broader Catholic community by raising awareness and understanding of the impact of abuse not just on the individual and the family concerned but on the whole community
- To encourage each person to recognize and fulfil a role in creating an enriching and safe environment for all in our church
- To share what has been learned in our church over the past fifteen years about the damage that has been caused so that all will resolve to work together to respect the dignity of each person and to protect all, especially children, young people and vulnerable adults
- To assist the Catholic community to implement the appropriate State and Territory legislation and to follow the National Framework Guidelines *Creating Safe Environments for Children*
- To assist key individuals within parishes and other church organisations to adapt relevant Church policies to their particular circumstances and to engage local members in implementation
- To provide assistance and guidance for key individuals in each parish and other church organisations
 - to consider the risks associated with particular activities
 - to assess procedures in place to minimise risks
 - to provide a positive and safe environment
- To distribute a Risk Assessment schedule with step by step instructions to be

followed.

- To provide answers to some of the most frequently asked questions e.g.
 - How do I protect my children?
 - Do we have to teach children not to trust anyone?
 - Does having a police check mean we are not trusted?
 - Should we give someone a second chance?
 - Why does it take so long for some to disclose abuse?
 - Isn't what adults do their private business?
 - Are forgiveness and/or healing achievable goals?

THE LESSONS WE HAVE LEARNED

GENERAL PREAMBLE

- We are grateful for the courage of those who have disclosed the abuse they have experienced. Their disclosures and actions have made us more acutely aware of the prevalence of sexual abuse in the community and more conscious of child abuse within many groups including our own church.
- We acknowledge that while media reports about abuse by church personnel have been confronting, they serve as a catalyst for us to put in place structures that will make our church community safer.
- We have learned a great deal about child sexual abuse. 'At the same time, however, we all remain students when it comes to this topic. In the past, for example, the sexual abuse of children was classified almost solely as a moral problem, today we realise that it is also a psychiatric disorder, and that in most countries, it is a crime.'

Br. Sean Sammon FMS psychologist and Congregational Leader.

- We have learned that every case is different and thus there is no simple answer to the complicated challenge of protecting children, young people and vulnerable adults. Clearly the whole church community must be committed to the prevention of all abuse.
- We have come to understand the words of NAPCAN that 'child abuse affects the whole community, not just the child and the family involved'.

EFFECTS OF ABUSE ON VICTIMS

- We have listened to adults who trusted a priest or religious at times when they were vulnerable and found that this trust was abused.
- We have heard the potentially crippling emotional and spiritual pain of victims who have been abused by church personnel and recognise the confusion and shame they carry well into adulthood.
- We have heard the anguish of parents who trusted church personnel, at times inviting them into their homes or allowing their children to be with them, on finding that trust abused.
- We continue to learn that the effects of being abused as a child have frequently been serious and long-term especially when no disclosure has been made for many years. Even years later, abuse can contribute to a lack of trust in relationships, sexual dysfunction, low self-esteem, fear and anxiety, and a number of other potentially debilitating problems.

REPORTING AND THE CHURCH RESPONSE

- We recognise that any attempt to sexualise a pastoral relationship is 'a breach of trust, an abuse of authority and professional misconduct'. (*Towards Healing 1*) It is the responsibility of church personnel to maintain the boundaries in any pastoral relationship and of church authorities to take action when abuse occurs.
- We have committed ourselves to ensure that 'serious offenders will not be given back the power they have abused' (*Towards Healing 27*).
- We have made a 'firm commitment to strive for truth, humility, healing for victims and assistance to other persons affected' (*Towards Healing 12*) and have set in place procedures to respond to victims of abuse by church personnel.
- We encourage and are willing to assist those who allege criminal abuse by church personnel to take their case to the police. Where the person is not willing to take this step or the matter is not criminal, the church follows the processes of *Towards Healing: - Principles and Procedures in responding to complaints of abuse against personnel of the Catholic Church in Australia*.

- We are grateful that parents have become more alert to the possibility of abuse occurring and are more likely to report it and that children are being educated to recognise and report abuse.
- We welcome the fact that, as a consequence of the increased awareness of parents and the education of children, disclosure of abuse to authorities seems to be happening closer to the time it is committed. This ensures that other children are protected and may encourage more effective healing for the victim.
- We have found, and this is supported by research, that people rarely make a false claim that they have been sexually abused.

AWARENESS RAISING AND PREVENTION

- We have learned that in virtually every case of sexual abuse there are individuals who sense or recognise that there is a problem, often long before abuse is disclosed and that most of the time, they fail to take action. This is not because they do not care, nor because it does not matter but because they may not understand their intuitions or they do not know how to respond or with whom to consult.
- We have learned that there are patterns of how abuse is perpetrated and there are elements that must be present for abuse to occur and that knowing these patterns and elements can help us to respond and to prevent abuse.
- We have learned that for abuse prevention to be effective there must be a conviction that a safe environment can be created and a determination within the organisation to achieve this.
- We continue to be informed that minimum compliance to legislation and other processes alone will not stop abuse. The primary element in prevention is a heartfelt commitment by the whole community. Thus this Awareness Raising Program is asking for the commitment of each person in the church.
- We welcome mandatory police checks and legislation regarding 'Working with Children' and 'Child Safe Environments' which are being introduced in various Australian States.
- We have become aware that children and young people are at greater risk than

ever before through Internet communication. Through the Internet, adults who have a primary attraction to minors have found it easy to contact one another and develop highly organized pornographic networks. There are hundreds of web-sites and chat-rooms where perpetrators of abuse meet and discuss how to cultivate relationships with minors.

- We understand that those viewing pornography are not 'merely looking' but are providing encouragement for people to abuse children or adults for sexual gratification. Using children to create pornographic images is criminal.

THE CHURCH RESPONSE

Over recent years the Catholic Church in Australia has taken steps to address the issue of sexual abuse by church personnel. To date much of the focus has been on providing, through *Towards Healing*, an appropriate and compassionate response to those who have suffered abuse within our church.

In December 1996 the Bishops and Congregational Leaders of the Catholic Church in Australia acknowledged 'with deep sadness and regret that a number of clergy and religious have abused children, adolescents and adults who have been in their pastoral care. To these victims we offer our sincere apology.'

While continuing to respond to allegations being brought forward under *Toward Healing*, the Church has also taken steps towards prevention of abuse, especially among clergy, religious and others engaged in ministry within the church.

WHAT CAN EACH OF US DO?

- Respect the dignity of each child, young person and adult in the community
- Be aware of the possibilities of abuse, not overly suspicious
- Trust our instincts, avoid gossip and consult with appropriate persons
- Be open to acquiring a deeper understanding of the harm caused by abuse
- Undertake willingly the checks required by State and Church agencies
- Abide by Codes of Conduct and follow conscientiously Risk Assessment procedures
- Work to protect children, young people and vulnerable adults in our community
- Make a personal commitment to ensuring that our church is a safe community for all

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION FOR SPEAKERS

The media have been and continue to be instrumental in providing information about sexual abuse.

As well as the church, society and the government have become more aware of abuse and schools are teaching children to recognize and to report abuse.

Legislation is in place already or in the process of being put in place

- requiring police checks for church personnel, employees and volunteers
- ensuring that there are Codes of Conduct, policies and procedures to protect children and all vulnerable people
- requiring mandatory reporting of abuse of minors
- requiring action on all cases of reported abuse

Research indicates that the long-term effects of undisclosed child abuse may include

- a lack of trust in relationships
- guilt and shame
- grief and anger
- sexual dysfunction
- low self-esteem
- fear and anxiety
- a number of other potentially debilitating problems

The long-term effects of abuse of children and vulnerable adults by church personnel are to be seen in

- loss of trust in church and in God
- the association of wrong and harm with faith in God and in church
- children and vulnerable people feeling guilty, believing they are responsible
- children and vulnerable people becoming withdrawn from family and church community
- the destruction of all church involvement for victims and their families

What has allowed abuse by church personnel to develop?

- the trust and naivety of church community members (as in the wider society) and the strong belief that abuse was perpetrated exclusively by strangers
- the ability of the perpetrators to exploit the most vulnerable and to make it appear that they are being exceptionally caring of
 - e.g. those previously abused
 - children in single parent families
 - children who are often alone
 - children from families where the adults are always 'busy'
 - adolescents who are 'loners'
 - adults in times of grief or distress

How do perpetrators 'groom' their victims so that the abusive actions take place?

- perpetrators select a potential victim and develop a relationship of trust with their victim
- they test whether the child will keep small secrets
- small steps are taken, advancing first into sexual talk and then to initial exploration, these are further examples of 'our secrets'
- as the sexual activity becomes more serious and more intrusive it can often be accompanied by threats about what would happen if the child told anyone
- the child is caught and does not know how to 'escape'
- also the child or young person may feel 'loved', may feel 'special' at the time, especially with someone outside the immediate home environment
- the child often becomes withdrawn, changes behaviour, becomes uninterested in school, friends etc.
- the abuse may be buried for many years and disclosure is triggered by later trauma or hearing of other similar cases of abuse

It is our belief that a commitment to following the example of Jesus by respecting the dignity of each person will assist us to work together for the protection of all and for the prevention of any form of abuse – physical, sexual, emotional or spiritual – within our church communities and organisations.

HOW DO WE TRANSLATE THIS AWARENESS INTO PRACTICE IN THE PARISH AND IN ALL ORGANISATIONS THROUGHOUT THE CHURCH?

1. Preparation of a Source Document

2. First phase – September 2007

Kits for parishes and organisations which will include

- A letter of Introduction
- Homily Notes
- Notices for the Parish Bulletin
- Prayers of Intercession (2 sets)
- Cards for distribution to the Parishioners
- Speaker's Notes
- A Risk Assessment Guide

3. Later phases

- i) A video (Phase 2)
- ii) Policies to be provided (where assistance is required)
- iii) Presentations to Deaneries and groups
- iv) Wider promotion – media
- v) Development of a web-site
- vi) A Summary of the legislation for the appropriate State.
- vii) Information (e.g. card) in key community languages.