

# UPDATE 82

## Royal Commission Case Study 35 Archdiocese of Melbourne



Friday 27 November 2015 – Day 4

Day four of the Royal Commission's public hearing into the Archdiocese of Melbourne started with Mr Allan Dooley who was a regional educational consultant in the Melbourne CEO during the period when Peter Searson was parish priest at Doveton.

Mr Dooley reported directly to Father Doyle, former director of Catholic Education in the Archdiocese of Melbourne.

Mr Dooley told the Commission he agreed Searson was a devious and dangerous person and he was someone who should not be around children without supervision because of 'his manner, because of the way he would deal with children, because of the way he would intimidate and threaten'.

When asked about his reporting processes Mr Dooley told the Commission he did not always become aware of how his reports were dealt with and this sometimes made it difficult to do his job. He told the Commission he believed the allegations against Searson 'had substance' on the basis of them having been reported by school principal Sleeman.

He said that while allegations against Searson were 'substantial' they were not 'substantiated' or 'proven' and that without a formal investigation Searson could not be removed. He said he had not called for an investigation and was unaware of anyone else doing so.

Asked by Commissioner McClellan why he had not 'point-blank' recommended Searson be removed from the school he said he believed his reports were drawing attention to the 'necessary actions' but that in hindsight 'it seems obvious' that he should have made such a recommendation.

Bishop Peter Connors was vicar-general to Archbishop Frank Little from 1976 to 1987, he was an auxiliary bishop in the Archdiocese of Melbourne from 1987 until installed as Bishop of Ballarat in 1997. He retired in 2012.

Bishop Connors was questioned about his role as vicar-general and secretary to Archbishop Little from 1974 to 1997 particularly in relation to his involvement with Peter Searson.

Bishop Connors told the Commission that any capacity he had to investigate complaints was 'very limited in its scope or in what I was capable of doing'.

When he was asked about a number of allegations against Searson including recording confessions and having children kneel between his legs during confession he said that he believed he failed to investigate because he 'foolishly trusted the priest to be telling me the truth'.

He said '...on reflection I do believe I should have been more involved at a local level in finding out just what was happening' and that his instruction that Searson use a kneeler in confession was 'naïve in thinking that was sufficient' to protect children from Searson.

When asked by Commissioner McClellan about the difficulties of removing a priest from his parish Bishop Connors told the Commission that over 'the past 20 years there's been a greater understanding of this issue

and that there are better processes in place since 2000 to ensure that this kind of allegation is dealt with and action taken’.

While Bishop Connors said there are some things to be gained by the parish priest feeling that he’s got a responsibility to a local parish school as the employer of staff he agreed with Commissioner McClellan that ‘for the sake of good order and duty of care that (role) should be taken away from the parish priest and given to a centralized expert body’.

When asked about the national development of protocols to deal with clerical sexual abuse in the early 1990s and if this had an influence on the decision to issue a canonical warning to Searson, Bishop Connors said he accepted that canonical processes were starting to be put in place.

Asked about the way in which the Archdiocese handled Searson over many years Bishop Connors said ‘we responded in a very amateur way and probably left a lot of people hurt’.

When asked if he was trying to shield Archbishop Little from dealing with the Doveton issues he said he didn’t believe this to be true but that he ‘found it just so difficult to get him to act’.

Bishop Connors concluded his evidence regarding Searson and will be recalled to deal with other issues next week.

Towards the end of the day survivor witness BVC read a statement to the Commission in which he talked about his experiences in the Holy Family parish and the abuse he suffered at the hands of Searson as a 10-year old altar boy in 1992.

He spoke about being abused by Searson in 1992 in the presbytery including being raped anally and orally about 10 times over the following five years.

BVC completed high school and went on to complete a graduate diploma in Education becoming a teacher and an assistant principal.

He told the Commission he has found it extremely difficult to come to terms with his abuse and that he has struggled with building relationships. BVC said he has considered suicide.

The hearing will continue on Monday.

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