

Church leadership puts in place lay experts...

It is always encouraging to see a diocese or congregation taking new approaches to the protection of children and vulnerable adults.

The latest is the Diocese of Maitland-Newcastle which this week officially announced a new independent child protection council.

The Council will provide local Bishop, Bill Wright, with advice on protecting children and vulnerable adults and on how to ensure the Diocese continues to develop its policies and practices in the field of professional standards.

Amongst other things, it is hoped the nine-member council will also help rebuild a sense of trust within the community following the harrowing Royal Commission case study towards the end of last year and the long history of child sexual abuse in the region.

Bishop Wright says the Diocese has a sad history of abuse.

"The Diocese has a particularly troubled history of failing to protect children from sexual abuse and through these failures, allowed predatory individuals to continue to abuse.

"It is this sad history which sees us now at the forefront of safety and protection as we aim to continually push forward with any activities which minimise the risk for people suffering in the future," he said in a recent statement.

Putting in place this Council is yet another indication of the willingness, across much of the Church leadership in Australia, to look to lay experts to help address the many issues around the abuse of children and others.

The official launch of the Council comes just months after the Church announced the establishment of a new independent agency which will set, audit and report the compliance of diocese and religious orders with child safe and vulnerable adult protection standards.

Both initiatives are recent examples of the mind shift in the Church's approach.

It was also encouraging to see that this week one of Australia's oldest boarding schools, St Stanislaus' in Bathurst, will make an official apology to survivors of abuse at the school.

This is the latest of a string of apologies – Marists Brothers in Canberra, St Pats in Ballarat and others – from schools which have recognised the importance of publically acknowledging the abuse and inviting survivors to be part of a recognition and healing ceremony.

It is also very encouraging to see that the head of the College, Anne Wenham, plans to publically invite survivors to get involved in the planning of the event which is likely to be held mid-year.

When symbolic events like this, built on strong decisive action, take place then there is a possibility that survivors might see the Church is willing to engage with them in different ways as it tries to acknowledge the reality of the abuse and build connections and good will.

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