Blog

Towards a greater healing

TRUTH JUSTICE HEALING COUNCIL

In early July the Royal Commission announced that *Towards Healing* is the second public issues paper for public comment and consultation.

As many of you are aware *Towards Healing* was established in 1996 and formalised the Catholic Church's principles and procedures for responding to complaints of abuse. At the time it was considered a groundbreaking initiative designed to provide a pastoral response, tailored specifically to the individual needs of victims of sexual abuse.

Many people believe *Towards Healing* has been successful in improving the Church's handling of sex abuse allegations. Over the years there has been a number of improvements and changes made to address any problems or issues.

Through the Royal Commission's issues papers we have the chance to examine *Towards Healing* protocols, to identify what is working well and what is not and to make the changes that will keep it relevant and delivering results.

The goal of *Towards Healing* has always been to take a holistic approach to addressing the needs and concerns of people who have been abused within the Church.

It was never the intention of *Towards Healing* to be a substitute for any criminal investigation. People approaching the Church are actively encouraged to inform the police of any criminal behavior and the Church itself is likewise obliged to inform authorities.

Individual cases are administered locally across the country, and while they reflect the diversity of approaches that have arisen in response to local needs, each case is dealt with in accordance with the principles of the *Towards Healing* process. Anecdotal feedback from individuals that have gone through the *Towards Healing* process is also largely positive.

Towards Healing has always been open to continuous improvement. It has had two major independent reviews by Professor Patrick Parkinson, a family law and child protection specialist, and the Church has adopted the recommendations of those reviews.

The National Committee for Professional Standards, the collaborative body that oversees the progress and effectiveness of *Towards Healing*, is also continually seeking to fine-tune its operations.

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There are of course a number of complex issues, complaints and questions concerning *Towards Healing* that need to be examined. In preparing our submission for the Commission, due in early September, we will be relying on experts, and those within the National Committee for Professional Standards, to advise on the areas of the program that can be enhanced and improved in the interests of victims.

Towards Healing has dramatically assisted the Church in addressing the scandal of child sex abuse. The concern and compassion that drove its creation is also the same motivation to make the program robust and credible for the future.

As the introduction to the 2010 version of *Towards Healing* says it is a 'living document, responsive both to a changing environment and to the needs of those involved.'

And like the earlier documents, the 2010 version restates public criteria the community can use to judge the resolve of Church leaders to address issues of abuse within the Church. If we do not follow its principles and procedures we will have failed according to our own criteria.

Victims and the community generally need the confidence that the Church's processes have the interests of those damaged as their number one priority.

We encourage people who have been through *Towards Healing* to tell their story and to contribute to its improvement.

While *Towards Healing* is being examined, Commissioners are holding informal meetings with victims in Adelaide, Perth and Melbourne. The Commission has advised that there will likely be 24 issues papers to be prepared and discussed.

It is heartening to see so much work, energy and enthusiasm from all aspects of the Catholic Church, and beyond, in getting this issue right. We all want to ensure children are safe, well cared for and thrive in the world.

This is our chance, our great opportunity to uncover any policies and procedures that may be holding us back from achieving true reconciliation for people who have been abused.

Francis Sullivan