

Picking up the pieces when they fall

It was a great pleasure to meet Ian Elliott, the out-going CEO of the National Board for Safeguarding Children in the Catholic Church in Ireland. Mr Elliott has been in Australia for the past month or so at the invitation of the Catholic Church's National Committee for Professional Standards.

Mr Elliott openly discussed the challenges and successes of implementing a standards-based national strategy for the safeguarding of children. It is widely acclaimed his reforms and leadership changed the attitude and operations of the Irish Catholic Church in the face of the clerical abuse scandal.

Mr Elliott provided valuable advice to the Australian Catholic Church and the Council. He emphasized the importance of developing transparent and accountable response and prevention strategies.

I encourage you to read his [blog](#) and watch my [interview with Mr Elliott](#).

As we begin to prepare our submission on Towards Healing for the Royal Commission, I am reminded of Mr Elliott's advice and his actions in addressing public criticism and allegations openly and honestly.

Our submission will outline the development of Towards Healing, and will thoroughly investigate its operations. This Council will convene a Towards Healing workshop in Sydney on 18 September so that dioceses and religious orders can contribute to the Towards Healing submission.

We can be proud that since it was introduced in 1996, Towards Healing has marked a significant shift in philosophy and approach by the Church towards people who have been abused. It is a living document, subject to ongoing review. Significant changes have been made over time. And while it is not perfect, it's better than what was in place prior to 1996.

Times change and so too does our knowledge and understanding of the long-term and significant impacts of abuse. We know now that most victims and survivors need long-term care and on-going support. .

The Council was set up in December, and since January I have travelled across Australia and talked with many people involved in the Church's response to the abuse scandal. They tell me we must be vigilant and continually trying to improve the Church's pastoral response to people damaged by abuse. In other words, we know that to strive for best practice is in itself a commitment to survivors and their families.

The thing that struck me about the Irish experience was with their transparent review and auditing of Church procedures. Based on set standards, Irish Church agencies are assessed on their performance and outcomes with all findings placed in the public domain.

This ensures accountability is completely transparent. It also shows that the Church leadership is serious about demonstrating their bone fides on child safety and protection.

Mr Elliott explained that developing safeguarding practices within the Church was not 'comfortable' and that many people were anxious about it. It is reassuring to know that six years after its introduction there is now a truly positive and optimistic feeling about the Church in Ireland and their management of abuse cases.

In the context of striving for best practice, there is much to be learnt from the Irish experience, and indeed the experience of other countries.

When the Catholic Church in the USA was engulfed in similar clerical abuse scandals in 2002 the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops engaged the services of John Jay College of Criminal Justice of the City University of New York. They were asked to conduct a comprehensive research study on the causes and context of the clergy sexual abuse.

Like the Irish experience, and what we are experiencing now in Australia, it was a difficult time in the USA. But the research lifted the lid on secrecy and showed the Church was committed to admitting past wrongs and importantly making them right for future generations.

Bishop Cupich the Chair of the USA's Committee for the Protection of Children and Young People said at the time that the future must be marked by humility and partnerships with others.

"The shame of failing our people will remain with us for a long time. It should. Its sting can keep us resolute in our commitments and humble so as to never forget the insight we came to nearly a decade ago in Dallas."

There is a lot to be learnt from the experiences of other countries. Like Ireland and the USA we have also adopted an honest and transparent approach to the issue of clerical sex abuse.

We can learn and grow from the experiences of other countries. As I have said before, it is important for everyone to realize that the process that brings out the truth may be painful, but out of the ash grows hope.

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