

The need for a national compensation scheme

It was gut wrenching hearing the shocking stories from the 11 former residents of Christian Brother's orphanages and farm schools in WA in the 1950s and 60s during the Royal Commission in Perth over the past two weeks. They spoke of childhoods destroyed and lives damaged.

With strained voices and trembling hands the impact of the abuse, and the agony in recalling such a painful past, was obvious. These survivors struggled on because it was important for them to tell their story, and we need to have a deeper understanding of what really happened.

During the Commission the Catholic Church, particularly the Christian Brothers have been questioned intensely. Current Christian Brothers living with this past shame have fronted the Royal Commission and demonstrated their willingness to acknowledge and explain the past, let the community know about current protections in place and apologise for the actions of pedophile brothers.

Current Christian Brothers have worked hard to offer support to survivors by establishing large pastoral programs. Christian Brothers' Ex-Residents Services (CBERS), chaired by one of our Council members, Professor Maria Harries provided counseling and support to men and partners of people who had been at the WA Institutions.

The Christian Brothers have also founded a support service for individuals to reunite with their families back in England and Malta. This has been a positive initiative and generally welcomed by former residents.

It was also an important step forward to hear from Br Julian McDonald yesterday that the Brothers will re-examine any settlement claims that have been made in the past for any victim who feels they have been treated unfairly.

Despite this assistance and the fact these tragedies were featured in the media years earlier and were the subject of a 2003 Senate Inquiry, it is quite clear this sorry saga is far from settled.

In his evidence to the Commission this week, Brother Anthony (Tony) Shanahan, former Leader of Christian Brothers' Province of Western Australia and South Australia, spoke about the reasons, he thought, played a part in the abuse at the Brother's four WA orphanages and farm schools.

Brother Shanahan highlighted issues of personal and sexual immaturity, lack of appropriate training and historic inappropriate screening of candidates wanting to enter religious life.

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Evidence was also heard about 'Redress WA', established by the WA government to provide compensation to child migrants. The scheme was criticized during the Commission for providing inadequate amounts of money. Financial support from the Christian Brothers and the class action, mounted by Slater & Gordon, has also been the subject of intense analysis and scrutiny.

When reviewing the redress scheme, Chair of the Royal Commission, Justice Peter McClelland, said something had "seriously gone wrong" with the government's handling of its compensation scheme for children abused in State care.

It is quite clear that the only way forward is a sound and generous national compensation scheme, funded by the Catholic Church and other institutions for survivors of child sex abuse. A national compensation scheme is part of a reform package proposed by the Truth Justice and Healing Council (TJHC).

In November last year I wrote to all Attorneys General of the Commonwealth, State and Territory governments asking them to consider a national compensation scheme for the survivors of child sex abuse.

This would involve an independent authority investigating and determining compensation, which would be paid by the Church or any other institution responsible for the abuse. I believe this would be the most compassionate way forward and in the best, long-term interest of survivors, many of whom have faced serious obstacles in having to litigate their claim in court.

The second part of the reform package is ensuring every Bishop, every diocese and every religious order makes available a legal entity, covered by insurance and wealth that survivors of child sex abuse can sue. Our hope is survivors will no longer feel intimidated by the Church or denied a fair hearing because of legal technical issues.

We cannot change what has happened, but we can do our best to ensure survivors are well compensated and given every opportunity to heal and to lead a life of dignity and hope.

Brother Brian Brandon, the Christian Brothers Oceania Executive Officer for Professional Standards expresses this hope well in a written statement about the tragedies in WA.

"We commit ourselves to walking with these men on their lifelong journey in search of redress and healing for the failures of the past."

"While what has happened can not be changed, we will continue to seek to work with all these victims, responding to individual needs and circumstances with compassion, care and respect."

Francis Sullivan