Blog

TRUTH JUSTICE HEALING COUNCIL

Consultation forums begin in Canberra

The Truth Justice and Healing Council (TJHC) has just completed the first of eight forums consulting with the Church community on setting up a national standards setting and supervisory body for child protection and safeguards for vulnerable people in Catholic institutions.

The first forum, held in Canberra on Monday saw 25 people from across the local church community meet to flesh out and discuss ideas on the best ways to deliver better accountability, transparency and consistency as we work to ensure all Church institutions are safe.

The starting point for these discussions has been a consultation paper developed and distributed widely throughout Catholic Church institutions. What the end proposal will look like when it is delivered to the Bishops and religious leaders mid-year is very much a work in progress and will be informed by what we hear over the coming month.

If the Canberra forum is anything to go by there are many people with strong views and ideas that will play a significant part in shaping the final recommendations.

By the end of this week we will have been to Adelaide and Perth. We will be in Hobart and Sydney next week and Brisbane and Melbourne the following week.

It was interesting that last weekend, just ahead of the start our consultation forums, the Irish Church held a major conference hosted by the National Board for Safeguarding Children in the Catholic Church in Ireland which was established to set child protection standards, audit and report on them across the Irish Church.

Archbishop Eamon Martin, President of the Irish Bishops' Conference who opened the meeting, said the conference provided an opportunity to look back on where the Church in Ireland had come from and to assess its progress.

The conference was grounded on two underlying themes: the legacy of past failure, and the importance of safeguarding as a shared responsibility within the Church. It looked at three important issues in particular: a safeguarding culture; a One-Church approach; and, outreach to survivors.

As we go about consulting on a child protection body for Australia it is important to understand the types of reforms being considered are not unique.

In Europe, the UK, the US and Canada the Catholic Church is working to address the shadow of child sexual abuse with many countries now having independent whole-of-church child protectorate bodies.

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Chair of the Royal Commission, Peter McClellan, has indicated his interest in seeing how institutions are responding to what they are hearing from the Royal Commission. Our national consultation process demonstrates that the Church is listening and is taking action.

Public hearings

As the forums are being rolled out throughout Australia we will also continue preparations for Royal Commission public hearings in Rockhampton and Ballarat.

On 14th March a public hearing will be held in Rockhampton focusing on the experiences of children at St Joseph's Orphanage, Neerkol, and the conduct of priests attached to the Diocese who carried out duties at the orphanage.

The Commission will then travel to Ballarat in May, where it is understood further evidence of institutional sexual abuse, involving the Catholic Church, will be examined.

But before either of these hearings, on Tuesday next week a public hearing in Sydney will look at allegations of child sexual abuse and prevention strategies in out-of-home care.

This hearing isn't focusing exclusively on the Catholic Church but will gather information from all State Government jurisdictions and around seven other major institutions.

During the hearing al the groups will be asked to outline their experience in the management and safety of children in Out-of-Home Care.

We also continue to develop our response to the Royal Commission's Redress Paper due to be submitted next week.

With the consultations in full swing and preparations for public hearings underway, we must continue to be directed by the needs of survivors.

Everything we do, every discussion we have, every policy we develop must consider survivors and what is in their best interest. This must be our focus and our priority and is the direction we must continue to follow.

Francis Sullivan
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www.tjhcouncil.org.au