

Redress Royal Commission hearing, consultations wind-up, Rockhampton and Lateline

Royal Commission redress public hearing

This week I gave evidence to the Royal Commission in Sydney on the Church's redress and civil litigation submission.

I also spent a day and half listening to others including survivor support groups, governments, other institutions such as the YMCA and other churches talk about redress for child abuse survivors.

It was clear both from the submissions I've read and what I've heard that most support a government-run, independent scheme which determines redress which is then paid by the organisation responsible.

I, along with many others, was disappointed to see the Federal Government, in a very brief two and a half page submission, does not support a national redress scheme, arguing it's too costly and too complicated to implement.

It's surprising the Commonwealth, which set up the Royal Commission, has so quickly removed itself from any involvement in the fundamental issue of developing and operating fair and generous redress scheme.

It is surprising and very disappointing, but I'm hopeful when the final decision is made, ideally around the Cabinet table, that wiser and more compassionate heads might prevail and the Commonwealth will accept it has a role and plays its part.

Community Consultation

It's over 12 months since the Council and the National Committee for Professional Standards drafted the reform discussion paper: *Ensuring a Safe Church for Children and Vulnerable People*. We've now finished our scheduled consultations and I hope to meet with a few more groups in the weeks ahead.

It's been enormously helpful to hear from people at the coal face, Church leaders and many others about the ideas in the discussion paper.

We heard from more than 300 people who came to forums in Canberra, Adelaide, Perth, Hobart, Sydney, Brisbane and Melbourne.

A report on the consultations will be delivered to the Council in early April, and the final draft will go to the Supervisory Group shortly afterwards.

It is hoped the final report, which will include a business plan, will be signed off by the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference and Catholic Religious Australia in November, ready to be rolled-out early in 2016.

Rockhampton Royal Commission Hearing

Last week I was in Rockhampton ahead of the Royal Commission hearing which starts mid-April into the St Joseph's Orphanage, Neerkol.

It was valuable to meet with more than 120 local teachers, principals, priests and others to talk about how the hearing is likely to unfold and what the Catholic and broader community can expect to hear.

Both local Bishop Michael McCarthy and the head of the Mercy Sisters, Bernice Loch said that while the hearing will be extremely difficult for the survivors who will give evidence it is important that they have every opportunity to tell their stories, be listened to and be believed.

Lateline

During an interview with Tony Jones on Lateline this week to talk about our redress proposal I was asked about comments Bishop Bill Wright made in a local Newcastle article.

I said that when Bishop Wright referred to some critics as 'the usual suspects' that it was not language I would have used and it might be helpful if he explained what he meant.

While I stand by these comments it is important to add Bishop Wright has been a long-time supporter and advocate both within the Church and beyond for changes to the way the Church approaches the issues of child sexual abuse.

He has been a strong supporter of Zimmerman Services in Newcastle which is used to help local survivors of clerical abuse and I understand the changes he has put in place and the support he has given is broadly supported.

The language we use when we are talking about child sexual abuse is very important. It is sometimes the case that something said can, rightly or wrongly, be interpreted as something else entirely. This has happened to me in the past and it will probably happen again.

Bill Wright is on the Truth Justice and Healing Council and I know for a fact that he is very much part of the solution. Without his active advocacy for reform among his fellow church leaders the work we are doing would be much harder.

As we continue to confront the church's child sexual abuse history and put in place the changes needed to ensure survivors are treated fairly and compassionately there will be mistakes made and wrong reins pulled.

We need to acknowledge these mistakes, fix them and then continue to do what we know is the right thing.

Francis Sullivan
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www.tjhcouncil.org.au