

OPINION

Aurora

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Protecting Children is Everyone's Business

National Child Protection Week 1 – 7 September

By Francis Sullivan

Recently I heard a prominent Catholic Church leader say something very significant and prophetic about the discussions around the Royal Commission into Child Sexual Abuse and in particular into protecting children.

He said too often, during the discussions and debates around child sexual abuse, the children 'slide in and out of the frame'.

What I took this to mean is that during this very difficult time, across so many parts of society, we can sometimes get so lost in the minutiae and the detail that we lose focus on one of the most important things – ensuring children are protected.

This, the church leader said, is something that can never get lost as we go through the Royal Commission and as we put in place the changes to the Church it will inevitably bring.

Protecting Children is Everyone's Business. This is the theme of this year's National Child Protection Week. It's timely to look at what the Church is doing now to make sure that children and young people are safe in our schools, in our parishes, in our hospitals and in our welfare services.

Since the mid-1990s we have had in place ground-breaking measures to respond to allegations of abuse. *Towards Healing* started in 1997 as a pastoral approach. It focuses very much on the individual needs of victims and survivors and works with them to come up with a suite of services and options. It was developed over four years with input from victims, social work experts, Church leaders and many others. It is not promoted as an alternative to going to the police or through the courts. It has been reviewed twice since 1997 and on both occasions changes were made to make it more professional and more responsive to the needs of victims and survivors.

Under the current *Towards Healing* protocols, which are the result of two major reviews and many amendments, offenders cannot simply be moved from one parish to another. Authorities, including police, must be notified of the name of anyone who has an allegation of criminal sexual abuse levelled against him or her, and professional records and documents are required to be kept and made available on demand. The Wood Royal Commission in 1997 and the Whitlam Inquiry in 2012 both acknowledge the value of the *Towards Healing* process.

Governments can also do more to secure the safety of children and young people. The Truth Justice and Healing Council has just lodged a submission with the current Royal Commission, calling for a national system for Working With Children Checks, which forms part of a broader approach to checks and systems to provide a safe environment for children.

There are currently many anomalies across states and territories, exposing loopholes that allow people who present a risk to children to work in those environments. A national system would provide greater transparency and consistency across jurisdictions. It would help close loopholes that

currently pose a threat to children and it would enable the sharing of intelligence and the monitoring of relevant records across jurisdictions.

We argue there should be no exemptions. Everyone working with children must be checked. Currently the only consistent check across all states other than Tasmania is a national check of police records. The Working with Children Checks across the other states are all different. And there are different exemptions across the states for people like police officers and school teachers. A nationally consistent approach is the best way to go, so there is no confusion, no jurisdiction shopping, no exemptions and no trying to get around the tightest possible requirements.

The Catholic Church's history on child abuse is rightly under further scrutiny as the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse continues, with public hearings starting in Sydney in September.

The Church, along with other institutions, will be called to account for failing to protect vulnerable children. Serious flaws have been exposed in the way the Church has approached allegations and evidence of child sexual abuse in the past. Recent inquiries in Melbourne and the Diocese of Maitland-Newcastle have reignited attention to the Church's failures. There is evidence of historical denial and minimisation of child sexual abuse claims, of crimes, of cover-ups and of incompetency. The Church stands accused of being more concerned about its reputation than the plight of survivors and victims. It has failed to report allegations to authorities for investigation and prosecution, and it has often exhibited an apparent lack of compassion.

Many in our Church community are appalled by, and ashamed of, the crimes committed by trusted people, often in positions of authority. Many wonder how they can continue to identify as part of the Church community. It's been a devastating road for victims and it's a challenging time for committed members of the Church community.

The Catholic Church, through the Truth Justice and Healing Council, is engaging fully with the Commission and encourages victims and survivors of abuse to tell their stories.

The Truth Justice and Healing Council is co-ordinating the Church's response to the Royal Commission. The Council has also been tasked with developing policies and structures that will ensure the future safety of children and young people.

Governments, churches and all organisations must work together to ensure children are safe across Australia.

Francis Sullivan is the CEO of the Truth Justice and Healing Council. You may wish to visit www.tjhcouncil.org.au.