



Thursday 6 September, 2018

Health and Integrity in Church and Ministry Conference, Melbourne, 27–29 August 2018

Conference communiqué: “For the Christian churches, we are at a Tipping Point. Recovery will depend on engaging in a thoroughgoing reformation of theology, structures, governance, leadership and culture.”

Introduction

An ecumenical conversation on the task of rebuilding and renewal for Australian churches following the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse was conducted at a University of Divinity-hosted conference on Health and Integrity in Church and Ministry from 27–29 August in Melbourne. The conference was the first ecumenical gathering of its kind to discuss the way forward for the churches in Australia.

The Health and Integrity in Church and Ministry Conference was sponsored by four leading Catholic religious institutes – the Franciscan Friars, the Passionists, the Redemptorists, and the Blessed Sacrament Fathers – along with the Catholic Diocese of Parramatta, Yarra Theological Union, Carroll & O’Dea Lawyers, Gilbert + Tobin Lawyers, and a number of private donors.

The conference featured fifty presenters and panellists drawn from Australia, New Zealand, Asia, Europe, and the United States, and was attended by approximately 270 delegates, including church members and leaders, academics, clergy and religious, ministers and church workers, survivors of child sexual abuse and their advocates, and groups advocating church reform.

To the Church and the Australian Community

This communiqué is addressed to survivors of child sexual abuse in church institutions, to members of the Australian Christian churches, and to Australian church leaders, including the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference, Catholic Religious Australia, and the leadership of the National Council of Churches of Australia (NCC).

Above all, this communiqué is an appeal to the whole Australian community, including all members of faith communities, because participants believe that health and integrity in ministry and the rebuilding and renewal of our churches should be of the utmost concern to all Australians, whatever their beliefs.

A brief synopsis

The sessions discussed the following topics: the causes and dimensions of the tragedy; the collateral damage to ecclesial communities; the ongoing pastoral care needs of victims, their families, and affected communities; theological implications; implications for church governance and leadership; Church law; implications for ministry (including formation for ministry and professional supervision for those in ministry); the international and multicultural dimensions; and supervising the perpetrators.

The conference expressed its solidarity with the many thousands of men, women and children who had been directly and indirectly harmed, and strongly condemned ongoing denial by some church members of the truth of what has happened.



During the conference, delegates acknowledged and thanked survivors of child sexual abuse for their courage, resilience, and their testimony before the Royal Commission, and affirmed that they will continue to stand in solidarity with them. Conference delegates expressed sorrow for the many lives that have been lost due to child sexual abuse, and concern for all those who have not felt able to come forward with their own stories of abuse, and for those of our Aboriginal sisters and brothers who have been abused in church care. The conference also acknowledged the brave “truth-tellers”, whistle-blowers, journalists and the media for their courageous role in bringing these criminal acts and their institutional cover-up to public attention and forcing Australian governments to act.

Describing the criminal sexual abuse of children by clergy, religious, and church personnel as a national tragedy, the conference resolved that it is essential for Australia’s churches to fully implement all the Royal Commission’s recommendations pertaining to them. But the conference also called for the churches to go beyond the minimum standards of implementation in the Royal Commission’s recommendations, to undertake thoroughgoing reform of theology, ministry, governance and leadership, and in so doing to return to the teaching and example of Jesus Christ. Survivor Joan Isaacs told the conference that it was time for the churches to “get back on the donkey”.

Opening the Health and Integrity Conference, the Vice-Chancellor of the University of Divinity, Professor Peter Sherlock, said the conference provided a focussed opportunity for the University to identify both immediate and longer-term actions. One outcome will be the creation of a new goal in the University’s Strategic Plan commencing immediately, to pursue the dual themes of health and integrity in church and ministry.

Where are we, and how did we get here?

In his address, Emeritus Professor Des Cahill of RMIT University, told the conference that the Royal Commission’s final report was the most thorough and credible report that has ever been produced on the sexual abuse of children in religious institutions. “Due to the Royal Commission’s unparalleled moral authority, Australian governments are moving quickly to implement its recommendations”, Professor Cahill said.

Professor Cahill said that the image of religion had been severely damaged by the child sexual abuse crisis, and that the Royal Commission had demonstrated that many religious institutions were not in good shape. He described the Australian Catholic Church as ‘a shipwreck’ and described the performance of the Australian Catholic Bishops in taking almost nine months to formally respond to the Royal Commission as ‘appalling and abysmal’. Professor Cahill said deep cultural change was needed in the churches, going beyond professional standards and child safety mechanisms. He argued that the Catholic Church would need to completely rethink the sacrament of reconciliation in light of the Royal Commission’s findings, its theology and praxis of priesthood, and its theology of gender and sexuality. He also called for the conference to adopt a wider focus than child sexual abuse, to include the abuse of vulnerable adults, including seminarians, novices and the sexual assault of female religious by priests.

Collateral damage to ecclesial communities

The Health and Integrity Conference heard that there is grief and pain everywhere throughout the Australian churches as a result of the criminal sexual abuse of children. Beyond the damage to the victims themselves, pain has also been caused to many of those who live and work inside the church.

Dr Megan Brock RSJ, Congregational Leader of the Sisters of St Joseph of Lochinvar, spoke of the “post-Royal Commission feelings of exhaustion and numbness experienced by many of us”, and the strain experienced by those whose task it was to deal with abuse cases and clean up the mess.



“I am aware that many individuals who work in religious and pastoral ministry, including priests, brothers, nuns, pastors, teachers and social workers, feel betrayed by their colleagues who perpetrated the abuse, and their colleagues who failed to respond with integrity and justice”, Dr Brock said. “Some will also be questioning the dysfunctional and sometimes abusive church structures within which they have had to live and work.” These included adult female and male religious who have themselves experienced sexual abuse in the Church.

Theological implications

In his keynote paper, Rev Professor Richard Lennan, an Australian priest who is Professor of Systematic Theology at Boston College in the United States, warned that any church that proved unwilling or unable to learn the lessons of the Royal Commission “will disqualify itself from a continuing place in Australian society”.

Professor Lennan said the Royal Commission had brought distorted aspects of the Catholic Church’s culture into relief. “When the Royal Commission defined clericalism as the idealisation of the clergy, and by extension the idealisation of the Church, it was describing a form of idolatry”, he said in his keynote paper. “Idols cannot ever give life; they can only be a distortion of what God enables,”

“While taking up the specific recommendations of the Royal Commission will certainly help the church to become a more transparent and authentic body”, Professor Lennan said, “the renewal of integrity in the church requires more than individual pieces of reform: it requires broad and deep cultural shifts in the church. To achieve this, it will be necessary for the Church to embrace an overarching approach to change”.

Governance and Leadership

The Health and Integrity Conference heard that, in many areas, the Christian churches lag behind secular society in providing ethical governance and leadership, and that the creation of healthier institutions lay in adopting governance models that are transparent, accountable, inclusive of all the People of God, and genuinely dialogical, participatory and collaborative.

Susan Pascoe AM, President and Chair of the Australian Council for International Development (ACFID) and Chair of the Community Directors Council, told the conference that although most of the churches have signed up to the National Redress Scheme and many have issued apologies to victims, to date there has been limited public recognition by the churches of the need for governance and cultural reform.

“Abuse survivors, many of whose lives have been irretrievably damaged may take some convincing that genuine reform is on the way,” Ms Pascoe said. But Ms Pascoe said the voices calling for change in response to the child sexual abuse crisis have enormous power, and the Church was at a “tipping point”.

Noting that Basic Religious Charities are currently exempted from meeting the reporting obligations and governance standards of other charities and not-for-profit organisations under the 2013 *Australian Charities and Not-for-Profits Act*, Ms Pascoe said it was “reasonable to expect church bodies to operate on comparable, or equal governance standards as corporate, government and not-for-profit entities”. She said they should also be subject to the same, or a comparable, regulatory regime.



Canon Law

The conference heard that structural changes in Catholic canon law are “absolutely necessary”, although these should build on what is already positive in canon law. In his keynote paper on Catholic Canon Law, Professor Rik Torfs, Professor of Canon Law at the Catholic University of Leuven, Belgium, argued that the 1983 Code of Canon Law still carries traces of an outdated ‘perfect society’ theology that is contributing to the survival of the culture of clericalism in the Church. These aspects include the view that the Church is self-sufficient and independent of the civil law (canon 22); the fundamental distinction between the clergy and the laity (canon 129); and the lack of separation of the powers of governance (legislative, executive and judicial), which are concentrated in the hands of the pope and diocesan bishops (canons 135, 331, 381). Professor Torfs also said it was of the utmost importance that canon law procedures were made more transparent and more accountable.

Ministry

In relation to formation for Ministry, Janiene Wilson, who has taught seminarians and laity at the Catholic Institute of Sydney for 25 years and worked as a clinical psychologist with clergy and religious for 25 years, told the conference that Catholic seminary formation had been underpinned by a ‘faulty anthropology’, meaning “a purely theological understanding of the human person drawn entirely from scripture and tradition, without reference to science”. In the Catholic Church, Ms Wilson said, “Ministry has traditionally been something done to a passive laity, and now we have a two-tiered model of ministry. Ministry is identified with clergy, and the laity for the most part are passive recipients”. She called for a renewed understanding of ministry based in an ecclesiology of communion.

In relation to the Royal Commission’s recommendation that all persons in religious or pastoral ministry should receive mandatory pastoral/professional supervision, Dr Alan Niven of Stirling Theological College in the University of Divinity, expressed concern that the supervision response put in place by the churches could fail because of marginal resourcing and lack of cultural and strategic support. He argued that professional supervision needs to be re-framed. It is not something external to ministry, so much as a form of pastoral care for those in ministry, a theological discipline, and a form of ministry in its own right.

Conference resolutions

1. We the People of God say ‘NO’ to child sexual abuse and to the institutional circumstances that led to its cover up, and we demand the removal of any conditions which put children and vulnerable adults at risk.
2. The criminal sexual abuse of children in religious institutions has been a national and international tragedy. We hope for personal and community healing, we express solidarity with the victims of child sexual abuse, their families, and affected communities, and pledge to continue to learn from survivors and their advocates.
3. We affirm that the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse has been a gift to the entire Australian community, including the churches, and that it presents the churches with a unique opportunity for re-visioning and renewal. The churches share a common guilt and shame in relation to child sexual abuse. They must accept the Royal Commission’s recommendations in full. But they must go beyond minimum standards of implementation, to embrace a thoroughgoing reformation of their theology, structures, governance, leadership and culture, and in so doing return to the teaching and example of Jesus Christ.
4. We affirm the profound importance of the Royal Commission for survivors of child sexual abuse and their families, as an event in the life of the Australian churches, as an event in the life of the Australian nation, and internationally. We thank the Royal Commission for exposing the truth about child sexual abuse in the churches and other Australian institutions, including the dimensions of what has occurred, and we condemn the ongoing denial by some church members of the truth of what has happened.



5. We affirm that as part of accepting responsibility for the immense damage they have caused, the churches must take responsibility for the lifelong care and support of all those whose lives have been harmed by child sexual abuse in church institutions. This goes beyond the notion of “redress”. It is vitally important that locally-focussed healing services for victims, their families, and affected communities be supported and financed by the churches at the national level. Ongoing care should be based on the principles of trauma-informed practice, meaning that it should be holistic and survivor-informed. The churches should urgently review their processes for responding to ensure that victims are not re-traumatised when they seek support and redress from the Church.
6. Child sexual abuse is also an ongoing tragedy, including in church-run institutions internationally. We affirm that the Royal Commission presents Australia with a unique opportunity and responsibility to contribute through thought-leadership, and church and government action, to international efforts to address the scourge of child sexual abuse and its institutional cover-up.
7. We affirm that the Church is in constant need of conversion and that theological reflection is essential to sustain the church in its mission and help free it from the distortions of the past. We call on all the churches to engage in a process of fundamental theological and interdisciplinary reflection about the causes and implications of the child sexual abuse crisis. We call for new theological approaches to the body, sexuality, gender and the child, that are informed by contemporary experience and scientific understandings.
8. We reject clericalism in all its forms. We note the intervention of Pope Francis (20 August 2018) in his “Letter to the People of God”, which states that: “It is impossible to think of a conversion of our activity as a Church that does not include the active participation of all the members of God’s People. Indeed, whenever we have tried to replace, or silence, or ignore, or reduce the People of God to small elites, we end up creating communities, projects, theological approaches, spiritualities and structures without roots, without memory, without faces, without bodies and ultimately, without lives”. We demand an end to those values in our church culture which are antithetical to the values of the Gospel, including the patterns of silencing and domination which have characterised so much of the response to child sexual abuse in our churches.
9. We affirm that any restoration of trust in the churches will be dependent on a commitment by our church leaders to contemporary ethical standards of good governance based on the principles of transparency, accountability and inclusivity. There can be no theological excuse for dysfunctional or unhealthy governance structures and practices. We call on the National Council of Churches of Australia, the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference, Catholic Religious Australia, and all Australian church members and leaders—national, diocesan, and local—to take concrete steps to create more participatory churches. It is essential that the laity in general, and women in particular, enjoy full equality in the Church, including in church governance.
10. Through the disaster of child sexual abuse crisis and the experience of the Royal Commission, the churches have been called to a renewed understanding of ministry. We therefore call on the churches to engage in theological and pastoral reflection and research, informed by the social sciences, into healthy and effective models of religious and pastoral ministry for the 21st century and best practice models of initial formation and ongoing support for persons in ministry.
11. We affirm the importance of increased funding by governments and churches for research into the sexual abuse of children and vulnerable adults. We recognise the benefits which will flow from the creation of specialised research institutes—centres of excellence—that will inform improved teaching and practice in governance and ministry. We call on each of the churches to consider providing seed-funding to create an ecumenical centre for pastoral supervision under the auspices of the University of Divinity. The Centre would provide training, accreditation, professional development, and best practice professional/pastoral supervision. It is suggested that a steering group be established to work towards implementation of this proposal.



12. In order to protect children and communities, prevention of offending is essential. This must include adequate treatment and help for offenders, so they do not re-offend. We call for more research into the origins and underlying factors of child sex offending in order to maximise the future protection of children and vulnerable adults.
13. We call on all Australian churches to participate fully in the national apology to victims of institutional child sexual abuse on 22 October 2018.
14. We affirm the need for monuments, rituals and archives to preserve documents and record the voices of victims and their stories. The churches should also consider instituting a shared National Day of Remembrance and Bearing Witness, to be held perhaps on the anniversary of the release of the Royal Commission's report on 15 December 2017, to ensure that the testimony of victims and survivors of child sexual abuse continues to be heard, to be an occasion on which each church reports publicly on its progress in implementing the Royal Commission recommendations and what it has done by way of reforming its governance and culture to respond positively to this national tragedy, and also to be an occasion to celebrate those righteous truth-tellers who refused to keep silent about the abuse and those who have worked in the interests of victims and child safety.

Conclusion

We give thanks to those religious leaders who attended the Health and Integrity Conference, including bishops and leaders of religious institutes. We affirm the power of conversation within and between churches that creates a respectful space for constructive action for reform in response to the child sexual abuse crisis.

We look forward to an even broader multi-faith conversation. We undertake to repeat this conference in some form, in solidarity with survivors, and to build on the interest groups and networks of church leaders, theologians and social scientists, researchers, practitioners and faithful which have been established and/or confirmed over three hope-filled days in Melbourne in August 2018.

— Professor Maria Harries AM, Emeritus Professor John Warhurst AO, Professor Peter Sherlock,
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