

# Remembering our future

The response of Australian churches to the recommendations of the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse

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# St Mark's Review

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## Remembering our future: the response of Australian churches to the recommendations of the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse

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# Introduction

## Remembering our future: the response of Australian churches to the recommendations of the *Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse*

On Monday 22 October 2018, just as this editorial was going to press, Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison delivered in parliament a formal apology to survivors of institutional child sexual abuse. “Today, as a nation,” he observed with understandable emotion:

we confront our failure to listen, to believe and to provide justice. And again today, we say sorry. To the children we failed, sorry. To the parents whose trust was betrayed and who have struggled to pick up the pieces, sorry. To the whistleblowers who we did not listen to, sorry. To the spouses, partners, wives, husbands and children who have dealt with the consequences of the abuse, cover-ups and obstruction, sorry. To generations past and present, sorry.<sup>1</sup>

The Prime Minister went on to stress that “acting on the recommendations of the royal commission with concrete action gives practical meaning to today’s apology.” To that end, he noted the Australian Government’s response to the recommendations of the commission, which has included the commencement of the National Redress Scheme, a National Office of Child Safety, a research centre, a museum, and a national database, *inter alia*. Finally, he added that “[w]e will shine a spotlight on all parts of government to ensure

we are held accountable,” and that “the institutions which perpetrated this abuse, covered it up and refused to be held accountable, must be kept on the hook.”<sup>2</sup>

This edition of *St Mark's Review* echoes these convictions, but with a particular focus on Australian churches, which confront the same failures as state institutions. We share Morrison's convictions that churches must be kept accountable and “on the hook,” and that only concrete action can give practical meaning to the apologies that various churches have already offered. To that end, this issue of *St Mark's Review* offers constructive proposals for how Australian churches might respond to the findings and recommendations of the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse that were handed down earlier this year.

There is a range of voices and perspectives here: from theologians and ethicists, both local and international; from a barrister who has worked extensively with the Anglican Church of Australia; from a clinical counsellor; and from an Anglican bishop. The focus here is on constructive, intentional, and targeted proposals that can move churches beyond what one article contributor describes as mere “words and handwringing, to church cultures that are robustly safe for every child encountering them.” The following articles deal predominantly with the Anglican Church of Australia, along with one article specifically relating to the Catholic Church in Australia.

The first article, by Garth Blake SC, offers the perspective of a barrister who has for nearly two decades been instrumental in creating frameworks for professional standards in the Anglican Church of Australia. His article shows that although significant work has been done over the last two decades, the Church has nevertheless failed to achieve a national approach to safe ministry to children, episcopal standards and redress up to 2017. The lack of a consistent national approach in the Anglican Church to responding to child sexual abuse, he argues, has led to inconsistent outcomes for survivors. Barriers to a consistent national approach have included dispersed and decentralised authority, diocesan autonomy, theological and cultural differences between dioceses, a failure of leadership by bishops, and a culture of clericalism that has discouraged reporting or has too quickly moved to extending forgiveness and compassion to perpetrators, rather than properly considering the needs of victims. Blake helpfully outlines the key recommendations of the Royal Commission and their implications for the Anglican Church of Australia, and contends that they may be viewed as a

catalyst with potential to transform the Church. He cautions, however, that the implementation of these recommendations will require

an unprecedented level of cooperation between dioceses to achieve a national approach to issues touching upon the protection of children and redress for those who have been abused. This process offers the opportunity to transcend diocesan autonomy and theological differences to achieve the far more important outcome of the safety of children and vulnerable adults which is central to its mission. The question remains as to whether the Anglican Church has the will to seize this opportunity to transform its life. Its future may well depend upon this transformation as without it there is unlikely to be the recovery of public trust necessary to sustain its life.

In the subsequent article, ethicist and theologian Andrew Cameron observes what he calls a “miasma of organisational breakdowns that are not insurmountable but certainly habitual and complexly interrelated.” In the commission’s historico-legal narratives of past Anglican life, he contends, we see passivity; indecisiveness; well-intentioned naivety; a conflation of forgiveness with trust; an addiction to politeness, masking terrible ego-defences and tribal loyalties; the inability to resolutely oppose the successful and the charming; constant distraction born of focus upon other demands, now long forgotten; and a myopic focus upon “lesser matters of the law.” One key way to avoid harm to children, he adds, is to avoid dangerous continuing practices within an organisation, rather than relying mainly on attempts to screen out potentially dangerous people. One practical tool for promoting this culture change is vocational and educational training in professional supervision, such as that which is now being offered Australia wide through St Mark’s National Theological Centre. Such courses can assist church leaders to exit their own “miasma” and resistance to creating child-safe churches.

Helen Blake, a professional counsellor who has worked extensively with victims of abuse, notes that although official church bodies have already been responding to the issues raised by the Royal Commission, any change in the culture of the church demands something of all its members. She offers suggestions, drawn from both her clinical experience and theological reflection, for how survivors can overcome shame, anxiety, and disconnectedness, and

be helped to “find voice”, and how the church can do the same and so learn to listen and validate more deeply and sensitively, acting as a “companion on the way”. Drawing on the work of Walter Brueggemann, she notes how Psalms of lament can “illustrate the power of giving voice to pain and distress in a deliberate and focused way”, and provide a “script for how the community has practiced that subversive activity of finding voice”.

John Harrower, the current Bishop assisting the Primate of the Anglican Church of Australia, likewise draws powerfully on lessons learned from his experience of working and walking with the survivors of sexual abuse. He calls for a kind of discipleship that moves beyond mere strategy, structure, and compliance. Instead, he emphasises the need for deep empathetic listening and apology, and for better acknowledgement of the courage it has taken for survivors to come forward. But there are other practical needs: the need to pay attention to processes of socialisation in culture formation, the need for bishops to exercise courage and moral leadership, the need for further consideration of the role of the media in holding the church to account, and the need for making pastoral and liturgical resources available. Like Cameron, he stresses the importance of auditing, coaching, mentoring, professional supervision, and peer support for church leaders.

Virginia Miller’s article analyses aspects of the Royal Commission’s findings in relation to the Catholic Church in Australia. She stresses the need for analysis of the findings to be as objective as possible, especially in light of what she argues are limitations in the investigative processes of the Royal Commission and inaccurate media accounts of its findings. She draws two broader conclusions from this analysis: first, that figures of child sexual abuse reported in the media are likely to be inflated and, as presented, misleading; and second, notwithstanding the very real trauma that many victims of past acts of child sexual abuse continue to experience, the “crisis” of child sexual abuse in the Catholic Church in Australia is essentially a historical problem. Miller stresses that these conclusions should certainly “not be regarded as an attempt to deny or downplay the horrific or otherwise morally unacceptable abuses that have taken place or to exonerate the church in relation to these abuses. However, in the prevailing climate of media hype and moral hysteria, it is important to restore some balance to the debate.”

Finally, Martyn Percy, Dean of Christ Church Oxford, writes at the intersection of pastoral theology and ecclesiology, and from the perspective a leader who has had to navigate these issues in the context of the Church of



England. Percy urges churches, both in Britain and in Australia and beyond, to take responsibility, in the sense of serious accountability and obligation, and to be highly risk averse when it comes to dealing with the most vulnerable. He adds that apologies are not enough, but rather repentance is what the churches are called to hear. This means a change of culture in the church, which, he argues, includes actively handing over child protection and safeguarding matters to a single independent authority that the church is subject to. This is quite normal in public life, as he points out, such as in the press and in advertising, which are all regulated by bodies in the interests of ensuring fair and transparent public service and basic ethical standards. On this point it is worth contrasting Harrower's earlier article, in which he questions whether putting processes of redress and professional standards at arm's length from bishops unduly slows the processes of redress and discipline, and removes them from the exercise of moral episcopal leadership.

There are valuable lessons and concrete suggestions in the articles that follow. They are in keeping with an urgent national plea that institutions, not least our churches, be kept accountable and "on the hook," and that only concrete action can give practical meaning to words and apologies. While these articles rightly make for sobering and at times uncomfortable reading, they nevertheless offer hopeful, practical, pastorally astute, and theologically informed responses to one of the most pressing issues for churches in contemporary Australia.

Michael Gladwin

## Endnotes

- 1 Scott Morrison, "Scott Morrison's national apology to Australian survivors and victims of child sexual abuse—full speech," *Guardian*, October 22, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2018/oct/22/scott-morrison-national-apology-to-australian-survivors-and-victims-of-child-sexual-abuse-full-speech>. The full text of speech can be read here.
- 2 Morrison, "Scott Morrison's national apology."