

National Council of Churches in Australia

Safe As Churches?7 Conference - 9 and 10 September 2015

Building Resilience

Opening Address

1. I attended the first “*Safe As Churches?*” conference in March 2004. Since then I have attended most of the successive “*Safe As Churches?*” conferences. Apart from the addition of a number for these successive conferences, the title of all them has been the same: the expression “*Safe As Churches*” followed by a question mark. This punctuation is intriguing. Does it imply uncertainty? Or doubt? Or ambiguity? Or something else? Is it still appropriate? How would you answer this question in your own context?
2. The public exposure of abuse, particularly sexual abuse, in churches is a recent phenomenon. It was only in 1989 that Marie Fortune published her groundbreaking book *Is Nothing Sacred? When Sex Invades the Ministerial Relationship*. The American theologian Karen Lebacqz has suggested that it was ordained women in American churches in the 1980’s who first confronted the culture of silence about sexual abuse in their own churches. I suspect that women in leadership have had a similar key role in confronting this culture of silence in many Australian churches.
3. There have been three overlapping phases in the response of churches in Australia to the public disclosure of sexual abuse:
 - (a) firstly, there has been the development phase - the development of policies and procedures to respond to survivors, to make perpetrators accountable and to prevent the occurrence of abuse – this commenced for some churches in the 1990’s, and for others since then. It has been marked by successive revisions of these policies and procedures as improvements have been identified. Today, most churches have policies and procedures in place;
 - (b) secondly, there has been the implementation phase – the implementation of these policies and procedures. While this implementation has generally been effective and sensitive, there have been some serious failures in many churches. In some cases, policies and procedures have been ignored. In other cases, policies and procedures have been implemented in a pastorally

insensitive manner. Ineffective and insensitive implementation of these policies and procedures can re-traumatise survivors. When I have heard of these failures, I have been discouraged and have wondered how much progress the churches have really made;

- (c) thirdly, there has been the change of culture phase – the creation of a culture of safety, a change of attitude in which safety, as demonstrated by words and actions, is central to all ministry. All churches still have a long way to go to creating a culture of safety.
4. I believe that the entrenched attitudes of some leaders and members constitute the greatest barrier to cultural change in churches. Some see attention to safe ministry as a distraction from the real mission of the church, and ignore safe ministry policies and procedures or treat these requirements as a matter of ‘ticking the boxes’. Some think that the problem of sexual abuse has been fixed and are wanting to reduce human and financial resources devoted to safe ministry. Some are suffering from ‘issue fatigue’ in relation to safe ministry. Some have converted safe ministry policies and procedures into inflexible rules rather than an approach to ministry. There are some, even today, who do not believe this is a significant issue. And there are others who think people who have been abused exaggerate its impact. Have you encountered any of these attitudes? Often these attitudes are accompanied by lack of self-awareness and so are difficult to change. All attitudes constituting a barrier to cultural change must be transformed before a culture of safety will exist in our churches.
 5. I wonder if theological views held by some in our churches also constitute a barrier to cultural change – views that discount women and children, views that promote clericalism, and views that encourage forgiveness of perpetrators without their genuine repentance. Have you encountered any of these theological views? It is difficult, particularly if you are a lay person, to challenge them.
 6. Challenging the culture of a church can be very costly at a personal level. To challenge the status quo will often be seen as a betrayal of the church, and can lead to marginalisation, even exclusion, for the challenger. Challenging the entrenched attitudes of a church requires great courage and resilience.
 7. The environment for churches has changed significantly since January 2013 with the establishment of the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual

Abuse. Significant failures by a number of churches have been exposed in public hearings of the Royal Commission. The nature of these failures has been so extensive that it cannot be doubted that there is a widespread public perception that churches are not safe.

8. There are no short cut for the churches to recover public trust – it will be a long, gradual process. Churches must not only honestly face their failures with genuine accountability, but also show by their actions that safety is of paramount importance – that there is a culture of safety unpinned by rigorous policies and procedures, and their effective and sensitive implementation. Words unaccompanied by action will be seen as hypocrisy and will further erode public trust in the churches.
9. The conference theme of “*Building Resilience*” has a number of dimensions – they include building resilience for survivors, for churches and for us as safe ministry practitioners. In the long, gradual process of rebuilding public trust our resilience will be critical. What is ‘resilience’? How do you ‘build’ it? As we participate in this conference over the next two days I want to challenge each of us to reflect on these questions, particularly as they apply to ourselves.
10. We are attending this conference not just as safe ministry practitioners, but also as members of a church, and as disciples of Jesus Christ. The demands upon us as we undertake our particular ministry are great – at times physically, and especially emotionally and spiritually. We should not underestimate the personal impact of our ministry. Building our own resilience will occur not just through developing new skills, but also in attending to our physical, emotional and spiritual health. For some of us regular professional supervision will be necessary. For all of us self-awareness and attention to our physical, emotional and spiritual health will be essential.
11. It is fitting that this conference is being held in this year’s National Child Protection Week. May God bless us as we seek to build our resilience for the long journey still to be travelled before the expression “Safe As Churches”, rather than being followed by a question mark, will be followed by an exclamation mark indicating a public recognition that the churches are places of safety.

9 September 2015

Garth Blake SC