



**National Council of Churches in Australia**

---

## **SAFE AS CHURCHES ?**

**National Ecumenical Consultation on Sexual Misconduct and Abuse  
in Australian Christian Churches**

**Thursday, 04 March – Saturday, 06 March 2004**

## **CONSULTATION SUMMARY**

**[www.ncca.org.au](http://www.ncca.org.au)**

## **The Venue**

### **The Australian Centre for Christianity and Culture 15 Blackall Street, Barton ACT 2600**

The Australian Centre for Christianity and Culture, situated in Canberra on the shores of Lake Burley Griffin, is a place to celebrate and nourish the spiritual journey of Australians. It has been established on land once intended for an Anglican national cathedral, but now gifted to a Trust to establish a centre for the study and strengthening of Christian tradition, dialogue between faiths, and the encouragement of Christian artistic expression. The Centre can be contacted on (02) 6273 8805.

**© National Council of Churches in Australia, 2004.**

This work is copyright. It may be reproduced in whole or in part for research, study or training purposes subject to the inclusion of an acknowledgment of the source and no commercial usage or sale. Reproduction for purposes other than those covered above, requires the written permission of the National Council of Churches in Australia. Requests and inquiries concerning reproduction and rights should be addressed to: General Secretary, National Council of Churches in Australia, Locked Bag 199, Sydney NSW 1230 Australia.

This Consultation Summary can also be accessed on the NCCA website: [www.ncca.org.au](http://www.ncca.org.au)

## Forward

Confronting the reality of sexual abuse by clergy and church workers has been, and continues to be, a painful and difficult journey for the Australian Churches. Procedures both to respond to allegations and to prevent abuse have often been deficient and poorly implemented. Church leaders, in seeking to protect their Churches, have compounded the problem by denying justice to victims and jeopardizing the safety of the vulnerable. The public reputation of Australian Churches has been damaged because abuse has occurred and under intense media scrutiny the reputation has been further damaged.

*Safe as Churches?* a national ecumenical consultation on sexual misconduct and abuse in the Australian Christian Churches organized by the National Council of Churches in Australia on 4 to 6 March 2004 was a ground breaking initiative. Over 3 days at the Australian Centre of Christianity and Culture at Canberra representatives of 12 Australian Churches gathered together for the first time to consider this question from a number of perspectives. We heard from survivors. We reflected on theological and cultural factors, particularly the link between power and abuse, that have contributed to this crisis. We discussed strategies of how to respond more effectively to victims and discussed ways to make changes in our church communities in order to prevent future abuse. We worshipped together, shared resources, supported one another and planned joint action.

While significant initiatives have already been taken in many Churches, a comprehensive approach is required for *Safe as Churches* to become a statement of reality. For this to happen all Churches will need ecclesiastical will, financial resources and a change of culture. In bringing the Australian Churches together for a consultation on sexual misconduct and abuse the National Council of Churches in Australia has made a significant contribution to them becoming safe places.

March 2004

### Planning Group

Garth Blake	Anglican
Ronis Chapman	Quaker
Glynthea Finger	Copt Orth
John Henderson	National Council of Churches in Australia (Lutheran)
Paula Masselos	Gk Orth
Anne Norman	SDA
Angela Ryan	Catholic
Margaret Sanz	Salvation Army
Diane Stanton	Uniting
Jenni Woodhouse	Anglican

## AFTER DINNER PRESENTATION

### The nature of power in the church and its linkage to misconduct and abuse.

Presented by James Haire

The Reverend Professor James Haire, from the Uniting Church in Australia is the Executive Director of the Australian Centre for Christianity and Culture and currently the President of the National Council of Churches in Australia. He has contributed significantly to current moral and social justice issues in Australia and overseas.



Thank you very much indeed for your very kind introduction. Ladies and gentleman, I have been asked this evening to speak on loss of power in the Church as it leads to misconduct and abuse. I want, if I may, to try to look at this in some sort of perspective. Then try and come to understand the strong differences between power and misconduct, power and abuse.

If I may I would like to indulge myself by beginning with a personal story from my own family. As you can hear I have an Irish accent. As you probably know the English think best standing up, the French think best sitting down, the Americans think best walking up and down, but I want to show you the Irish always think best afterwards.

My family is of Irish descent and for four generations we have either been clergy or medical practitioners. My paternal Grandmother was among the first cohorts of medical practitioners from across Ireland and from the what was then Royal University of Ireland where she graduated in 1899. It was later split up into forming what is now the National University of Ireland (in Dublin, Cork and Galway) and the Queen's University of Belfast.

She came from, at that time, a fairly privileged background, where her father was a landowner, a farmer. She studied medicine and graduated, but after five years of medical practice she married and her medical career formally came to an end. She was forbidden to continue working as a medical practitioner. However, her life as a medical doctor then actually began.

In the five years that she had practiced medicine she had been very conscious of the high mortality rate among rural Irish women. At that time Ireland was still undivided. Partition of the island had not come into being. And there was a very high rate of maternal mortality

after 14, 15 or even 16 births. This resulted in many families without a mother, often with a highly irresponsible father, seeking to survive as best they could. My grandmother got in touch with a woman called, Marie Stopes, who was practicing medicine in the East End of London and had been beginning to introduce contraception techniques in the form of condoms, and also in other forms of natural birth-control, because those were the only forms acceptable to the Catholic population of Ireland. She imported these ideas from England into Ireland. She was a Professor's wife and she was operating quite independently. She was not paid. She was working as a volunteer and she set up her own organisation to distribute condoms free of charge throughout the Protestant population. Among the Catholic population, where it was acceptable, she sought to teach them other, natural methods of birth control.

She was a Presbyterian. For her sins she was railed against by Protestant church leaders and by Bishops. In 1921 she was excommunicated from the Presbyterian Church, that it to say she was not permitted to receive the sacrament of Holy Communion and she remained banned from Communion for 32 years. She was not to be received for Communion because she had used her training and intelligence, in her opponents' eyes, to promote rather promiscuity and also to reduce the Irish population. This, in her opponents' views, would leave the Irish even more stressed than they had been in the past.

This banishment from Holy Communion because of her Irish nature only encouraged her.

I came across my Grandfather's Diaries some years ago and he complained in them about the fact that the Drawing Room (they had rather a nice house) was full of boxes of condoms, and expressed his embarrassment at the large number of lorries rolling up at the front door to unload these, and then occasionally at my Grandmother distributing them throughout the thirty-two counties of Ireland.

When social attitudes changed, which they did, first in the North of Ireland, and then later in the South, she suddenly became "flavour of the month". She received awards from the Irish Government and from the British Government, she had all sorts of letters after her name. She was honoured by Universities and other esteemed bodies.

When she died, my Grandfather did a thing which I believe was remarkable. He stood at the end of the coffin and said to the gathered community (and there were lots of people there because she had now come in from the cold): "Most people have their friends at their funeral, but I am delighted that Lottie (her name was Charlotte) has gathered so many of her enemies that she will go to her Maker delighted that all her enemies are here to make sure she is well and truly gone!"

Now she began with contraception, but, as I found in her diaries, was also actually dealing, in the thirties in rural Ireland, with sexual abuse. She was actually beginning to deal with that, because what she was engaged in was what today is called transparency. Even though she was operating so many years ago, the theme of her diaries is, in a sense, "let's know what's going on".

I am glad to say the church, in this case the Presbyterian Church, actually gave her Communion, I think three times, before she died. However, I would like to say that that did not reflect at all on her, but reflected rather on the church, that the penny had finally dropped.

Now I want to look at this issue of power, because I think it is important. The interesting factor for the Christian Church is that its history began in terror. If you have seen that movie of Mel Gibson's, "The Passion of The Christ", you can imagine the sheer terror out of which Christianity began. However, it moved on from being a totally terrorised minority to a position of power under the Constantinian settlement, by which this faith became the faith of the Roman Empire.

Let us for a moment think of other societies which have had a history of terror and then find themselves in a position of power. Let us think, for example, of the Afrikaans experience in South Africa, when the Afrikaaners, the Dutch settlers, were so badly treated by the British settlers and the British Crown, and were forced up north into what became the Orange Free State and the Transvaal. Badly treated appallingly ostracised, they themselves became the appalling oppressors of the African population once they got into a position of power.

It is very painful, but we think too of the experience of those who escaped the appalling effects of the Holocaust and found themselves relatively secure in the State of Israel, and then wanted to secure their position even further, and have found themselves in the position of becoming the great oppressors of those around them.

Christianity has had the same tradition time and time again, from being in the position of powerlessness and then being in the position of power. Of course, at times Christians have lost that power and come back to have another kind of power.

Now I am talking about physical power, legal power, political power, but parallel there is another important Christian concept.

It is normally associated with the word *authority*. I want now to try and see how authority can be abused as power. Authority in and of itself, is of course, neutral. It is the seeking for the Will of God: how do we know what to do; what should we do; what is the ethical way in which we are to behave. How are we to spread the faith? How are we to tolerate those who do not believe? How are we to educate the faithful? How are we to bring in the Kingdom of God? How do we know what the Will of God is?

There are a variety of ways in which authority has been understood. Do we know it through those who have been ordained? Has that sequence of ordination been built on a solid and unbroken tradition? Do we know it that way, or do we know it better where the tradition lives within the councils of the church and where we seek in broader groups? Or do we find it from prophetic figures? Or do we find it from charismatic figures? Or do we find it by ruthlessly democratic means? Or do we find it by a particular series of doctrines, or by the interpretation of scripture, or by the confessions and the books that explain the scriptures, and if so, who is to do the interpreting and how are they allowed to interpret?

Now if you look at the whole expanse of Christian history, all of these factors have worked well at times, but all of them have been abused. All of them have been abused. That is to say, the charismatic figure becomes the bureaucratic dictator. That is to say, the system of ruthless democracy becomes the dictatorship of the masses and the exclusion of the prophetic voice, and of those who are weak. Often in Christian history women and children are acted upon rather than being active.

Actually, if one looks very closely, at certain points of Christian history it has been among the prophetic positions and among the democratic positions that women have mainly found

their way. Sometimes this has been done by creating a series of prophetic voices which have been counter-culture. However, this actually is a very humbling task, trying to seek the Will of God, trying to find out what the Will of God is.

Now any system of authority, once mixed with power, whether it be political power or the power of the majority or the power of an uncontrolled prophetic voice, becomes absolutely ruthless in certain circumstances.

I want to go on now just to look at one example of that, which was dealt with a great deal in the seventies and eighties, because I want to make a criticism of one particular position. In the seventies and eighties, scholars, particularly Edward Yarnold and the former Archbishop of Canterbury, Robert Runcie, raised interesting ways of looking at authority as the opposite of that, and so Robert Runcie wrote that "authority is powerlessness". It is seen on the cross of Christ, where authority is vulnerable. It exists for service rather than for domination, and for the creation of true fellowship between God and humanity. I looked at a lot of the material that Runcie and many others wrote around the seventies and I am very suspicious, I have to say. It sounds very attractive, this concept of power as powerlessness, as vulnerability, but I actually think that this particular type of servant leadership can itself be a form of abuse, if we are not very careful. For spiritual power, spiritual power presenting itself as powerlessness, I think is the subtlest, the sweetest, the most seductive and perhaps even for that reason the strongest form of power, even if it gives the impression it is powerless.

All of this leaves a number of things which I think are very important. I would like to make three points as I close.

The *first* is that we have to realise that Christianity has come from a position of weakness and vulnerability and yet at times has moved to positions of great power. In fact, at the time of the Reformation, the Baptists were the only people who never abused any one else, and that is because they never got the chance. Everybody else had the chance and took it.

It seems to me that one of the deepest needs that we have at all times is to be aware that this happens to us as a Christian community.

In our time Christianity in many ways is weak, yet we are the largest deliverers of community services in this country. Culturally we may be vulnerable, but we have power to wreck much of the welfare fabric if we conspired to do so.

Therefore, it seems to me that we are situated in this ambivalent situation of always having with our authority the possibility of power, abuse and misconduct. The primary thing is that we have to have *transparency*. We have to realise how immensely powerful, even in a situation of cultural marginalisation, we actually are, and we need to be open about that, so that we have immense clarity in all relationships.

The *second* thing that seems to me to be important is that, for those who are theologically trained, including clergy, subconsciously authority is the primary issue for their lives. That involves interpreting the will of God, and this is so easily confused with power. That does not mean that we have necessarily to fall over backwards to be sympathetic with those in that situation, but we are called once again to have transparency and clarity, and that of course has to be partly dealt with by systems which are particularly clear.

And the *third* thing that seems to me is that for us at our particular time one of the most foolhardy and indeed dangerous things for us to do is to believe that we have found the final answer to dealing with the abomination of sexual abuse in the church. That is self delusion of the worse kind. It will take long and hard and painful work to reach a situation with which we can all be satisfied. It seems to me that it is very important for us to realise that and to be willing humbly to go forward on that basis.

We Christians, of all communities in the world, ought to be able to be most open about our life. We ought most easily to be able to face reality, and not paint the situation differently for what it is. We of all people ought to be able to face the reality of failure, evil, and renewal. Our faith is based on the New Testament, where nobody in the Gospel story comes out of it clean apart from the central figure. Our human tradition likes to hide the nasty parts of the stories, but the New Testament was able not to do that, because something had happened in their midst, so that they cared about the truth. Truth and transparency are not the entire answer, but they are the real beginning of hope.

James Haire  
5<sup>th</sup> March 2004



## RESPONSE TO AFTER DINNER PRESENTATION

### Presented by Patricia Brennan AM

Dr. Patricia Brennan is a medical practitioner who has been working for 12 years in the area of sexual assault. Previously, she was a missionary in Africa, and founder and National President of the Movement for the Ordination of Women. Her doctoral thesis related to gender, the body, and abuse.

#### **A forensic physician speaks out...**

I am a forensic physician. Not one of those exciting characters you see on television collecting samples at the scene of a murder—they are usually forensic pathologists. Being a forensic physician means that I work with living patients and, in my case, predominantly in the area of sexual assault of both children and adults.

I'm awfully glad that James has established at the outset that we're all shady characters. A case can be made that sexuality is one of the most complicated things in our lives when it comes to shadiness. So much is said about it day and night. Everywhere you look there are references or images that remind us about sexual relations. And yet so little is said about what we actually experience personally. While James has opened the theological question of the relationship between sexual abuse and the Church's use of power over others, my intention is to sheet home the practical realities of religious power and sexual abuse, a point at which polite drawing room conversation usually ceases.

#### **The Church as an ideal place for hiding abuse**

The film "The Choirmaster" that we all saw today was a significant film, albeit a sad expose on how the Church has housed those who use their privileged access to children to sexually abuse them. The story of the paedophile choirmaster who managed to fool many parents and other clergy, despite the sustained testimony of his victims in the choir, is not unique. Such a story is characteristic of many sectors of society. What is unique and relevant to the topic is the repressive environment of the Church as an ideal seat of abuse. It seems an effortless task for those in religious authority to hide all kinds of exploitation behind the guise of respectability and assumed virtue. Of equal interest is the outrage such cases provoke in the rest of us once we have proof beyond reasonable doubt. It tells me how easy it is to turn a blind eye to wrong-doing when that wrong-doing is by those in authority.

While the delayed disclosures by the victims gave opportunity for more abuse by the choirmaster, it was the protection by the Church that gave him the greatest opportunity to continue his ugly activities. Sadly, child abuse of this kind rarely is advantaged by recent advances in forensic science precisely because the victims do not report at the time when possible evidence is present.

#### **Illusive proof**

The legal proof of sexual assault rests in retrieving and identifying the offender's DNA. This is left on the person who reports sexual assault soon enough, and these are the cases I mainly see as a forensic physician. Breakthrough techniques in the last decade mean that even one sperm or one cell from saliva can be used to identify an offender. At the time of

the medical examination of an adult or adolescent the examining doctor has to ask the victim if they've had consensual sexual intercourse within the last seven days. If so, it is critical that the forensic lab separates the semen from consensual sex from that of rape.

It is always one of the more embarrassing questions one has to ask someone who's brought in by the ambulance or the police because they've just been raped - sometimes pack-raped. I usually give the biggest lead up to it where I apologize profusely and explain DNA to this poor post-traumatized person. It is such a jarring and invasive question since normally people don't want to talk about when or whether they've had sexual intercourse or the details of it. How much more is this the case in a context where everything we value about the privacy of our body has just been violated by forced invasion.

### **What is the legal definition of rape?**

You may or may not know the elements that are required for a charge of rape to be made. There are three consistent features in most jurisdictions:

- Absence of consent by the victim to the particular sexual act.
- Understanding by the offender that there is no consent.
- Sexual penetration of orifices or sexual contact with the genitals of either male and female victims by any part of an offender's body. In the case of the female, the modern definition of rape does not require full penetration but includes any penetration beyond the labia

The major problem in achieving a conviction is that rape is rarely witnessed. It is the word of the alleged offender against the word of the complainant. Even DNA proof of identity neither proves nor disproves absence of consent.

With children, consent is not an issue. Whatever a child's response to an adult sexual approach, in law a child is not legally able to consent. So why are there so few convictions for child sexual abuse? The problem, as already mentioned, is that usually children do not tell anyone for a whole range of different reasons. The more obvious reasons are that they are too embarrassed to, too afraid they will get into trouble, or if they are young enough they have no idea that something wrong has been done to them.

### **They can't know**

When our daughter was about three going on four, if someone asked her a question that she couldn't answer, instead of saying "I don't know", she would say "I can't know". Ironically this is the case for many children when it comes to recognizing a sexually inappropriate act, especially if it involves an adult who has gained their trust.

In the strict legal sense, children are not sexually *assaulted*. Assault involves an attack, and that is usually the case with rape. It's an attack by force. Children in contrast to this are usually described as sexually *abused*, inferring that the abuse takes place within an ongoing relationship. It doesn't require force—because an adult already has the power to do as they please with a child they have access to as a carer. Add to the role of carer the stamp of religious authority, and the stage is doubly set for advantage over the vulnerable and the unknowing child.

Given the absence of witnesses, the adult victim cannot prove absence of consent, and where the child victim either can't know or won't tell, it is not surprising that a conviction of guilty-as-charged is not common. Nor is it surprising that the concerns about sexual abuse lead to a kind of hysteria where real events cannot be distinguished from the unreal ones.

This is especially the case where sexual assault or abuse has taken place years before. It is no less a dilemma for the adult male wrongly accused. While the genuine victim has a problem recalling the kind of detail required by the court, the accused, innocent or otherwise, cannot produce alibis or shake off the black cloud of suspicion that descends on his or her life.

### **The power of religious authority**

I would suggest that, when all these features of sexual abuse are transposed into a religious context, the last state is worse than the first. The 'father-in-God authority figure', cultivated for centuries within Christianity, poses a particular problem for victims. If it is hard to break the silence produced by the secular abuser who has crossed the boundaries from care into sexual intimacy, it is far more difficult to break the silence over one's moral guardian. I have spoken with female victims where the abuse has been by a priest, a minister or a counsellor. They find themselves trapped between submission to the agent of religious morality and the immoral embrace of someone who is actually a sexual predator. Any self reference gives way to an almost automatic compliance especially where obedience is a central part of the religious rhetoric.

However, unlike secular deviance, the religious context is suffused with notions of Judgment Day and accountability. The New Testament says that what is done in secret will one day be shouted from the roof tops. Any wonder that as a consequence a kind of moral panic spreads in the Church. The search for facts such as those surrounding the question "Did it happen or didn't it happen?" stirs up the investigative process into fever pitch or ruthlessly silences it. As a result, the genuine victim is portrayed as an hysteric, while on the other hand any who have strayed are cast as monsters with no distinction between minor offences and gross abuse.

### **The nature of memory**

In this environment, the myths surrounding repressed memory produced an epidemic in society at large. While the jury remains out on the nature of reconstructed memory, the fact that sexual abuse of minors *does* happen and it happens extensively leaves genuine victims abandoned. The expectation that victims will tell at the time of abuse is hopelessly uninformed. I have often been approached outside country courts or after medical examinations by accompanying relatives who confess it is the first time they have ever told anyone that they were sexually abused as children. There is no way of knowing the extent of sexual abuse except to say it is under-reported. I have stopped speaking at high schools unless a group of counsellors are on hand because of the amount of hidden abuse that manifests itself on such occasions. Even speaking here in this room I would be surprised if there wasn't much that cannot be spoken about when it comes to abuse. It's an issue steeped in a blurring between truth and lies. Not only are events forgotten and repressed in the memory of the victim, they are also forgotten and repressed in the memory of the offender.

### **Truth telling**

The great temptation for those concerned to investigate such cases in the Church is to imagine that the truth can be arrived at. When I was a missionary doctor, time spent on the field was classified by sets of five years, with each term of four years followed by a furlough period of a year back home. There was a popular joke around on how to distinguish first-, second- and third-term missionaries. It went like this. When a fly lands in the soup of a 'first-termer', the missionary throws out the soup with the fly. When a fly lands in the soup of a second-termer, the missionary carefully picks out the fly then goes ahead and has the soup. But if a fly should land in the soup of a missionary who has

spent more than eight years on the field, they make the fly stand on the edge of the soup bowl, and grabbing it tightly say “Spit it out, you little \*\*\*\*!”

When it comes to the kind of hypocrisy that marks religious posturing, I’m definitely a third-term. I want to make those in religious authority ‘spit it out’ and get victims to ‘spit it out’ in the process. But unfortunately in an institution that places such high stakes on truth-telling, the fear of retribution silences us even more.

**The real question tonight is this: Why does the Church, given its mandate of seeking righteousness, have such a bad track record in admitting it houses sexual abuse?** For complex historical and theological reasons, a special place is reserved for the whole problem of sexuality in the Church. I would suggest, that in order to understand the misuse of power over the most intimate aspects of a person’s body, you must go beyond the anecdotal case of one-on-one sexual abuse. Power over one individual by another is underpinned by a set of values and beliefs that becomes habitual, that makes abuse possible. By looking at the different ways that power is exercised in the Church, a linkage can be made with a certain kind of theology that, in the name of obedience to religious authority, puts self-reference at risk.

The sexual abuse of another can be achieved by force, by coercion, or by co-operation.

- **Abuse by using force.** The commonest abuse of power in adult rape is achieved by creating in the victim, terror for one’s life either by the sudden violence of physical force or by the use of threat. “I was sure at the time that he was going to kill me.” Victims are stripped of their power to say “No”. The most cowardly scenario is that where more than one male is needed to restrain the female. Of course, the same is true for male victims of rape except that they do not come forward in most communities. We have even less statistics on these matters. What we do know is that males who are raped go to sexual health clinics and not sexual assault units. What is known to counsellors in Sexual Assault Centres is that, given the stereotype of the abused female, male victims feel they are doubly stigmatised by rape. There is still the bugbear of misogyny that hangs like a cloud over the whole question of gender and violence. So the individual male who’s forced to submit sexually in this sense is feminised
- **Abuse by using coercion.** The second means of achieving sexual abuse is by coercion. This is common with children since children expect that they have to do what an adult tells them. But it’s also extremely common where there is a predilection for one adult to cooperate with an authority figure. For instance, assent to the doctrine of headship in marriage predisposes wives to take on what I have always maintained is an infantilised role halfway between childhood and adulthood. Supposedly ordained as part of the natural order by God, it has been contrived for male privilege in the family and society, and renders the female who subscribes to it particularly accessible sexually.
- **Abuse by exploiting co-operation.** The third means of achieving sexual abuse is probably a combination of manipulation and cooperation, and is what I see as underlying much of the sexual abuse that takes place in the Church. It can start with fundamental concepts taught about God. Especially the conceptualisation of the gender of God as exclusively male and the power of God—in particular the power of God *over*. It was Germaine Greer who described the male priest as God’s *locum tenens* on earth. Manipulation involves the most insidious uses of power. Two prior

conditions enable sexual access with minimal resistance, whether of choir boy or a submissive female parishioner, namely vulnerability and trust. There is no need for coercion or threat where you have achieved submission by theological legitimation. The offender establishes an authority over the victim, an authority divinely ordained. A victim of an Anglican clergyman with teenage children the same age as her said, "On Saturdays he had sexual intercourse with me and on Sundays. I sat in the congregation, thrilled by the authority of his sermons that swayed the congregation. None of them knew our secret, that he loved me in a special way and that one day he would marry me."

My commitment to reforming the sexism that precluded women from ordination in the Anglican Church twenty years ago started with my being party as a doctor to these issues. Such knowledge, while it fuelled the debate, could not be exposed without breaking confidentiality. It was partly responsible for the distancing of a whole generation of women from an ecclesiastical authority that was bankrupt. Fortunately, such women were not lost to the Christian cause and serve in the prison system, units against violence, and in education. Ecclesiastical authority is not able to keep a good woman away from a calling. She rises early and goes about fulfilling her spiritual destiny. Unfortunately it would seem that the grand opportunity for reforming the Church was largely missed, and spiritual integrity flourishes on the highways and the by-ways when it isn't welcome in many of the councils of the Church.

During the debates in the Church over gender roles, I didn't expect men in the Church to always understand the misogyny they passively complied with. It was the women, particularly those who worked hardest in the Church such as clergy wives, and lawyers wives who were the most disappointing. Yet, wise after the event and two decades later, I can understand them better. Like the women who surrounded the choirmaster and protected him from his victim accusers, even their own children, it is their beliefs about God that restrain them. It is a wrenching choice to give up the dream—the dream that the Church is more than the fallible, shady institution that it often is. Not only do we see through a glass darkly, but we darken the glass by serving power interests instead of resisting them.

Where the silencing seems complete, however, there is a knowingness about some victims, even when they can't speak up for fear of retribution. Like our mothers and grandmothers before us, woman is on that side of the species which is marked biologically for co-operation. The female is placed by Nature at the interfaces of birthing and dying, whether in labour or as midwives, or as nurses of the dying. She is the one with the vulnerable orifices that mark her rites of passage into puberty, motherhood and old age with the dramatic signs of fertility and loss of fertility. But just as often throughout history they have been sites of death, whether through ritual mutilation, rape or backyard abortions. Women suffer in keeping with their biological and cultural assignment. Men suffer similarly according to the cultural prescription for masculinity. Their biological destiny is to be sent to die on hillsides or the streets of Iraq.

I loved James' use of the word "strident". Interestingly, in the Movement for the Ordination of Women, we were often described as 'strident' by our opponents and sometimes by the media. I decided to do something about this word. So I broke up an otherwise powerful tool by scrambling it into two composite words 'stir' and 'tend'. Our task was to stir the muck from the bottom of the sexual pool. But we also committed ourselves to 'tending' any untoward consequences. The sad part for some is that we were not permitted to complete that tending in places such as the Anglican Diocese of Sydney.

When it comes to the complex biological and social realities that lead to sexual abuse, especially in the Church, we have the obligation to stir up what others want to silence or forget about, because such acts are painful, because they're shameful, because they are shady. But we also have the opportunity to 'tend' to the Christian ethic and see the consequences through. Submission to abuse is obtained because the offender has some sort of legitimate power as well as the biological ability to use physical force and penetration. More often than not the victim is sickened not only by the abuse itself but by the words and acts they have been made to choke on. If you remember nothing else from tonight you might remember the word *strident*. It means a harsh, grating, shrill sound and is related to the medical condition *stridor* which is caused by obstruction of the larynx or voice box. For me, significantly it describes the abuse victim whose voice won't be silenced.

I leave the thought with you that sex and religion are both perilously involved with the surrender of the self sometimes to creative freedom and sometimes to oppressive control.

When as a missionary doctor I found myself not agreeing with the mission policy of wives obeying husbands, I was admonished by a loved and senior missionary doctor. She pointed me to the scripture which said "Humble yourself under the mighty hand of God and let Him exalt you." Being Irish by name and outspoken by nature, I said "If I could humble myself under the mighty hand of God I surely would try, but I will not humble myself under your hand."

### **How a man eats his pasta**

In some parts of Sicily, there is a tradition where the whole town gathers on a particular feast day in the village square for a communal feast. They drag large wooden tables into the square and scrub them down until white. They fill iron pots surrounding the square with tomatoes and onion and garlic spices and all those things that Italians do so well. They light fires under them in the midst of much noise and celebrating. And when the cooking is done they put great sheets of fresh pasta out in layers on the oiled scrubbed tables and ladle out the steaming content of the pots onto the pasta. After marking out the pasta into individual portions, everybody is invited to come and take their place at the tables. And the feast begins. Some confine themselves to what is marked out for them, some encroach on the pasta surrounding their bit, some sneak extra, some nibble, some gorge. They say in that village that the way a person eats their pasta is the way they make love, is the way they run their business, and it's the way they treat others. And I would say to this gathering of the various religious positions of Christianity represented here—that the way we eat our pasta is the way we treat the bodies of others.

I think there is justice within the Church, but the way we deal with sexual abuse in high places tells us what we are really like. There is still the false idea that we've got to come across as good. If only we could give up coming across as good and start *doing* good, then many thousands of children, as well as many adults, would not have to bear the burden that is forced on them by our silence.

Patricia Brennan  
5<sup>th</sup> March 2004

## **PLENARY**

**What are the clusters of cultural and theological issues that have led to the current situation, and a possible vision for the future?**

**Facilitated by Garth Blake**

### **Sexual Abuse in the Church - the Past, the Present and the Future**

#### **The Past and the Present**

What have been the theological and cultural factors that have brought about the sexual abuse crisis in the church?

##### **Abusers - weakness and opportunity**

- Lack of structure and boundaries in pastoral ministry
- 'Unhealthy work practices' - stress, depression, loneliness
- Failure to deal with their own abuse

##### **Victims - inability to speak out**

- Often vulnerable
- Self-blame
- Confused by sexual encounters
- Deeply traumatised
- Life functioning impaired
- Fear of exposure
- Fear of perpetrator

##### **Leaders - lack of effective action**

- Protection of the Church
- Defective understanding of forgiveness
- Male-oriented structure: belief in ministerial colleagues, disbelief of women and children

##### **Contemporary culture**

- Sexualisation of relationships
- Inadequate understanding of sexuality

## **The Future**

How can Australian churches create safe faith communities?

### **A Comprehensive Approach**

No single strategy or quick fix.

A comprehensive approach to prevention will require

- ecclesiastical will
- financial resources
- change of culture

### **Policies and Structures**

- Integrated national regional and local policies and structures
- Professional standards committees

### **Recruitment of Clergy**

Effective selection and screening will require

- rigorous applicant and referee questionnaires
- criminal records check
- psychosexual assessment
- screening at key ministry transitions

### **Recruitment of Lay Workers**

- Screening necessary for all paid and voluntary workers
- Different levels of screening for high, medium and low risk categories

### **Standards of Behaviour**

- Development of code of conduct for clergy and lay workers
- Code not limited to sexual conduct and children's ministry
- Protection for whistle blowers

### **Clergy Formation**

- Training in human sexuality and professional ethics in ministry
- Training required before ordination or licensing

### **Safe Ministry Training**

- Training for all church workers
- Training to cover child protection and prevention of sexual misconduct
- Regular refresher training



## **Care and Support of Survivors**

- Apology
- Counselling
- Chaplaincy and support group
- Education for congregations

## **Care and Support for Clergy**

Systems to provide

- mentoring and supervision
- peer support
- professional development
- performance review

Change of culture with clergy making use of support structures

## **Care and Support for Abusers**

Protection for churches and accountability for abusers through

- agreement specifying conditions of involvement within a church
- support groups

## **Government Action**

Uniform laws on

- reporting child abuse
- screening of workers with children
- protection for reporters of misconduct

Commonwealth and State Childrens' Commissions

National summit on child protection

## **Joint Church Action**

- Sharing of ideas and resources
- Creation of network
- National and regional conferences
- Sharing of information about abusers

## **Safe as Churches?**

- Comment of derision

## **Safe as Churches!**

- Statement of reality

## **The Choirmaster**

**A documentary film from Canada was followed by questions for reflection and discussion led by Garth and Helen Blake.**

**How did the 'culture' (attitudes and practices) of the church contribute to the undetected continuation of the abuse?**

- protection of the institutional reputation
- lack of any risk assessment strategy – no plan to deal with allegations
- lack of open accountability by Church authorities
- lack of reporting procedures
- don't know how to deal with this – maybe it will go away
- culture of denial
- misplaced loyalty – preservation of the institution in preference to the individual
- focused on success/status of high profile choir and choirmaster. Adults have authority. Church has authority.
- lack of understanding of indications of abuse

**What attitudes and practices would have prevented the abuse?**

### Attitudes

- Child focus – take seriously what children say
- Less concern for institution – primary concern for victim
- Courage for Church to own this and say it won't tolerate abuse
- Commitment to the gospel values rather than the institution
- For us to move beyond denial and accept that anything is possible – i.e. the tragedy of abuse

### Practices

- Open transparent procedures
- Clear reporting mechanisms
- Clear response to deal with report
- Training/education for all in Church
- Listen and take seriously what young people and adults say
- Educate parents – encourage them to talk with their children about dangers
- Empower parents, congregation to speak out
- Police checks
- Protective behaviour training for leaders and boys
- Supervision
- Accountability
- Open door policy
- Procedures for complaint process

## SETTING THE SCENE

### Introductions by:

Anglican Church

Roman Catholic Church

Greek Orthodox Archdioceses

Salvation Army

John Harrower & Marilyn Redlich

Philip Wilson & Angela Ryan

Michael Diamond

Margaret Sanz

## WORKSHOPS

### Were offered on:

Healing Communities

Pastoral Care of Survivors

Perpetrators within churches

Supporting the supporters

Education and training in sexual misconduct/ abuse

Recruitment of Church workers

Standards of behaviour for Church workers

Practical steps for creating safe parishes & congregations free from sexual abuse

### Facilitated by:

Meg Herbert & Karee Casey  
Uniting Uniting

Jenni Woodhouse  
Anglican

Julian McDonald & Michael Hill  
Catholic Catholic

Diane Stanton & Marion Gledhill  
Uniting Uniting

Meg Herbert & Marion Gledhill  
Uniting Uniting

Margaret Sanz  
Salvation Army

Angela Ryan & Michael Salmon  
Catholic Catholic

Helen Carrig & Philip Gerber  
Anglican Anglican

## SURVIVOR'S STORIES

What is it like to complain?

Jenni Woodhouse & Josie McSkimming  
Anglican Anglican

## Chorus of Women

The Chorus of Women began when some 150 women filled the Australian parliament with the song 'Lament' on 18 March 2003, the day Australia's intention to invade Iraq was announced. They continue to sing in many places and are guided by the following mission statement.

### **Mission Statement**

We stand  
In the ancient sacred lineage  
Of the Chorus.  
As women citizens  
We sing out in the theatre of life  
Commenting and telling what must happen.  
We affirm the citizens' place  
In the public life of our country.  
We give voice  
To matters at the heart of our communities,  
Activating integrity and compassion in political life.  
Honesty, clarity and wisdom are our aims,  
Artistic expression a means to these ends.

### **Contacts:**

[chorusofwomen@incanberra.com.au](mailto:chorusofwomen@incanberra.com.au)

Jill Parliament 62577711

Glenda Cloughley 6239 6483

Alison Meritini 6257 5675

### ***Step-by-Step***

Step by step the longest march  
Can be won, can be won.  
Many stones to form an arch,  
Singly none, singly none.  
And by union what we will  
Can be accomplished still,  
Drops of water turn a mill,  
Singly none, singly none.

By Lee Kayes

## ***Man of Cloth***

Let us unwind the thread of this man,  
Let us unravel this man of cloth  
Who tampered with bodies, with hearts and souls,  
Who tore the fabric of children's lives.

When we unwound the thread of this man,  
When we unravelled this man of cloth  
Inside we found corrupting delusion,  
His body's desire mistaken for love.

When we unwound the thread of this man,  
When we unravelled this man of cloth,  
Inside we found conscience turned off,  
Fear of unmasking stronger than love.

When we unwound the thread of this man,  
When we unravelled this man of cloth,  
Inside his vestment the soul place was empty  
Inside was hollow, the heart space was cold.

Unwind unwind the threads of deceit  
Unravel Unravel the webs of betrayal  
Unbind the cords of painful truth  
Let flow Let flow the oceans of tears

Words by Glenda Cloughley, Judith Clingan, Alison Meritini, Bronwyn Goss, Meg Rigby, Sue Hoffman, Johanna McBride, Shona Chisolm.  
Music by Glenda Cloughley. First performance 5 March 2004.

ATTENDEE		CHURCH	ATTENDEE		CHURCH
Helen	Blake	Anglican	Sharon	McCallum	Catholic
Garth	Blake	Anglican	Elizabeth	McClellan	Presbyterian
Patricia	Brennan	Anglican	Kathleen	McCormack	Catholic
Joan	Buchanan	Anglican	Julian	McDonald	Catholic
Sue	Cain	Catholic	Josie	McSkimming	Anglican
Beryl	Carmichael	Anglican	Mikhail	Mikhail	Copt Orth
Helen	Carrig	Anglican	Hamish	Milne	Anglican
Karee	Casey	Uniting	Lucy	Molony	Catholic
Ronis	Chapman	Quaker	Deb	Mountjoy	Baptist
Alistair	Christie	Uniting	Howard	Murray	Catholic
Lyn	Cochrane	Salvation Army	Des	O'Sullivan	Catholic
Peter	Danaher	Anglican	Marilyn	Redlich	Anglican
Michael	Diamond	Gk Orth	Ray	Reid	Catholic
Rob	Ewing	Uniting	Trish	Roberts	Quaker
David	Farrer	Anglican	Cheryl	Robertson	SDA
Colleen	Fitzpatrick	Lutheran	David	Robertson	SDA
Philip	Gerber	Anglican	Angela	Ryan	Catholic
Marion	Gledhill	Uniting	Michael	Salmon	Catholic
James	Haire	Uniting	Jean	Sanders	Anglican
John	Harley	Anglican	Margaret	Sanz	Salvation Army
Rosanna	Harris	Catholic	Graeme	Sells	Anglican
John	Harrower	Anglican	Alicia	Simpfendorfer	Lutheran
John	Hedges	Anglican	Tim	Spencer	Anglican
Meg	Herbert	Uniting	Diane	Stanton	Uniting
Michael	Hill	Catholic	Linda	Vinall	Uniting
Celia	Irving	Anglican	Brenda	Williams	Baptist
Majella	Kelly	Catholic	Philip	Wilson	Catholic
Carmel	Kerin	Catholic	Kingsley	Wood	SDA
Graham	Lindsay	Anglican	Jenni	Woodhouse	Anglican
Sarah	Macneil	Anglican			
Maureen	Macpherson	Lutheran			
Wayne	Maddox	Lutheran			
Shenouda	Mansour	Copt Orth			

## Legend

Anglican	Anglican Church of Australia
Baptist	Baptist Union of Australia
Catholic	Roman Catholic Church
Copt Orth	Coptic Orthodox Church of Australia
Gk Orth	Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of Australia
Lutheran	Lutheran Church of Australia
Presbyterian	Presbyterian Church in Australia
Quaker	Religious Society of Friends in Australia
Salvation Army	The Salvation Army
SDA	Australian Union Conference of Seventh-Day Adventists Church
Uniting	Uniting Church in Australia

## Resources

### 1. The Choirmaster DVD and Video

Copies are available through the NCCA office in Sydney. Please phone on 02 9299 2215 for cost details. The NCCA street address is 379 Kent Street, Sydney. The mailing address is Locked Bag 199, Sydney NSW 1230.

### 2. TAMAR - "Towards a More Appropriate Response"

TAMAR - an advocacy group within the Anglican Church operated a resource store at the Consultation. TAMAR is committed to the prevention of all forms of abuse and run training workshops and have varied resources available.

Contact details are: Faye Hansen (02) 9636 7937  
Pattie Mutton (02) 9484 0174

### 3. Child Sexual Abuse and the Churches by Patrick Parkinson

*Sydney NSW: Aquila Press, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 2003, 321p*

Review by Helen Blake

Most Christians rightly react to the idea of child sexual abuse with abhorrence. At the same time, they often have difficulty really believing that it happens commonly, especially in the church. Numerous questions are asked, among them 'How can Christians abuse?' 'Does it happen often?' 'Why don't children tell?' 'Shouldn't Christians who were abused forgive and forget?' This courageous book, written by an Australian for leaders and members of Australian churches, addresses these and many other questions. It brings together in one volume, and in non-technical language, a relevant, widely researched analysis of the complex issues surrounding the sexual abuse of children within the church and elsewhere, providing the Australian church with a relevant, widely researched analysis of the complex issues surrounding the sexual abuse of children within the church.

*Child Sexual Abuse and the Churches* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed, 2003) contains important factual information that church members need to understand if they are to be sensitive to survivors of this crime among their friends, family, or congregational members, and to be agents of healing rather than unwitting participants in further abuse. Chapters on the nature and prevalence, the perpetrators, the process of victimisation and the effects of sexual abuse on the ongoing life of a child are an essential, and a confronting, read. Topics such as consent, sexual relations between adults and young teenagers as well as the controversial area of memory are addressed. Discussion relating to ministers who sin in this area and around

disclosure, the legal process, and making churches safer for children conclude the book.

The greatest service given to the church by this book is, in my view, the central chapters on 'The Struggle of Faith' and 'Forgiveness'. Much damage is done to suffering people by well-meaning Christians whose understanding of the Bible in this area is simplistic or ill-informed. Professor Parkinson addresses these with a thoughtful and insightful approach which is of enormous assistance in the practical application of Scripture.

Christians often promote the family and, by extension the church family, as the model of Christian living. They are usually silent about the darker aspects of family life such as the abuse of women and children. In this book Professor Parkinson is not afraid to do so. We Christians must do more than pray about this subject. May we have the courage to read this book, and to live out its many lessons.

*Helen Blake is a counsellor in private practice in Sydney, and is the Chair of the Association of Personal Counsellors.*

## Acknowledgments

**Dorothy Broom** was the compere for the evening at the Dinner. Dorothy is a member of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers), Canberra Meeting and an academic from the Australian National University with a long standing interest in gender issues.

**Debra Way** assisted John Henderson with the Media coverage of the Consultation. Debra is the Communications Officer for the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference based in Canberra.

## Counselling

Access to Counselling during the course of the 3 day consultation was available to all those involved by Helen Blake and Neil Harrigan.





## NATIONAL COUNCIL OF CHURCHES IN AUSTRALIA

Anglican Church of  
Australia  
Antiochian Orthodox  
Church  
Armenian Apostolic  
Church  
Assyrian Church of the  
East  
Churches of Christ  
Congregational  
Federation of Australia  
Coptic Orthodox Church  
Greek Orthodox Church  
Lutheran Church of  
Australia  
Religious Society of  
Friends  
Roman Catholic Church  
Romanian Orthodox  
Church  
Salvation Army  
Syrian Orthodox Church  
Uniting Church in  
Australia

379 Kent Street,  
Sydney  
(Locked Bag 199,  
Sydney 1230)  
☎ (02) 9299 2215  
Fax (02) 9262 4514

# MEDIA RELEASE

For immediate release

10 March 2004

## **Churches gather to share knowledge, experience on addressing sexual abuse**

Australia's Christian Churches came together last weekend for a ground breaking consultation designed to share knowledge, experience and expertise in addressing matters of sexual abuse and misconduct by Church personnel.

Entitled "Safe as Churches?", the consultation was an ecumenical gathering of up to 60 representatives, many of whom are involved in the formation and implementation of church policies on sexual abuse and misconduct.

It was convened by the National Council of Churches in Australia (NCCA) and was held at the Australian Centre for Christianity and Culture in Canberra.

It included representatives from the Anglican, Catholic, Uniting, Lutheran, Salvation Army, Greek Orthodox, Quaker, Churches of Christ, Coptic Orthodox, Baptist, Seventh Day Adventist and Presbyterian churches.

NCCA general secretary, Rev John Henderson, said many of those who took part were people who worked with victims, some professionally and some as volunteers within their church policies.

"Churches recognise the seriousness of issues of sexual abuse and misconduct," Rev Henderson said.

"They want to do better and live by the standards Christ himself set for his church. This consultation is a step in developing best practice among the churches.

"They are now ready to come together around the table and tell their stories, resource one another, listen more intently to victims and to develop a positive culture in which abuse and misconduct will not take place."

Rev Henderson said the consultation encouraged and resourced Australian churches to deal with complaints in the best possible way, working to protect the innocent, and changing any elements of church culture that encouraged abuse or protected abusers.

"It is significant that the churches are coming together to talk about this matter. We need to develop a positive culture that reduces the likelihood of abuse and misconduct taking place. We can help one another develop best practice, and learn from mistakes before, not after, they are repeated," he said.

\* \* \* \* \*

### **Further Information:**

John Henderson  
General Secretary, National Council of Churches in Australia  
(02) 9299-2215



