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2010

Statement to the Synod of the Diocese of Newcastle by the Bishop of Newcastle

The Newcastle Herald has carried prominent stories on three successive days this week publicising serious allegations against a high profile priest of this Diocese who died in 2007, and by implication suggesting the existence of other members of the clergy engaging in similar activities. Further, in yesterday's story, the allegation was made that the Diocese has known about these allegations for decades.

These stories have attracted wider media coverage and are deeply disturbing for the entire community. They have the potential to seriously damage the reputation of the Anglican Church generally as well as place all Anglican clergy under a cloud of suspicion. I am very conscious of the pain and anxiety felt amongst you all and the sense of shame that engulfs our Diocese.

I have listened to the life-stories of some of the people who have made the allegations. I have been deeply affected by their stories and by the issues that they had subsequently had to deal with through their adult lives. I had all of this reinforced recently when I attended the opening of Saint Philip's House at Health for Life, the recovery centre led by Liz Mullinar.

The first telling of their accounts is a courageous act, for it ignites traumatic memories of the original events and is very distressing. Those of us who have not experienced such horrendous events are not in a position to understand their pain. As Christians, our role is to empathise and support.

I have acted to assure both the people who have related their accounts to me (some of whom praise God are still worshipping members in the Anglican Church) and the wider community that we are a transparent Church and that we will not keep shameful secrets. As a Jesuit priest-psychologist once wrote, 'we are as sick as we are secret'.

I assure the Synod that the Director of Professional Standards is acting effectively and professionally in dealing with all matters notified to the Diocese. As to the media allegations surrounding the apparent knowledge of the Diocese about decades of knowledge of such activities, I do not know the extent of the knowledge or the identities of the persons purported to hold that knowledge.

It is not the role of the Director of Professional Standards to acquaint me with innuendo. He briefs me with issues that are substantial, verifiable and that will be transparently investigated. I have a responsibility as your Bishop to be open to the community about those matters and to avoid past tendencies to ignore or conceal such issues. It is such past behaviour that now challenges the standing of the Church in the eyes of the community.

The publicity surrounding allegations of sexual abuse often encourages the emergence of other accounts of tragic events. That is occurring at the moment, following the allegations published in this week's stories in the Newcastle Herald. The Director of Professional Standards is well equipped to handle these matters.

This is a turbulent period for the Diocese and for me as your Bishop. I had never anticipated that in my final years of ministry I would be dealing with such dreadful issues.

But I am determined to demonstrate that the Diocese is not secretive or dysfunctional, that the Diocese is transparent and that we honour the teaching of Jesus in our care for 'the little ones' - those people whom Jesus identified were at risk because of their vulnerability.

You may be shocked by these matters. You may be in disbelief. You may be angry. But please let us act obediently to Jesus' teaching and reclaim the trust that has been so damaged.

+Brian Newcastle
October 23rd 2010.