



Newcastle

Catholic Family Welfare Bureau
Murray-Dwyer Group Homes**PRIVATE AND CONFIDENTIAL****A SUMMARY OF THE MEETING WITH CONCERNED PARENTS
WITH CHILDREN IN THE CATHOLIC SCHOOL AT CESSNOCK**

1. The people I met with are a deeply grieving community and it is essential that this is recognised by those attempting to deal with the many issues that have arisen in the Catholic community at Cessnock. Grief experts such as Dr Elizabeth Kubler-Ross clearly acknowledge anger as one of the stages of the grieving process. Thus those involved in the healing process need to have some understanding of this and be able to stay with the anger until it is diffused and then the community, with support will be able to facilitate its own rebuilding. These views reflect solely those parents with children in the primary school.
2. To deal with the pain of the present it is essential to take into account the other events that occurred over time at Cessnock and recognise how these issues influence the present events. For example, a claim by a parent of not being informed of a child's learning difficulties by teachers earlier, resulted in longer remediation through tutoring at the parent's time and expense and loss of confidence in the school. Similarly past behaviour by Father Ryan impacts on the present issues. For example, refusing to help a child with a religion assignment because she did not attend mass regularly, was reported by one parent.
3. Overwhelmingly there was a sense of powerlessness among the parents that I talked to. This has been fuelled by many factors including:
 - (a) A feeling by the parents of a failure to protect their children from possible sexual assault from a person invested with trust by the Church. Some of these parents are realistically living with the fear that while their children may not have currently disclosed, they still may do so in the future.
 - (b) School issues which may subtly invalidate the seriousness of the destruction of trust that has occurred; and at times replicate patterns of abuse by maintaining secrecy and discounting the concerns of both parents and children.

- (c) Apparent lack of support and information for parents in how to deal with their children in regard to the issues arising from the sexual abuse and consequently the court case. Some parents approached the school both last year and this year for assistance in this, but the school expressed concern over creating greater anxiety in unaffected children, so have declined to be involved.

In a community's struggle to come to terms with the unthinkable, any delay in responding in certain areas has exacerbated grief. The delay in providing support other than the Melbourne phone number has added to the community's sense of powerlessness. Agencies like Centacare or other professionals could have assisted in debriefing and appropriately educating the community about the issues involved. Knowing that Taree had been offered these resources far earlier even though Father Ryan had been there only for a comparatively short time, has added to the community's sense of powerlessness. It has taken so long for those parents to feel they have been heard, the first critical step in the healing process.

The school, and in particular one teacher, appear to have presented a confusing message to the children. The parents reported that a teacher had taken leave and attended court with Father Ryan, her friend. When her students saw her on the nightly televised news no explanation was given to the children to distinguish between caring for a friend, while clearly stating his action was wrong. Primary aged children were innocently caught in following a previously trusted teacher or believing allegations made elsewhere, which were supported by parents who are struggling to find words to explain what had happened to their children. Such behaviour may result in a parallel with the pattern of secrecy involved in sexual abuse. Given the media coverage of Father Ryan's case, clarifying the issues with the children as they asked the question "why were you on TV", could have assisted the children to understand more fully the complexities involved.

As a Church I believe that we have a collective responsibility to assist when damage has resulted from the Church's representatives. Healing will necessitate people extending themselves beyond their defined role (such as a job description) to meet the needs as they arise. This may require specialised training, support, or utilisation of outside resources. Some parents reported speaking to Michael Bowman who offered to send people from the St Laurence Centre to assist the parents and children. It was reported to me that when no follow-up occurred, Michael Bowman was contacted by a parent and was informed that the school principal had vetoed that approach on the grounds that it might create anxiety in younger children. As a parent said this contrasted strongly with Bishop Michael's openness when speaking at a mass soon after Father Ryan's arrest, where all ages were represented.

These parents understand the implications of industrial issues and are not asking for staff to be dismissed. However they are asking for their needs to be listened to and some creative problem solving to be explored.

Given the opportunity to ventilate their pain, the group could also verbalise the steps essential to healing. Pouring out their pain to the Bishop and being listened to (appropriate grief work) and in return receiving acknowledgment by the Bishop of the hurt caused by people carrying the authority of the church is an essential beginning.

Given what has happened recently with Father Ryan, there is now a connection with the issues of the changes in the church building and these also will need to be addressed. This group were not as concerned about the changes per se, but I believe these changes impact more strongly in other ways. The parents' perceptions are, that since the practice of their religion is heavily based around symbolism throughout the liturgy, the changes in the church have become symbolic of deceit, betrayal and abuse of children. In the words of one parent " It has become a monument to a paedophile". The current church building is perceived as a visible sign of the betrayal by God's servant of the innocence of the community and the children.

SUMMARY OF CONCERNS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Opportunities need to be given for the expression of the grief and anger. Bishop Michael's visit is very appropriate and acknowledgment of the delay in responding to the community's pain is essential.
2. This group were deeply concerned about the divisions within the Catholic community and seeking avenues to change this. One possibility is to provide facilitators to assist the Catholic Community to develop its own path to healing. It is important to recognise and honour the community's capacity to rebuild, while taking into account the long time period this might require. Decisions made by the church hierarchy should incorporate the needs of the community.
3. Provide resources to meet the needs of the parents and children about sexual abuse issues for those not direct victims. This would include exploring the needs of the children travelling to the local Catholic High School by bus. Currently these students are being targeted by fellow passengers and called "gaylords". Younger children could be involved in protective behaviour training.
4. Explore with the local community what other resources they think may be helpful. This may involve workers from the St Laurence Centre or Centacare being more actively involved with the community over a period of time.
5. This group was only a microcosm of the general community and other views will need to be accommodated with those expressed at the group. With time, care and faith I believe this can be done. Behind this pain I believe a faithful community is struggling for greater understanding.
6. Approaches to pray publicly for Father Ryan need to take into account those hurt by Father Ryan's actions. Public acknowledgment and prayer for the hurt group will be of greater importance to these people at this time.

7. The community need strong reassurance that Father Ryan will not be placed in a position by the Church where he would have contact with children when he is released from gaol.

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