

## PROFESSIONAL STANDARDS RESEARCH PROJECT

### SUMMARY OF CONSULTATIONS

---

As part of the research project methodology, a series of Consultation were held between late August and early November ,1995, with professionals associated with intervention or therapy for victims or perpetrators of sexual offence by priests and religious in Australia.

The meetings were convened, with members of the research team, in each of the capital cities, with local priests acting as the convenors. Two smaller meetings were held by arrangement, one in Bathurst and the other as a teleconference with Darwin.

In all, eight consultations were held, with some 64 professional people contributing from particular perspectives as follows:-

Psychiatrist	4
Psychologist	11
Therapist (Church agency or other)	30
Clergy/ Religious Leader	19

Our overall impression from the series of meetings was a conviction of the amount of expertise and good will that we found, coupled with endorsement of and support for the research project. Identification on a national scale of the personal resources that are available to regional reference groups would be justification in itself for the effort made in conducting the consultations.

A complete set of minutes of the consultations will be incorporated in the final report of the research project, along with lists of those who participated in each of the meetings.

In what follows, an attempt has been made to summarise and draw together key aspects of

comment.

## GENERAL BACKGROUND COMMENTS

Every group without exception stressed the need to keep a three-fold perspective of Victim - Community - Offender in all considerations of sexual abuse. Even treatment programmes for offenders should be answerable to the rights and the needs of victims and communities. In terms of justice, (since rarely has it been found that disclosures and accusations are without foundation), the needs of the offender are subsequent to those of people directly and indirectly harmed by him.

Expressions such as "take responsibility for his actions", "be accountable for the effects that his actions have had on victims" were frequently used. Many offenders have little or no experience of dependency, especially that of a child, and their view of themselves (and their God) can be quite narcissistic and self-referent. And yet, resolution after offence is not in the hands of the offender.

Whatever can help an offender realise the true state of the victim is to be encouraged. There is a pattern of damage caused to victims and their families that is of such a proportion that it finally compels disclosure. Experience shows that those who become the victims of fixated offenders are mostly damaged, non-assertive, vulnerable persons for whom the realities of subsequent disclosure of offences are a further ordeal. "He must be stopped!" is their common theme.

Many statements were made about the reality of the "chain of offence" where fixated abuse of children is concerned. Most paedophiles have hundreds of offences; one clinical figure alleges that 30% of those who have been abused become abusers themselves.

"How the Church positions itself in respect of the perpetrator is enormously significant. Parishes and Communities frequently know about offences, quite apart from disclosure or accusation."

One sad effect of the present climate in the Church is that many "faithful" priests and religious

have quite consciously adopted protective and safe personal behaviours, distancing themselves from personal contacts. Some go as far as to question being a priest whilst priests are abusive.

The existence of institutions in the English speaking world, notably in England and America, that offer programmes for priests and religious, has led a number of bishops and religious leaders to send offenders overseas. Whilst such a programme might be helpful at some stage in the therapy of particular offenders, it is not a recommended option; programmes are not well known, there is not careful verification of the qualifications and experience of directors and staff, the bishop or leader is not able to accompany and support the person in his "journey", costs of programmes are hard to justify.

### **PROPOSAL TO SET UP A PROGRAMME**

Two consultations in particular explored the range of behaviours in cases of sexual offence and stressed the need in any programme planning to know exactly what personal issues were to be dealt with. Personal sexual orientation is most significant, not simply behaviour.

Frequently, comments were made about the lack of "cure" for paedophilia; the priest or religious who is a true paedophile was so when he entered the priesthood or religious life. This comment will be returned to in dealing with return to ministry.

The setting up of a programme was endorsed almost universally. But programme was not necessarily a physical institution. Opinions varied about whether such a programme should be residential or not, whether it should deal exclusively with sexual disorders or have a wider scope. There was agreement that it should include, assessment, intervention, education (especially research) and supervision. It should concentrate on clear programmes not just private therapy. It should have ability to gain professional credibility and should openly relate to other bodies such as the criminal justice system. At the same time, as sponsored by the Church, it should reflect what Catholics believe as the basis of its work.

Particular emphasis was given to:

- the importance of the **language** of such a programme. Distinction to be made between the language of experience, the language of assessment, the language of therapeutic intervention.
- the need for more information about **prevalence** in the Church. What are the statistics of offence in Australia? Are priests and religious over-represented among offenders? What are the facts on offences by women?
- the **Church distancing itself from the programme** and the therapy process. this was urged so that the process could be rigorously professional, and so that no accusation of "defending its own " could be levelled.
- the value to be gained by making some **parallels** between child sexual assault by priests and religious and work being done **in the area of family sexual assault**.
- the place in the programme for **group therapy** as distinct from personal intervention. Opinions differed according to the background of the commentator. Both approaches seem to have validity according to circumstances. There was a strong agreement that programmes have to suit individual people and be personalised for them.

## **OTHER AREAS OF COMMENT**

The participants of the consultations reinforced the view that there is no basis to link offences with celibacy. What may be more relevant are the issues that surround the sexual development of persons who enter seminaries or religious life with quite an amount of immaturity, and who do not ever fully integrate their sexuality and their lifestyle. That whole area is seen as a further one for serious research.

For whatever reasons, perhaps some associated with the sacrament of reconciliation, it was claimed that priests do not talk to each other about sexuality as part of their own personalities.

There was not one consultation meeting where return to ministry by offenders was not raised. Not only in terms of protocols, but also from professional standpoint, a true paedophile may not function as a priest or a religious engaged in duties where children are. Issues of care and protection demand that "basis of probability" and not "beyond reasonable doubt" operate. The possibility that was entertained, under strict conditions, was that of delayed return to ministry.

A final important issue, not limited to this specific research project, was "supervision" and "ongoing education", especially for priests. Supervision is to be understood in the sense in which it is used in Health and Social Welfare professions, where it has not only the notion of accountability, but much more those of resourcing and support. It was also suggested that a clear Code of Ethics for Priests and Religious has much to commend it.