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DIOCESE OF PERTH

The Anglican Church of Australia

19 July 2010

The General Secretary – Anglican Church of Australia
By email

Dear Martin

The National Register

The Directors of Professional Standards have asked me to write on our behalf to inform you about some issues with the way in which the National Register works at an operational level, and to seek your assistance in improving it.

The Directors have been using the National Register and its associated technology for about a year. At each of our quarterly meetings in that period, we have shared and discussed our experiences in applying the National Register Canon 2007 and using the computer software. At our most recent April meeting in Perth, it was agreed that we should write to you and describe our collective opinion on the operation of the Canon and its database. Our intention is to equip you with information which we hope will allow you to remedy the shortcomings that we believe exist in the Register and make it a more effective tool in our work and of greater benefit to the Church.

Before detailing our experiences and observations, it is important to emphasise that the practical support that has been given by both Mary and Paul to the Directors has been excellent. None of the issues arising from the application of the Canon is a reflection on the professionalism and hard work of either of them. They have been responsive, patient and good-humoured.

The main concern the Directors have is the reliability of the National Register as a record. It is our understanding that the general practical intent of the Register is to alert those responsible for the licensing of churchworkers about any professional standards issues that may be relevant to that decision. The ideal is that an inquiry of the Register should be sufficient to satisfy the inquirer of the existence, or not, of any professional standards related misconduct – much like a search of a land title is the definitive inquiry about the description and interests in a parcel of land. In short, it should be a 'one stop shop'.

However, the Directors do not have this confidence in the information on the Register because we know that it does not contain all the professional standards information that is available about churchworkers. We understand that the omissions exist because there are dioceses that have not entered all their relevant information for one or more of the following reasons:

- A lack of resources to meet the administrative requirements of entering available information
- Difficulties in using the software
- A decision to opt out of the Register

A number of Directors reported difficulties in using the software to both send and receive information to and from the database. Several had spent a considerable amount of time entering in their data, only to have it either become 'lost' or be incomplete when they have sought to confirm it.

There was also a feeling that the security measures were adding to the complexity of the data entry and retrieval process, and were perhaps excessive. While the Directors appreciate that these were necessary to provide confidence to churchworkers in regard to the security of information on the Register, these security measures appear to be both disproportionate to the relatively benign personal information on the Register (compared to what is exchanged in general church administration via insecure media such as email), and come at the cost of simplicity of use of the software.

While Mary and Paul have been enormously helpful in working through these technical bugs and processes, the inherent user-unfriendliness of the technology around the database have been a further deterrent to regular and timely updates by Directors, thus affecting its integrity.

The fact that we all know the shortcomings of the Register results in us being obliged to seek alternative ways to gain information. It means that while formal National Register checks are of course made, most of us have more confidence in the reliability of 'informal' inquiries of our colleagues via email or telephone.

The Directors acknowledge that the ability to remedy the integrity of the information on the Register lies largely with us. We are the ones who have local custody of information and the responsibility to enter it into the Register. However, while the gaps in the application of the Canon exist, the software remains user unfriendly and 'bug ridden', and Directors' workloads continue to grow, we admit to seeing the Register more as a regulatory requirement rather than the helpful tool that we assume and want it to be.

The Directors understand, manage and work within the above constraints but are concerned that the Register may be given too much credence by those who may not understand the reality of its operational shortcomings. This may in turn be creating a false and potentially dangerous sense of confidence in the decisions made using information on the Register, but without reference to the relevant Director.

The Directors propose several actions that would improve the credibility of the Register:

- Simplification of the software and processes associated with entering and retrieving information
- A risk assessment that seeks to redress the apparent imbalance between the high security and the relatively low sensitivity of the information, especially given that only a very limited number of individuals may access it
- A review of what is recorded on the Register – whether a simple 'red flag'/caveat style annotation that simply alerts the inquirer that a particular DPS needs to be contacted

for case particulars – thus diminishing the sensitivity of the information and therefore the security required

- Providing administrative and other resources to dioceses who have been unable to enter all historical information

The Directors welcome further discussion with you about our concerns and are committed to the objective of the National Register Canon – the 'physical, emotional and spiritual welfare' of all people who have dealings with clergy and churchworkers.

Yours sincerely

Bernard Hill

Bernard Hill
on behalf of the Directors of Professional Standards