

Royal Commission research looks at risk

Francis Sullivan - 20 June 2017

This week the Royal Commission released research which looks at four major risk factors for children in institutional care.

Essentially the report says where the opportunity for abuse is there, vulnerable children are particularly targeted by adults with a propensity to abuse children. And the characteristics of the institution itself play a major role.

It looks at the population of children and young people that an institution is likely to serve, the kinds of activities in which it is engaged and the institutional character of the organisation.

Residential institutions of all kinds, including juvenile detention or immigration detention centres, boarding schools, and boarding houses in day schools, long day care, some health care settings, youth camps and family day care all have an elevated risk of child sex abuse.

And while the report discusses ways to help mitigate these risks where that's possible, it's difficult to ignore the role of institutional culture in the sexual abuse of children as set out in the report.

Despite the history, or perhaps because of it, major Catholic institutions now have a solid reputation when it comes to approaches to child protection. Evidence from Catholic education, social services and professional standards offices in the final hearing on the Catholic Church is testament to that.

But gaps remain in some areas of church and these are slowly being addressed.

Important as they are, mea culpas and policy announcements only go so far.

The work of Catholic Professional Standards should go a long way to ensuring policies and standards are set and closely monitored.

The report outlines characteristics of organisations which respond inadequately to the protection of children in their care. These include:

- a culture of not listening to and respecting children
- close-knit and longstanding relationships between the adults, making it more difficult for leaders to believe that the abuse has occurred
- a strong ethos of group allegiance
- an aura of respectability that makes it very difficult for parents to believe disclosures
- a primary deference to the rules that govern the organisation, to the exclusion of the civil authorities
- internal disciplinary processes that are manifestly inadequate
- a culture that discourages complaints
- invisible child protection and complaints policies

- a tendency to place a greater importance on the protection of reputation than on the wellbeing and protection of children
- a culture of minimising the significance of child sexual abuse

And thinking back to the evidence and some of the panel discussions in the final hearing, the church still has a long way to go.

Until the Catholic church acknowledges and addresses many cultural issues (which have been well documented), it cannot say it is doing everything to ensure children in its care are safe.