

## ***Towards Healing* – from here to there**

Last week I had a robust and challenging interview with Tony Jones on the ABC's Lateline program. You can see it at:

<http://www.abc.net.au/lateline/content/2013/s3821565.htm>

It was great to have an opportunity to speak to a national audience about *Towards Healing*, how it was set up and how it operates, particularly as we prepare for the start of the Royal Commission's public hearings next month.

During this interview, and in my discussions with many religious and community groups around Australia, I realized there is a lot of misinformation and misunderstanding about *Towards Healing*.

The driving spirit and philosophy behind *Towards Healing* is not easy to package in a media grab, but the facts are important and the story should be told.

In my previous blog (*Towards a Greater Healing July 23, 2013*) I explained that *Towards Healing* formalized the Catholic Church's principles and procedures for responding to complaints of abuse. When *Towards Healing* was established, in 1996, it was considered a groundbreaking initiative designed to provide a pastoral response, tailored specifically to the individual needs of survivors of sexual abuse.

*Towards Healing* is a living document designed for continuous and ongoing changes and improvement. It has been through two major reviews and the Council is currently preparing a paper for the Royal Commission that will look at the strengths of *Towards Healing* and areas in the protocol in need of reform. Much has been said and written about *Towards Healing* but here are a few facts. *Towards Healing*:

- was designed around the interests of the victims with their individual circumstances given the highest priority
- provides an avenue for compensation that would not otherwise be available to survivors
- is sometimes the only option for some victims when the perpetrator is dead or there are not enough collaborating witnesses for them to be able to advance their cause in a legal settings
- does not impose confidentiality clauses on the victims
- instigates a facilitation/mediation process, not a litigations process
- does not permit lawyers into the media facilitation process, unless the victim chooses to have a lawyer
- has no cap on what compensation payments can be made
- was designed by people from a variety of backgrounds, including the Church's insurance company, psychologists, and other professionals.
- The Church pays for independent legal advice to be given to the victim before the victim signs any deed of release

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Together these are elements that give an individual the space to tell their story and seek reconciliation with the Church.

*Towards Healing* was a seismic shift away from how the Church had managed abuse claims in the late 80s early 90s. During that time the approach was arguably much more adversarial and focused on legal process. It was to some extent, driven by lawyers and insurers.

Significantly, Professor Parkinson, a family law and child protection specialist, conducted two reviews of *Towards Healing* and did not raise any concerns that the system is skewed towards the interests of the Church, or that it is framed in a legalistic, risk management fashion.

It is also interesting that both the Woods Royal Commission and a recent inquiry conducted by retired judge Tony Whitlam have affirmed the value of *Towards Healing*.

As I mentioned earlier, and have said often, *Towards Healing* is a pastoral reconciliation process for victims and survivors of clerical sexual abuse. It has within its design a reparation process. This can include many different things such as spiritual reparation, psychological reparation, apologies and financial reparation.

It is sometimes difficult not to sound defensiveness when trying to explain *Towards Healing* to the media and to the community.

The fact is *Towards Healing* has made valuable improvements to the lives of those who have been abused by people in the church, but it is a first step.

We want more for people who have survived sexual abuse as children. Their pain and suffering urges us to continue our pursuit of stronger more meaningful policies and better solutions for the ongoing protection of children and young people.

This is at the very forefront of the work of the Truth Justice and Healing Council.

Francis Sullivan  
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[www.tjhcouncil.org.au](http://www.tjhcouncil.org.au)