

The Irish Experience: The Catholic Church and Child Protection

10 September 2013



Mr Ian Elliott was appointed Chief Executive Officer of the National Board for Safeguarding Children in the Catholic Church in Ireland in July 2007. Described once as the “watchdog with a helluva-bite” Ian Elliott has been in Australia talking about his experiences and how this relates to the Australian context.

Read his blog....

My trip to Australia has been a great opportunity to meet and talk with a number of people directly involved in safeguarding in the Catholic Church in Australia. I have been greatly impressed by their commitment and their enthusiasm to secure the safety and wellbeing of children in the Church here.

I know this is a challenging time for the Church in Australia, and I can see many similarities between Australia and how the Catholic Church was in Ireland six years ago. In Ireland we are now in a completely different place, and there is a feeling of optimism in the Church. In this blog I will share with you how this was achieved.

Standards based safeguarding strategy for the Catholic Church in Ireland

In Ireland we developed and implemented a national strategy that was standards based for the safeguarding of children. In other words we were establishing a clear baseline, a reference point against which performance, in any part of the Church, could be referenced with regards to safeguarding.

We created seven national standards and asked all the Church authorities and ministries in Ireland to commit to implementing and adopting them. We also asked for the right to monitor the practice and performance of each Church authority in relation to those standard.

In order to restore public confidence in the effectiveness of safeguarding, particularly the confidence of the lay faithful, we asked that the findings for every review, for every Church authority, be placed in the public domain. This ensured there was transparency.

If bad practice was discovered there was a genuine commitment to addressing it, dealing with it and sorting it out. People were committed to achieving the very best standard they could in regards to the safeguarding of children. We were aiming not only for transparency but also accountability in the Church.

We adopted three key principles:

- Those who have harmed a child should be held accountable for their actions.
- Those who have allowed harm to occur to a child should be held accountable for their lack of action.
- If you safeguard children in the Church you will also safeguard the Church.

These principles underpinned everything that we did in Ireland.

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The Catholic Church in Ireland today

After successfully implementing this strategy, the Church is now in a very different place to where it was six years ago when I was first appointed to the position of Chief Executive Officer of the National Board for Safeguarding Children in the Catholic Church in Ireland.

Although six years is not a long time there has been a remarkable change.

You could sum it up by saying children are a lot safer and those who seek to harm children are a lot more at risk within the Irish Catholic Church. There is a great deal of enthusiasm and confidence that we are managing the problem, and moving forward.

One Archbishop described the situation to me as a liberating experience. “We feel lifted out of the mire of past bad practice and given an opportunity of a new beginning.”

A key element to the success of the review process is that it is seen by the lay faithful and by wider society as credible and effective. It addressed the three central questions of who knew what, when did they know it, and what did they do about it. As a consequence, this took the ground away from any further public intervention into the private life of the Church. This is important and it is what we want to achieve. Public inquiries are costly, cumbersome, and end up confirming what you know or suspect already. Scarce resources within the Church can be put to a better use.

Safeguarding reviews were not an easy or comfortable process and people were very anxious about them. But once they had gone through the process, they felt enthusiastic about it. The more reviews we conducted the more the momentum built and people started feeling enthusiastic and positive for the future.

We have now reached a situation where it is understood that the reviews are a process, rather than an event. They are part of the fabric of the Irish Church and are seen as ongoing. What we are aiming for through the reviews is continuous improvement within the Church with regard to our safeguarding practice. The only way you can achieve that is through review and monitoring, learning from experience, applying that learning to what you are doing now.

Advice for the Australia Catholic Church

I know the public hearings at the Royal Commission are only weeks away, but I would encourage those in leadership in the Australian Catholic Church to be pro-active now. Do not wait for the consequences of a public inquiry to force change, but to take the initiative now. Reflect on what needs to change, and start the process of change now.

There is no reason to feel that all the problems can't be solved, they can be. What is needed is the desire to do so and the commitment to ensure that it happens.