

Establishing an independent body to handle complaints

The Royal Commission is investigating its 21st public hearing this week, the last for 2014. The Catholic Church has been the focus of just over a third of the case load since the Royal Commission commenced public hearings in September last year.

We anticipate from mid-2015 further Church institutions will come under scrutiny. We can expect Catholic Church institutions will then remain under the spot light throughout the course of Royal Commission.

The hearings so far have revealed our shameful history of child sex abuse, cover-ups by Church leadership and deficiencies in our complaints handling systems.

The Church has listened and is now putting in place reform policies that will strengthen the Church's approach to the safety of children and vulnerable people. The first step is managing a broad consultation process to establish an independent accreditation and auditing body.

Consultation meetings to establish an independent accreditation and auditing body

The Truth Justice and Healing Council (TJHC), with the endorsement of the Church leadership, will begin consultation meetings in March next year to discuss the establishment of an independent accreditation and auditing body to protect children and vulnerable people.

Bishops and religious leaders from every state and territory will be asked to nominate representatives from a variety of backgrounds to be part of these important consultation meetings. An independent facilitator will co-ordinate up to 50 participants at each of the eight meetings.

At the conclusion of the meetings a progress report will be delivered to the Church leadership in May, followed by an implementation plan in November. Our hope is the new body will be operational by 2016.

What the independent accreditation and auditing body will look like?

As I have said many times before the days of the Church investigating itself are well and truly over.

The TJHC and the National Committee for Professional Standards has prepared a paper titled: Ensuring a safe church for children and vulnerable people that outlines the concept and broad structure of this independent accreditation and auditing body.

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We propose the establishment of a body that will develop and administer national child protection standards for all dioceses, religious orders and PJPs throughout Australia. This group will be responsible for monitoring adherence to these standards and publicly reporting on compliance.

Shouldn't we wait for recommendations by the Royal Commission?

Chair of the Royal Commission, Justice Peter McClellan is calling on Australian institutions to 'get on' and 'get it sorted' now. Evidence from eight public hearings clearly shows our deficiencies and areas for improvement.

We know what is required. We must make changes now and demonstrate to the community that we are seriously committed to change. We must demonstrate our conviction that the issue is too important to be left until the Royal Commission might make some recommendations sometime after 2017.

Establishing this historic body is a positive and vital step forward for the Church. It demonstrates that the Church is willing to be transparent and accountable and that the protection of children and vulnerable people is our highest priority.

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www.tjhcouncil.org.au