

# 'We accept the challenge - and we are committed to taking action,' General Synod chief executive tells Royal Commission

Text of opening statement by General Synod General Secretary Anne Hywood to final public hearing into the Anglican Church

MARCH 17 2017

I make this statement as the General Secretary of the General Synod of the Anglican Church of Australia.

This is the final opportunity the Anglican Church will have to appear at a public hearing before this Royal Commission.

We welcome the focus in this case study on our policies and procedures and the church culture and structure in which they operate.

We recognise that we have further work to do and we look forward to the assistance of the Royal Commission, through its recommendations, to help us put in place the highest standards of child protection and the best possible response to survivors.

We are prepared to confront the challenges that will be put to us.

We have already been confronted.

We have been humbled by the survivors who have been prepared to relive the pain of telling their stories in these public hearings.

It is through their telling that we have more deeply understood where we have failed. We are sorry that they have had to bear this responsibility but we are thankful for their courage.

In confronting our failings we have been ashamed.

We have had to face that we have not always protected the children we were trusted to care for.

It is clear that there were times when:

- We did not act as we should and we allowed harm to continue.
- We did not believe those who came forward and we tried to silence them.
- We cared more about the Church's reputation than those who had been harmed.

We have witnessed first-hand the suffering of those who have shared their stories. We have seen in their faces and heard in their voices not only the pain of the abuse they suffered as a child, but the further damage we inflicted when they came forward as adults, seeking justice and comfort, and we pushed them aside.

The Anglican Data Report to be tabled today tells us more. We are appalled at the stark presentation of the number of abusers and those they harmed.

It tells us that any processes we had in place did not prevent abusers working in our church, as clergy and lay leaders and, in the roles most trusted to care for our children, as teachers and youth workers.

What the data tells us now was only becoming apparent to the wider church in the 1990s. Individual dioceses were dealing with abuse in the absence of any national guidelines or policies. We know that mistakes were made.

As awareness grew we took action. At the General Synod in 2001 we commenced the process of establishing a national approach to child protection and responding to complaints.

At the General Synod in 2004 a package of child protection initiatives and a consistent complaints process was recommended for national implementation. The review and improvement of that work has been ongoing, and has been greatly assisted over the last four years by the work of the Royal Commission.

At that General Synod in 2004 we apologised as one church to those who had been abused in our care. As one of the many who stood and made this apology in 2004 I repeat it now.

That this General Synod and we as members of it acknowledge with deep regret and repentance the past failings of the Church and its members.

On behalf of the whole Anglican Church in this country we apologise unreservedly to those who have been harmed by sexual abuse perpetrated by people holding positions of power and trust in the Church.

We apologise for the shameful way we actively worked against and discouraged those who came to us and reported abuse.

We are ashamed to acknowledge that we only took notice when the survivors of abuse became a threat to us.

We apologise and ask forgiveness for the Church's failure at many levels to listen to and acknowledge the plight of those who have been abused, to take adequate steps to assist them, and to prevent abuse from happening or recurring.

We commit the Church to listen to survivors of abuse to respond with compassion to all those who have been harmed, both to those who have come forward and to those who may choose to do so in the future, and to deal appropriately, transparently and fairly with those accused of abuse and negligence.

The commitments in this apology from 2004 still drive our work to deliver a child safe culture and a response to survivors that meets community expectations. Those expectations have already been shaped by the work of this Royal Commission.

During this public hearing there will be much discussion about the structure of the complex institution that is the Anglican Church of Australia. How, its federal structure creates barriers to a national, consistent approach by the 23 dioceses and its many schools and agencies.

Our actions in responding to child sexual abuse cannot be limited by our structures, our culture or our differences. We recognise the imperative for a nationally consistent approach to child protection and a structure to deliver the best possible response to those who have been harmed in our care.

We accept the challenge - and we are committed to taking action.

**Anne Hywood,**  
**General Secretary of the General Synod of the Anglican Church of Australia**

17 March 2017