



The Right Reverend Keith Slater BISHOP OF THE ANGLICAN DIOCESE OF GRAFTON

MEDIA STATEMENT **Friday 17th May 2013**

Following is a public statement by the Right Reverend Keith Slater regarding the management of claims of abuse by the Diocese of Grafton at the North Coast Children's Home in Lismore NSW.

Under embargo until 4.00pm Friday 17th May 2013

Since 2006 the Diocese of Grafton has received a number of claims alleging acts of physical, psychological and sexual abuse at the North Coast Children's Home in Lismore NSW. The abuse took place over a number of decades (1940's to 1980's). The alleged perpetrators included staff at the Home, visiting clergy, members of holiday host families and other residents.

When the claims were initially received it was necessary to clarify the Diocese of Grafton's legal liability for the actions at the Home. Legal opinion stated that the Diocese did not have a legal responsibility. However, given the Church's recognised connection with the Home, the Diocese resolved that it did have a moral responsibility to respond to these claims and chose to settle them as expediently as it could.

In 2007 the Diocese settled thirty-nine of these claims through a payment negotiated with the solicitors acting for the claimants. Two other claimants were not ready to settle at that time.

In the cases of sexual abuse, and where the perpetrators were identified, the Diocese informed the Police and received advice that Police investigations had been instigated. This related specifically to allegations against two members of clergy who were still alive at the time the claims were presented.

After the majority of claims had been settled, seven more people came forward. The Diocese received these additional claims between 2008 and 2011, some through a solicitor; some complainants chose to write directly to me as Bishop. A few, but not all, alleged sexual abuse while resident at the Home.

In 2004 the Diocese had adopted a Professional Standards Ordinance and Protocol which outlines the obligations and processes for managing complaints of sexual abuse. An important obligation in the Protocol is that all matters are referred to the Professional Standards Director to ensure the complaint is managed and investigated in a way that provides support to the complainant.

In November 2012 the Bishop-in-Council of the Diocese of Grafton resolved to support the work of the Royal Commission and, in preparation, undertake an audit of the management of all Professional Standards matters in the Diocese.

That audit is still in process and the final findings are not yet known. However, some initial findings in January 2013 indicated that the Professional Standards Protocols had not always been applied, specifically in matters associated with claims of abuse at the North Coast Children's Home.

I acknowledge that I was responsible for ensuring full compliance with the Protocol and that I failed in this duty. Some matters detailing sexual abuse at the North Coast Children's Home were not referred to the Professional Standards Director as they should have been.

I apologise to those complainants who were not given access to the Professional Standards Director. I also acknowledge that, by not referring these matters, the Professional Standards Director was not provided with information that could have assisted ongoing internal and Police investigations. All information has now been provided to the Professional Standards Director who is currently liaising with the Police to ensure that all relevant information has been provided to them.

The Diocese responded to the additional claims received between 2008 and 2011 in different ways. Some were finalised through a financial settlement, which met the request of the complainant, in a manner similar to the majority of claims settled before them. Others were advised that the Diocese of Grafton was no longer willing to make financial settlements in regard to claims associated with the North Coast Children's Home.

While I responded to some of these complaints personally others were referred to the Diocesan solicitor for response. I acknowledge that the Diocese of Grafton should have received and investigated each new claim put before it and that there was no justification for the decision that new claims would not have access to the same financial settlement process made available to the earlier claimants. I acknowledge that our offer of a pastoral care package was poorly communicated and did not provide an adequate response to meet the immediate needs of the complainants. I acknowledge my pastoral failings in adopting this approach.

I apologise to those who bravely came forward to tell their story of abuse and were turned away. I acknowledge the pain and further damage that this response may have caused. These people have now been contacted by the current Professional Standards Director and the Diocese of Grafton will now respond to them appropriately and manage their complaints in accordance with the Protocol.

It is difficult to reflect on how these failures of process and pastoral response happened. The Diocese of Grafton had never before dealt with complaints of such magnitude as those associated with the North Coast Children's Home. The immediate question of legal liability had initially clouded the matter.

As the claimants were represented by a solicitor the Diocese engaged a solicitor to facilitate the process. This set a precedent of responding to all subsequent claims with the support and advice of a Diocesan solicitor. This does not excuse the failings I have detailed as, even though the financial settlements were being negotiated through solicitors, those claims alleging sexual abuse, should have been concurrently managed in accordance with the Professional Standards Ordinance and Protocol.

Information on the failings identified in January 2013 has been referred to the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse. Both I and others in the Diocese of Grafton are committed to supporting the work of the Royal Commission and are willing to provide further assistance as required.

I acknowledge and apologise for my past failings in the management of claims of abuse in the Diocese of Grafton. I acknowledge and apologise for the additional pain and damage that my decisions have caused to the survivors of abuse who came forward to share their story with me and seek assistance. I personally abhor abuse of any kind and appreciate that delays in responding and the imposition of a legalistic process can cause further pain.

Where my actions have caused hurt and undue distress and pain I am profoundly sorry and truly apologise to those concerned. I am relieved that any outstanding matters are now being dealt with through the appropriate channels.

There are words from the Ordination services of Priest and of Bishop which speak deeply to me:

'Remember that you will be called to give account before Jesus Christ: if it should come about that the Church, or any of its members, is hurt or hindered as a result of your negligence' The Ordination of Priests'.

'Will you show compassion to the poor and the stranger, be gentle with the abused and needy, and defend those who have no helper? 'The Ordination of Bishops'.

These words remind me of the high ideals of the Christian Gospel. In living these out I am accountable to God. Sometimes I may succeed, sometimes I fail. I am also accountable for my decisions and actions which impact upon those whom I try to serve and care for; as well as to the Church, the wider community, and my family.

It is in the light of my decisions and actions that I make this public statement and apology. As a sign of my recognition of these matters and in the hope that it may contribute towards healing and wholeness for those who are abused I forthwith resign from being the Bishop of the Diocese of Grafton.

END

NOTE: The Right Reverend Keith Slater will not be making any further comment and will not be available for interviews

Contact

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