

Protecting children from harm is everyone's job

by Sheree Limbrick / CEO Catholic Professional Standards Ltd



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The Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse exposed the damning failure of the Catholic Church in Australia to keep the most vulnerable people under its influence, children, safe from harm. Over 60 per cent of survivors who came forward to tell their story to a Royal Commissioner and had been abused in religious settings were abused within Catholic organisations.

As a proportion of all survivors who reported to the Royal Commission, 36.2 per cent of survivors said they experienced abuse in a Catholic Church institution. Well-established research has shown that reports of abuse by survivors are likely to be vastly outnumbered by those victims who choose not to report. Unveiling the staggering extent of the abuse that children encountered not just in the Catholic Church but in myriad institutional settings across the country was not the only task of the Royal Commission though.

The Royal Commission also did something else—through its work, it identified the characteristics of child safe organisations. In their final report published in 2017, the Commissioners declared that creating a culture of child safeguarding at the core of any organisation is key to preventing abuse. Royal Commissioner Robert Fitzgerald has said that "safeguards can help keep children safe in a very practical way, from the board right through to the basement".

In 2016, Catholic Professional Standards Limited (CPSL) was formed by the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference and Catholic Religious Australia in response to the findings of the Royal Commission, and given a substantial task—CPSL would work with the Church to foster a culture of safety and care for children and vulnerable adults who come into contact with the Catholic Church.

CPSL was charged with four key functions to achieve this: set safeguarding standards to protect children and vulnerable adults who have contact with any Church organisation; build the capacity and grow the capability of the Church to protect children and vulnerable adults; audit and monitor individual Church entity's safeguarding performance and adherence to the standards; and publicly report the findings of the audits to increase transparency and accountability.

In May this year CPSL published the first edition of the National Catholic Safeguarding Standards (NCSS). We spent 12 months developing these standards, consulting with survivors, safeguarding experts, as well as civil and Church authorities to: ensure that the NCSS would meet the requirements set down by civil authorities; provide a framework for the implementation and monitoring of many recommendations made by the Royal Commission specifically to the Catholic Church; and ensure that all of these requirements were applied in a practical sense to the context of the Church.

Alongside the publication of the NCSS, we began the roll-out of a three-year strategy to support the implementation of the NCSS across the Church. Face-to-face NCSS introductory sessions and implementation workshops commenced in February and continue to be facilitated across the country. As of early August, we have delivered 16 sessions across five states, attracting in excess of 500 attendees. Attendees have included parish representatives, bishops, leaders of religious congregations, safeguarding/professional standards staff, priests, religious, trustees of ministerial PJPs, board members, and volunteers. More than 100 separate Catholic entities have been represented at a training session to date.

On August 1st this year, CPSL marked another milestone in our development—we published the first audit report of a Church entity against the NCSS. The Presentation Sisters of Wagga Wagga are the first entity to be audited against the NCSS, and CPSL has provided 12 recommendations to the Sisters to improve their child safeguarding practices. You can find the report on our website at www.cpsltd.org.au/safe-church/church-reports/.

Protecting children and the most vulnerable in the community is a responsibility shared by the whole community. Children who come into contact with the Church have the right to be safe and feel safe. Implementing robust safeguarding policies, procedures and, most of all, fostering a culture of safety and care is what the Royal Commission has called upon all organisations that work with children to make central to their mission, and to make this commitment explicit. The days of assuming that people doing 'good works' are good people who necessarily have the best interests of children at heart are over—organisations must demonstrate in very practical ways that children are at the centre of their values, decisions and actions.

There's no way to return to the past and rectify the gross injustice of child sexual abuse within Church entities in this country. CPSL acknowledges the lifelong trauma of abuse victims, survivors and their families and the failure of the Catholic Church to protect, believe and respond justly to children and vulnerable adults. The task that lies before us is to build a culture of transparency, accountability and respect for the most vulnerable in our community through concerted safeguarding practices, to avoid these same crimes being replicated now and into the future.

With every audit we conduct, we will uncover weaknesses and blindspots in safeguarding processes and practices, and we will also discover innovative safeguarding practices which other entities can model for their own. Each audit we conduct will provide never before captured data which we will use to better understand systemic weaknesses and strengths in safeguarding practices across the Australian Catholic Church.

CPSL is here to create a safer Church for everyone, and to do that, we need engagement, commitment and cooperation at all levels, from the boardroom to the basement.



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For more information, please visit www.cpsltd.org.au or call on 1300 603 411.