

23. Royal Commission Synod Task Group

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<i>General Secretary</i>	Rev David de Kock
<i>Members elected by Synod</i>	Amanda Hunt
	Donald Nicholas
	Dr Alec O'Connell
	Rev Nalin Perera
	Vic Richards (representing Yvonne Robinson)
	John Talbert
	Dr Keith Truscott
	Rev Gary van Heerden
<i>Resource staff</i>	Kim Brooklyn
	Cindy Gorton
	Maggie Johns
	Sue Thomas

While the genesis of this Task Group was born out of the establishment of the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, it also has very much embraced the need to ensure that the Uniting Church is a safe church for children and other vulnerable people.

I. NATIONAL TASK GROUP (NTG)

This group has met regularly, usually every two months and occasionally monthly for special meetings, over the past year to address the issues raised by the Royal Commission and seeking to establish a unified response across our Synods.

I.1 Current State of Operations

Last year, the NTG is currently in a transitional phase and moving from being responsive to requests from the Royal Commission into being a pro-active group.

The NTG is in the process of establishing project plans and will continue with its own work after the life of the Royal Commission. This will involve primarily these main areas:

1. Policy
 - Established a National Interim Redress Framework for the Uniting Church
 - Reviewed the National Child Safe Policy Framework in light of the Royal Commission's report on the Ten Elements of a Child Safe Organisation
 - Established an implementation plan, with resources to aid implementation of the National Child Safe Policy Framework
 - Engaged with networks across the Church to support implementation
2. Compliance
 - Created an annual National 'self audit' process. This audit is done against the Child Safe Framework
 - Completed mapping of audit and compliance responsibilities nationally

3. Royal Commission Engagement

- Engaged with the Royal Commission through providing submissions regarding risk of child sexual abuse in school; 'best practice principles in responding to complaints of child sexual abuse in institutional contexts', and 'Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse in Out-of-Home-Care'
- Reviewed Public Hearings for learnings for the Church
- Reviewed research reports published by the Royal Commission and communicated learnings to the Church
- Established a Communications Plan for the Uniting Church regarding the Royal Commission

4. Redress

- In addition to the creation of an Interim Redress Framework, the National Task Group has worked alongside Synods to understand issues related to implementing Redress
- Participated in consultation processes with the Commonwealth regarding a National Redress Scheme
- Provided submission to the Commonwealth on draft legislation
- Given evidence to a Senate Committee regarding redress legislation
- Facilitated ecumenical discussions regarding redress
- Advocated for a truly equitable National Redress Scheme
- Nationally committed to Model Litigant Principles

5. Embedding Learnings

- Created a program of work to transition from engaging with the Royal Commission towards implementation of the learning of the Commission
- Reviewed the Royal Commission's Final Report and developed a summary paper
- Proposed a strategic approach through the establishment of a national Safe Church Unit to continue to embed, the learnings of the Royal Commission, into the life of the Church

1.2 Learnings

The Church has identified a number of issues which it must address as it lives out its commitment to be a safe church. These areas include:

- Information management and reporting
- Compliance and consistency across Synods and within Synods
- Education and training
- Cultural enhancement
- Consistent National Professional Standards

1.3 Transitioning

The outcome of the Task Group's deliberations has been to recommend to Synods a collaborative engagement with the Assembly to establish a Safe Church Unit. It is anticipated the Unit would be co-established by Synods and the Assembly as an institution under Reg. 3.7.4.7. It would have a governing charter delineating responsibility and accountabilities, and a governing body and reporting framework to ensure appropriate oversight and communication with the Church.

2. SYNOD TASK GROUP

The Synod Task Group met every two months. Work is also carried out external of the formal meetings by sub-groups and the great work of Cindy Gorton, Sue Thomas and Maree Kemp.

Work is also continuing in aligning our entities information and record sharing in this area and we recognise the significant assistance from Archives in this matter.

The Synod Task Group would wish to acknowledge the outstanding support it received from Rev John Cox, Executive Officer, National Task Group, who made himself available via teleconference and in one case personally attended a meeting.

2.1 Uniting Church Schools

Between March and May 2018, the Chair of the Synod Task Group, the General Secretary and the Synod's Insurance Officer met with all School/College Boards and briefed them on:

- the Uniting Church's Interim Redress Scheme, and the National Scheme
- Civil Litigation changes in WA
- Child Safe Policy
- Insurance Coverage.

2.2 Changes to Statute of Limitations

The changes to the Statute of Limitations Laws in WA passed through State Parliament in April 2018. These changes enable survivors of child sexual abuse to litigate retrospectively into the future with no time limitations.

It would seem, since the National Redress Scheme has been established, the Synod's experience has been that people are opting for Civil Litigation rather than the Redress Scheme.

2.3 National Redress Scheme and a Uniting Church Scheme

In the Western Australian Synod, each of the schools/colleges and community service agencies are separately incorporated under the Uniting Church in Western Australia Act 1977. As such each is a separate legal entity under the Property Trust and each will be asked to decide to participate in any national redress process/mechanism/scheme approved by the Uniting Church in Australia.

2.4 Transition to Child Safe Unit

Following discussions with the General Secretary, the Synod Task Group has fulfilled its purpose and will cease to function by the end of 2018.

It is envisaged that any remaining responsibilities and accountabilities will move to a 'Safe Church Unit' which it is thought will have a Reference Group in WA.

There is still work to be done that has tailored approaches with our agencies under the supervision of the Congregational Community Service Committee, our Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress (Congress) congregations and our Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) congregations. We wish to acknowledge the very positive response and initiatives from the multi-cultural congregations and the involvement of Congress leaders.

3. CLOSING COMMENT

In closing, I wish to acknowledge the skills and commitment that have been both displayed and invested by the members of the Synod Task Group over the last five years. It has never been an easy or pleasant task, but they have been faithful in living out the Church's Value Statement, which was made at the commencement of the Royal Commission's work.

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