

New child protection unit for church

The New South Wales Assembly of the Presbyterian Church of Australia has established a child protection unit to provide assistance, education and preventative measures to tackle the problem of abuse within the church.

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Abuse in the church is an ongoing subject of discussion in the wider community, and there is a need to provide assistance, education and preventative measures within the church to address the problem of child abuse.

To facilitate this, last year the New South Wales Assembly of the Presbyterian Church of Australia approved the formation of a Child Protection Unit within Presbyterian Social Services. At this year's General Assembly of Australia, the Director of the Child Protection Unit was co-opted by the Presbyterian Church in other states and territories to assist with the development of a national approach to child protection issues in the church.

The Child Protection Unit commenced on 23 February 2004 to enable the church to better respond to allegations of child abuse within the church (both past and present), to develop child abuse prevention measures and to support adult survivors of child abuse. The role of the Child Protection Unit is to establish processes, provide a point of contact between a variety of people both inside and outside the church, deal with stressful situations that need to be handled with procedural fairness and sensitivity, comply with legal obligations, and provide support for individuals dealing with difficult issues within an organisation.

Specifically the Child Protection Unit provides:

- a framework for responding to and supporting parishioners affected by child abuse (this is not limited to abuse within the church);
- a structure for responding to allegations of child abuse (both past and present) perpetrated by the clergy or lay people working within the church;
- screening for all employees and volunteers within the church whose roles are related to children; and
- training in abuse prevention (for example, raising awareness of the issues and possible signs of child abuse).

The first task has been to review all existing procedures for responding to allegations of child abuse within the church in order to assess their appropriateness and to produce one easy-to-access document for church congregations. Material is also being produced to let people know who to contact if they wish to make an allegation or have a problem concerning child abuse within the church where we may be able to provide assistance. The focus is on education, prevention and assistance.

The church has established a process to deal with allegations, a training program, and an abuse prevention accreditation program. Over the next twelve months the Child Protection Unit will be developing strategies designed to support offenders or those at risk of offending in order to prevent child abuse, while acknowledging the overriding obligation to ensure the ongoing safety of children and young people and to work within statutory frameworks for notification. During the same period the Child Protection Unit will be developing strategies for helping and supporting adult survivors of child abuse.

The Child Protection Unit is committed to providing all congregations, organisations and committees within the Presbyterian Church in New South Wales with the best possible support, advice and resources in relation to this important issue.

All enquiries and complaints in regard to child protection matters within the Presbyterian Church should be marked "Confidential" and directed to Elizabeth McClean, Director, Child Protection Unit, Presbyterian Social Services, 168 Chalmers Street, Surry Hills, NSW 2010. Or via email (emcclean@pcnsw.org.au). Or by phone (02) 9690 9324.

Individuals who have current concerns for the safety, welfare or wellbeing for a child or young person living in New South Wales may also contact the DoCS Helpline on 132 111 for the cost of a local call, 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

Elizabeth McClean is the Director of the Child Protection Unit for the Presbyterian Church of Australia in New South Wales.