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Subject: New Submission to Inquiry into the Handling of Child Abuse by Religious and Other Organisations

Inquiry Name: Inquiry into the Handling of Child Abuse by Religious and Other Organisations

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SUBMISSION CONTENT:

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This submission is made on behalf of the Advisory Committee to South Western Centre Against Sexual Assault

South Western Centre Against Sexual Assault (SWCASA) is one of fifteen (15) such centres in Victoria. It provides a sexual assault counselling and support service to victims and their families living in the city of Warrnambool and the Shires of Corangamite, Glenelg, Moyne and Southern Grampians.

Staff of the Centre have experience in working with people who have been victims of abuse by personnel within religious organisations and other non-government organisations. The sentencing of Fr Gerald Risdale in Warrnambool in 1994 for multiple counts of sexual assault crimes remains a landmark case in the recognition of the extent of child sexual abuse.

1. Victims of abuse by clergy in the years between 1970 - 2000 speak of a number of barriers to reporting this abuse. They include:

- * The mystique of the clergy
- * Lack of clear pathways to report abuse
- * The process of moving Priests to another position as complaints were raised.

2. SWCASA acknowledges that there have been significant changes within many organisations in ensuring a fairer response to allegations of sexual assault. Nevertheless there have still been examples of victims being referred for assistance to organisations affiliated with the organisation in which the alleged assault occurred. This practice has the potential to

contain matters within the organisation, or at least, to give the impression of a lack of transparency.

3. People who have been abused by the clergy can still find it difficult to obtain information on how to make a complaint within the Church. A recent search of the web pages of the Bishops of the Australian Catholic Church and the Melbourne Catholic Education Office yielded no results to the words "sexual assault". The same search on the Uniting Church of Australia indirectly led to procedures followed by the Church.

4. SWCASA requests that the Committee consider the following changes:

- * That the mandatory reporting of child abuse is extended to members of the clergy. This legal requirement should transcend any current theological privileges

- *That people seeking assistance from the Church or organisation of abuse that occurred within the organisation should be informed of alternative secular and independent organisations and encouraged to receive independent assistance.

- *That Churches and other organisations have clear pathways for complaints and that these pathways be publicly available.