

Submission to the
Victorian parliament's Family and Community Development Committee's
Inquiry into the Handling of Child Abuse by Religious and Other
Organisations

I do not have much to contribute according to the terms of reference. I did not have to deal with any offences personally, though I did attend three parish meetings with the then Vicar-General, Monsignor Gerry Cudmore (one at Oakleigh, two at Macleod).

I confess that I was able to understand how groups of people – teachers, parents, sporting coaches – could sexually abuse children. It did not occur to me that priests would abuse children, especially on the scale that some of them have. I worked as a priest chaplain employed by the State around State and Catholic Institutions. I studied criminology at the University of Melbourne. I was very ignorant.

The measures taken by dioceses have been helpful – “Towards Healing.” Many good practical initiatives are in place – windows on confessionals, no child alone in a room or a car with a priest, regular police checks, open presbyteries. I believe that Cardinal Pell's initiative was good to have an independent, qualified person investigate an accusation. It is my understanding that people were free and in fact encouraged to take their accusations to the police. I am not sure that the system was reviewed from time to time by another independent body – justice being seen to be done!

An abiding difficulty I have is in our reluctance to have women in authority positions at parish and diocesan levels. It is my belief, a belief shared by most people I have spoken to, that women protect and supervise children much better than men do. Recently, Catholic Education in Melbourne lost a woman, Maria Kirkwood, to the Sale diocese. She handles all sorts of complaints in a way that no man I know could have done.

I am afraid that, unless women are employed at diocesan, seminary, school and parish level to handle complaints with as much authority as men have, problems will continue. Unrealistic expectations are soft-headed, and unworthy of us as mature Christians.

These are the only comments I have to make.



Fr Joe McMahon, Parish Priest