

Appendix 7 - No 1: The price of battling paedophilia

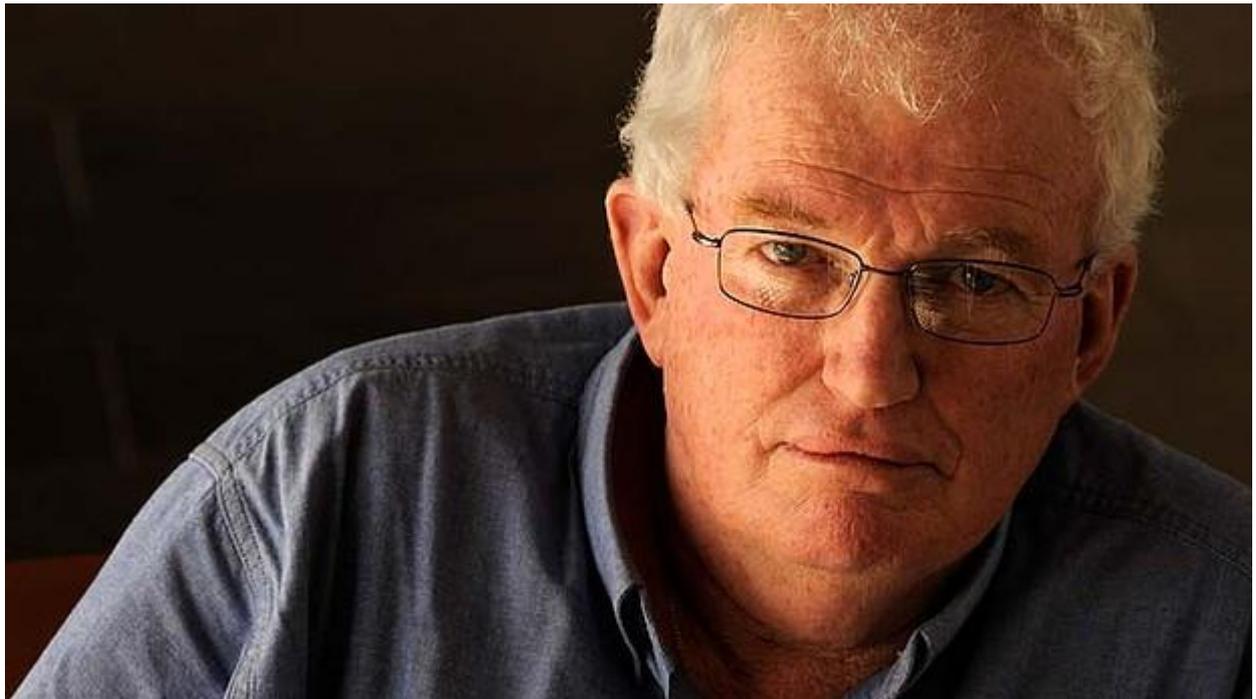
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Barney Zwartz

Former teacher Graeme Sleeman lost his career, health and financial security when he took a stand against a sexually abusive priest in Doveton.



Graeme Sleeman. *Photo: Penny Stephens*

GRAEME Sleeman knew Peter Searson was trouble even before Searson arrived as parish priest of Doveton in 1984. Searson liked to dress in military fatigues, often carried a revolver, and had a bad reputation when it came to money - and sexually abusing children.

The two locked horns immediately when Sleeman, principal of the Holy Family school, told the priest he knew of his reputation and would be watching him, and Searson replied that as priest he was the boss. Their main battleground was bizarre: the sacred Catholic sacrament of confession, where Searson could get the children alone and unsupervised.

"I was concerned about his addiction to confession," Sleeman recalls.



Peter Searson (bottom row, second from right) and Carmel Rafferty (top row, second from right).

"Sometimes he would get children to sit on his lap, or kneel between his legs." Later he would help a church investigation into two sexual assaults during confession.

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Sleeman was a respected educator and a devout Catholic. The latter cost him his career, his health and economic security for his family, as he sought to protect the children under his charge from a predatory priest while also trying to protect the good name of the church.

When Sleeman resigned as principal in 1986 in a vain bid to force the church and Catholic Education Office (CEO) to act against Searson, he was besieged by media wanting to know about the priest's behaviour. But he stayed silent, even in later job interviews, when his refusal to explain his departure worked against him.

Now, after 25 years, Graeme Sleeman, 63, is breaking his silence. Previously he feared a backlash against his family, and that he would not be believed. Now living in Queensland, he has decided to talk because "the climate is right".

He is still angry that despite repeated pleas to the church hierarchy, including to then archbishop Frank Little, and to the CEO to remove Searson - even providing proof he had stolen \$40,000 from school funds - nothing was done.

Sleeman says when the CEO asked Searson about the money, the priest said it was "a mistake" and he would repay it, though he never did.

Sleeman is also angry that he had to carry out this fight alone, with no support or counselling from the CEO.

Carmel Rafferty, a later teacher at Holy Family who stood against Searson, felt similarly abandoned.

"I felt bullied, abused, traumatised, humiliated and isolated by the principal and CEO staff," she says.

Worse still, Searson was the last in a line of six sexual abusers - some violent - who arrived in Doveton parish after it was created in 1962: the first four were parish priests at the Holy Family church, plus an assistant and a locum - a remarkable misfortune for a parish regarded as one of the most disadvantaged in Melbourne.

Sleeman, a big man who played semi-professional football, started as a Salesian novitiate at the Rupertswood school in Sunbury, where several serial abusers were based.

He left the order but later, feeling he had unfinished business with the church, became a seminarian, lasting only nine months because he didn't "fit the tea party conception" of priesthood and was uneasy about the homosexual activity of other seminarians there.

He became a bush footballer and principal at St Mary's in Sale. He arrived at Doveton in 1982, parachuted in by the CEO as a trouble shooter "because the Presentation nuns had walked out that morning after upheavals with the parish priest".

Sleeman didn't know that the priest, Victor Rubeo, was a serial abuser of boys and girls, but was aware Rubeo had affairs with women. Sleeman had a key to the priest's home, and once caught him in flagrante.

One day in 1984, Rubeo approached Sleeman "absolutely beside himself, in tears, in trouble with one of his women". Sleeman arranged for the priest to take sick leave, and helped him do a midnight flit to Malvern. Another abuser, Father Regis Smith - a female victim of whom was later paid out by the church - became interim priest at Doveton.

"I made a number of visits to [Archbishop] Frank Little and [Vicar-General] Peter Connors, asking them to send a pastorally minded priest," Sleeman says. "They appointed Peter Searson. I was on a fishing trip and saw it in *The Advocate* [a Catholic newspaper] and nearly had a heart attack." From the start, Sleeman made sure at least one teacher was in the church when Searson took children for confession. He did not know what Searson later conceded to a reporter, that the priest arrived from Sunbury banned from being alone with children in the confessional.

One day a teacher brought him a nine-year-old girl who had rushed sobbing from the confessional. More than a decade later, she received compensation from the archdiocese for a serious sexual assault. Another pupil, also later compensated, told her mother Searson had interfered with her. Carmel Rafferty says police told her Searson was brilliant at persuading parents not to make formal complaints.

Sleeman says the education office cover-up began with making teachers doubt what they were told - "what have you really seen, what evidence have you got?" "But they also kept telling us to report incidents. So we became the policeman, and they would go to the priest and say 'we've had another complaint', so the perpetrator was always getting a heads up," Sleeman says.

At one point, he found that Searson had a 14-year-old Indian girl living with him alone in the Holy Family presbytery because of her family problems. Sleeman warned him but Searson ignored it, so Sleeman told the CEO who "counselled" Searson. Nothing changed.

"Searson got great strength because he got away with it, and he upped the ante about taking kids to the confessional. So we put in place a whole lot of things to guard against him," Sleeman says. "There were always at least two staff inside the church, and we put in place a timetable for confession, but he ignored it. If he saw my car wasn't there he'd rush over to the school and grab a group [of children]."

Despite this, Holy Family was thriving. It was a finalist in Victorian school awards, and educators came from around the country and overseas to study Sleeman's ideas.

In the end, becoming increasingly volatile himself - on one occasion he threatened to "rearrange" Searson's face - Sleeman decided he would have to resign. He thought it would create such waves that the church and CEO would have to act. Parents were up in arms and demanded Searson's removal. But Searson stayed and, apart from a short stint coaching football in Chadstone, Sleeman never worked in Catholic education again. "I was suicidal. I was treated like I had leprosy."

He went to interview after interview, in Victoria and Queensland, and things would go well until he was asked why he left Doveton. He would just say "personal reasons", as advised by the education office. After he noticed a paper on a desk at an interview, he became convinced that the CEO was undermining him, telling schools "he's a great educator and works harder than anyone, but you'll never be able to control him".

The Sleemans bought a general store in Longford, then Graeme got a job driving horse semi-trailers, but his physical and mental health declined. In 1998 he had a breakdown, and was referred to Melbourne's Independent Commissioner into Sex Abuse, Peter O'Callaghan, QC.

For several years, O'Callaghan paid expenses and "wages" totalling \$90,000 for both Sleeman and his wife out of his own pocket and without the approval of the Melbourne archdiocese.

He did this until the church finally paid Sleeman \$150,000, a sum Sleeman says was not even close to what he had lost in income, superannuation and lost opportunities. "My family was totally dislocated, and we didn't know where the next meal was coming from," he says.

Carmel Rafferty joined Holy Family school the year after Graeme Sleeman left. But she wasn't forced into the front line until she started teaching grades 5 and 6 in 1992.

"I lost my job over it, and during the process I couldn't make children safe."

She says the school's staff had a good idea of what was going on with Searson. Altar boys didn't want to serve; asked why, they said "because of the way he touches us". One boy became upset during a sex education class when a teacher mentioned erections - he began rolling on the floor saying, "Oh no, Father's got a big penis".

In 1991, concerned at the way Searson was loitering around the boys' toilets, the staff sent a deputation of three teachers to the regional bishop, George Pell, now Archbishop of Sydney. Nothing was done.

Rafferty says that over time many people approached her about Searson: children seeking safety, different concerned parents, a police liaison officer who wanted her to ask Vicar General Gerald Cudmore to remove Searson (she did, in vain), and a worker at Doveton Hallam Health Centre after an incident in which Searson picked up a girl in his car.

Her relationship with Searson deteriorated. The CEO wanted to be told about Searson, but would tell her, "Don't say anything, it's being handled". Instead, she says, she was pressured out of her teaching career and livelihood. She resigned in 1993.

"This has wrecked my life, basically." She had to move house because she couldn't pay the mortgage, and spent six years working in a call centre. "I felt my soul was dying."

For 13 years she sought compensation for wrongful dismissal, and was finally given a compensation for "hardship and distress".

Searson's reign finally ended in 1997 when he was charged with the physical (not sexual) assault of two altar boys and stood down.

The Age put several questions to the Catholic Archdiocese and CEO about why they did not act against Searson despite receiving complaint after complaint.

Independent Commissioner Peter O'Callaghan noted in 2004 how surprised he was that Searson was left so long as a parish priest, "producing ill will, frustration and concern to school and parish staff, fellow priests and parishioners".

A spokesman for the archdiocese replied that Searson was an eccentric and difficult person, but until a formal complaint in 1997 there was no evidence on which the church could act.

"Searson's conduct was examined from time to time, but nothing firm could be established under the processes that were then in place."

Searson was warned about behavioural issues, but the church did not know of his sexual misconduct.

The archdiocese says it would have acted had it known about the Indian girl living with Searson, and when it found out about his gun it demanded he surrender it to police.

Similarly, the CEO says it would have acted had it known about the stolen \$40,000.

Sleeman says that given he informed authorities about both episodes, he finds this ignorance hard to explain.

Sleeman, like many victims, suspects that the archdiocese did not find evidence because it was disinclined to look too hard. At the least, they knew he was not the pastorally sensitive priest Holy Family needed.

Similarly, the CEO says it gave "regular and considerable support" to Sleeman, but did not identify a single example. Nor could Sleeman.

Both Graeme Sleeman and Carmel Rafferty plan to make submissions to the inquiry into the church's handling of sex abuse now being conducted by a parliamentary committee. Submissions close on September 21.

Read more: <http://www.theage.com.au/victoria/the-price-of-battling-paedophilia-20120916-2606z.html#ixzz26tvVTBqT>