

Former teachers speak out about abuse allegations

By [Jean Edwards](#)

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Two former Catholic [school](#) teachers have broken their silence about sex abuse in the Doveton parish in Melbourne's south-east.

They say the church covered up or ignored their repeated pleas for something to be done about a predatory priest.

Graeme Sleeman resigned as the principal of the Holy Family school in 1987, in a desperate bid to force the church to stop Peter Searson sexually abusing children.

"I didn't resign because I was sick of [teaching](#). I didn't resign because I thought I wasn't up to scratch," he said.

"I was a highly successful principal and I believed that by resigning, the church and the Catholic Education Office would support me, and say 'hey, there is something wrong with what's going on in Doveton'.

"But they cast me aside, in fact, for the last 25 years, those people have treated me as though I've had leprosy."

Mr Sleeman says the experience cost him his career and his health, and left him facing financial ruin.

He had a breakdown in 1998.

"I was contemplating suicide because I did not see a way out of the problem that the church had created," he said.

"I'd stood up for the rights of children. I'd stood up for the right of the church and I'd been cast aside."

Mr Sleeman says the Catholic Education Office constantly told him it would do something.

"I tried back then to protect the safety of children, but the hierarchy would not seem to take any notice of all the accounts I gave," he said.

"I've been sadly disillusioned by the approach that was given to me by the archdiocese clergy, and also by the Catholic Education Office.

"They constantly kept saying to me, 'yes, report to us', but there was never any action taken."

Graeme Sleeman made a statement to police last month.

"In many ways I feel saddened, because those people couldn't make the right decisions years ago.

"I have to [question](#) myself every day. Did I try hard enough? Did I do the right things? Was there something else I could have done?", he said.

A spokesman for the Catholic archdiocese says until there was a formal complaint about Peter Searson 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," he said.

The church eventually paid Graeme Sleeman \$150,000, after a report by the independent commissioner, Peter O'Callaghan QC.

Mr Sleeman has also revealed Mr O'Callaghan gave him \$90,000 out of his own pocket, in what he describes as a gesture of compassion.

"He was highly concerned about the situation I found myself in, because I tried to stand up for what was right," Mr Sleeman said.

"If you've got nothing and you don't even know where the next meal is coming from, if someone offers you some financial support, we had to take it because there was no other [course](#) of action for us.

"I believe he's a man of principle, and he saw that I'd been dealt a very severe injustice."

Mr O'Callaghan says he has not paid anyone else.

"It was a one-off. I never did it for anyone else. It was paid for no other reason than to give them [the principal and his wife] assistance," he said.

Carmel Rafferty taught at the Holy Family school until her resignation in 1993.

She says children, parents, teachers and health workers came to her about the priest, but she had no-one to turn to.

"I had quite a few children coming to me frequently, complaining about how the priest was touching them, and they were really frightened and they were really trying to stay away and they were having trouble. Some of them were having a lot of trouble staying away."

She says she wanted to come forward earlier, but the climate was not right.

"I was met with a lot of being shut down and shut out. To speak to people who really didn't want to hear was a lost cause, and it was also a pretty frightening position to be in. I felt unsafe," she said.

"They need to face the truth, they should face the truth, and it's unfortunate that they don't.

"I certainly think that there's huge responsibility on individuals out there, for covering it up, for pushing people away."

Glenn Davies used to head the sex crimes squad at Victoria Police.

He says the revelations from Graeme Sleeman and Carmel Rafferty are amazing.

"They believed that there was a record of individuals committing this sort of abuse, and what they're saying is that nothing was done about it.

"What they're saying is an extraordinary revelation that doesn't surprise me, but this is why an inquiry has been set up. They want to get to the bottom of this."

Last month Newcastle police charged a former priest with covering up abuse.

It is the first time a priest has been charged over an alleged cover-up and survivors of sexual abuse hope it might set a precedent.

Mr Davies says that is something for the Victorian parliamentary inquiry into the handling of complaints of sex abuse to consider.

"It's a bit hard to say whether these revelations specifically will result in charges, but what it will do, is it will alert Victoria Police, it will alert the inquiry that this is an option that they need to look at," he said.

Graeme Sleeman and Carmel Rafferty are making submissions to the inquiry.

The deadline is on Friday.