



The Uniting Church in Australia

Annual Report to the National Office for Child Safety

Implementation of Recommendations of the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse

30 November 2019



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Introduction

The Uniting Church in Australia believes that a safe Church is integral to who we are called to be. Ensuring a safe Church is the way we are able to physically, emotionally and spiritually care for each other.

In the years since the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse the Uniting Church in Australia (the Church) has engaged in deep reflection on the manner by which our theology adequately and appropriately gives recognition to children and their safety, in the life of our Church. In response to the lessons learned and the Commission's recommendations we have taken action.

We are a large and complex organisation, consisting of many entities which vary in size, scope and legal structures. These different entities are regulated by Church law, entity constitutions and by-laws, state/territory and federal laws and regulations, industrial instruments, funding agreements, quality frameworks and standards. As such, much of our work across 2019 has focused on the development and implementation of new tools and supports to enable a consistent approach to grow and sustain a child safe culture across the Church.

As a whole Church we have taken the following actions in 2019:

Governance

Established a National Safe Church Unit to provide leadership in:

- Enhancing a child safe culture across the Church
- Aligning the Church's *National Child Safe Policy Framework* with the National Principles for Child Safe Organisations endorsed by the Council of Australian Governments (COAG)
- Developing best practice policy frameworks which will govern consistent policy across the Church
- Developing an education and training framework which will create nationally consistent standards for training of people who work with children in the Church

Delivered a series of events and activities to further support a child safe culture and practices across the Church including:

- Continued engagements with the Commonwealth, State and Territory Governments on legislative and system reform in response to the Commission's recommendations
- A series of workshops across the Church identifying the nexus between our Christian values and being a safe church
- Regular reporting on progress to national and Synod (state and territory based) governance bodies

Child Safe Organisation

- Aligned the Church's *National Child Safe Policy Framework* with the National Principles for Child Safe Organisations
- Resourced an implementation plan for the framework
- Engaged with networks across the Church to support implementation of the framework in various contexts
- Supported and resourced a project to review and consolidate resources for Ministry Agents to ensure behavioural expectations are clear and enforceable
- Developed a *Persons of Concern Policy Framework* which provides guidance about how to deal with 'known offenders' in congregational settings (this framework is additional to existing policies in Uniting Church agencies and schools)
- Launched the 'toolkit for listening' to provide guidance on good practice for ensuring children's voices are valued and listened to across the life of the Church
- Created child safe networks of staff and volunteers with child safety responsibilities

Compliance

- Reviewed the annual national audit process against the *National Child Safe Policy Framework*
- Developed mechanisms to support reporting against the *National Child Safe Policy Framework* and the requirements of the National Office for Child Safety
- Commenced development of internal reporting protocols

Redress

- Synods and the Assembly of the Uniting Church in Australia declared as participants in the National Redress Scheme
- [UCA Redress Ltd](#) operating as a separate company to be the national vehicle to facilitate the Church's participation in the National Redress Scheme
- As of 14 November 2019, 193 requests for information had been received and 20 offers of redress had been made, of which 13 have been accepted

Our continuing commitment

The Uniting Church has pledged publicly to continue to implement the lessons of the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse. We remain open to the insights of survivors and professionals, we regularly renew our policies and practices in all parts of our Church, and we work to ensure that they reflect best practice for care, service and support of children.

The Church's [National Child Safe Policy Framework](#) underpins our delivery against this commitment and we are united in our values in the care and protection of children:

<i>Compassion</i>	We will deal with children compassionately and with an understanding of their vulnerabilities
<i>Respect</i>	We respect the boundaries of professional relationships and respect the rights of every person to feel safe while in contact with our services
<i>Justice</i>	We will seek justice for those who have been harmed
<i>Working together</i>	We will work together to create a culture of individual and collective responsibility for the safety and wellbeing of children and to create friendly, welcoming spaces for children
<i>Leading through learning</i>	We will be leaders by undertaking a continuous improvement approach to the protection of children and to offering child friendly services

SECTION 1: Identifying the Institution - the Uniting Church in Australia

On 22 June 1977, the Uniting Church in Australia was inaugurated by a union of the Congregational Union of Australia, the Methodist Church of Australasia and the Presbyterian Church of Australia (the three churches). The Church is the first church to be created in and for Australia.

The Church is incorporated by Acts of Parliament in each state and territory, and its legal structure (The Uniting Church in Australia Property Trust) similarly is a state/territory entity administered by each state/territory Synod.

Uniting Church structure defined in the Basis of Union

The Church is governed through inter-related councils as follows:

- The Assembly (the national council)
- The Synods (the regional councils)
- The Presbyteries (the district councils)
- The Congregation (congregational councils) and The Elders' or Leaders' Meeting (the council within a congregation or group of congregations)

Children in contact with the Uniting Church

The Church, through its schools, agencies and congregations provides a wide range of services directly to children, including:

- Youth/children's ministry activities within Church settings (Sunday school, youth groups, camps, playgroups etc)
- Local, regional and national camps or gatherings
- Childcare
- Out-of-home care
- Boarding and day schools
- Hospital and health services
- Mental health services
- Disability services
- Child and family services such as telephone and face to face counselling, domestic violence support programs and refuges, family intervention services, community recovery
- Homelessness services

SECTION 2: General reporting against recommendations relevant to all institutions

Theme 1: Making Institutions Child Safe

The Church believes that all institutions should act and make decisions consistent with human rights. This includes having the best interests of children as a primary consideration in decision making processes. This approach aligns with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, including the best interest principle in Article 3.

In 2019 the Church's National Child Safe Policy Framework was revised following COAG's approval of the National Principles for Child Safe Organisations. The updated framework aligns with the principles to further support the Church and its entities to create and sustain a culture of child safety.

Actions flowing from the Church's National Child Safe Policy Framework in 2019 have included:

- Safe church issues included as a standing agenda item at many Church Council meetings
- The inclusion of the ten National Principles for Child Safe Organisations in Safe Church workshops and refresher training delivered by Synods for congregations, children's ministry workers and Safe Church Officers.
- Progressive inclusion of reviews and updating of organisational codes of conduct for staff, school students and their parents/carers to align with the National Principles for Child Safe Organisations
- progressive inclusion of The Child Safe School – Statement of Claim on school websites alongside publication of the policies and procedures that document how the school is safe for students
- Updating induction procedures, staff training and resources to strengthen delivery and access to child protection and mandatory reporting training and information
- Development of a policy for psychometric assessment for staff working in residential care
- Revision of feedback and complaints processes, including new directions for responding to allegations made against staff
- Auditing of compliance with policies and procedures to ensure they align with the National Principles for Child Safe Organisations
- Reviews of and changes to archive systems and facilities
- Updating of information sharing procedures and practices
- Responding to legislative changes to ensure compliance with new regulations, such as changes to South Australia's Children and Young People (Safety) Act 2017

Safe Church Training is offered across the life of the Church and most Synod operational staff are required to undertake this training as part of their induction process. Refresher training is provided regularly.

Measure 1.1: New or revised Code of Conduct, policies and procedures for child safe institutions (Volumes 6 and 7, Recommendations 6.4-6.6,7.8)

- *all staff and volunteers comply with a Code of Conduct that sets behavioural standards towards children, explains reporting requirements and handling complaints of child sexual abuse*
- *requires all people working within the institution to undergo initial and periodic training of the Code of Conduct*
- *ongoing documentation of policies and procedures related to child safe standards (now national principles)*

There are a number of different policies, procedures and codes of conduct in place for staff, members and volunteers across all entities of the Church which set out the behavioural expectations towards children and provide guidance on reporting requirements and how to handle disclosure, suspicion or reports of child sexual abuse. These continue to be resourced, implemented and reviewed. For example, congregations in the Synod of Victoria and Tasmania are asked to undertake annual reviews of their keeping children safe policy and codes of conduct and to reaffirm their commitment and review of their practices.

Codes of Conduct are specific to the context in which they are applied, these codes set out clear expectations of behaviour at all levels of the Church and identify how individuals are accountable for their own people and for upholding the Church's commitment to be a safe church for all people.

Documentation of policies and procedures related to child safe standards is undertaken in line with local documentation and record keeping practices. It is therefore different for each Synod and their entities. The National Safe Church Unit is currently building a website which will provide a central landing point to help increase access to these policies and procedures where appropriate.

CASE STUDIES

Training

[Safe Church Awareness training and refresher workshops](#) were delivered by the Uniting Church Western Australia across WA in 2019 to help all church members understand their responsibilities and develop policies and practices that create safety in their church. Church council members, children's ministry workers, safe church officers, congregational members and volunteers from over 30 congregations participated. The workshops and training included:

- National Principles for Child Safe Organisations
- Empowering and listening to the voices of children and their families in the design and review of services
- Types and indicators of child abuse
- Recognising and disrupting grooming behaviours
- Code of conduct for lay leaders

- Handling disclosures and reporting child abuse processes and protocols
- Ethically mandated reporting of child sexual abuse by all Uniting Church ministry agents and church members

Introduction of Working with Children Checks in South Australia

When South Australia revoked the *Child Protection Act 1993* two Acts were introduced, the *Children and Young People (Safety) Act 2017* which commenced in two stages in February and October 2018 and the *Child Safety (Prohibited Persons) Act 2016* which commenced in July 2019.



It is the policy and practice of the Synod of South Australia that all appointed leaders within the Church (whether paid or voluntary) who would have or could expect to have contact with children, youth and vulnerable people obtain the required screening check as part of being authorised by the Church Council for the roles of responsibility for which they hold.

The Synod's [Duty of Care Policy](#) was re-written to ensure compliance with the *Child Safety (Prohibited Persons) Act* and to align with mandatory notification procedures. The Synod has also introduced a policy for psychometric assessment for staff working in residential care.

Measure 1.2: Improvements to institutional responding and reporting (Volumes 6 and 7, Recommendations 6.4-6.6,7,8)

- *there are effective complaint handling policies and procedures in place that set out how the institutions should respond to complaints of child sexual abuse, and these are understood by children, staff, volunteers and families*
- *if a complaint is made, there is a risk assessment framework that is followed immediately, including appropriate discipline of any internal perpetrators and review of the decision-making processes by staff when handling allegations or undergoing investigations*

All Synods have processes for managing reportable conduct, which include clear guidelines for staff and volunteers on how to respond to allegations, suspicion or disclosures of child abuse. These processes are reviewed at appropriate stages and some reviews include a communications review to identify if they are easily understood by children, their families and other vulnerable people.

Given the broad nature of the Church and the wide range of services offered, different complaint mechanisms are in place at the local level to best meet local needs. For example, in the Synod of NSW and ACT, the [Speak Out](#) program is provided so that anyone can report any concerns (current or historic) they have about safety, wellbeing and integrity within the Church and/or its entities or offer ideas and suggestions that may improve operations. Speak Out is operated as a confidential service provided by the Synod's integrity partners, Core Integrity.

The Church's National Child Safe Policy Framework has continued to be used to set out the need for complaints processes to be accessible for children, families, staff and volunteers. It commits the Church and its entities to review all incidents and continuously improve child

safe policy and practices. The framework articulates the Church's commitment to a culture of reporting, compliance and cooperation with authorities.

CASE STUDIES

New guidelines for responding to incidents

The Queensland Synod's reporting for lay workers and ministry agents is supported with simple guides for an immediate risk assessment to occur, to ensure the immediate safety of those involved.

B.C.A.L.M provides a simple guide for immediate action for lay workers who become aware, or receive a report, of inappropriate behaviour or child abuse or neglect to ensure the immediate safety of those involved:

Breathe using a quick calming breath to help engage your thinking brain. Suggest the person 'take a deep breath' and count for them as they breathe in and out a few times.

Calm the person. The words you use will have a profound and lasting impact on them. Use words like 'You've done the right thing by telling me', 'I'm glad you told me', 'I believe you', 'It wasn't your fault'.

Assess whether there is any immediate or imminent danger. If there is, or if in doubt, call 000 and ask for police to attend.

Let the person know what your obligations are. Explain you have a responsibility to report child abuse concerns and allegations. You could use words like 'I will need to tell someone about this so we can get you some help. I am going to have to make a report'.

Make a report immediately. Make a note of your concerns and report them to your ministry agent straight away, respecting the privacy and dignity of all parties.

R.E.S.P.O.N.D provides a guide for ministry agents:

Reassure the person – 'I'm glad you told me', 'It's important for this to be addressed' or similar words that welcome the information.

Ensure immediate danger has been addressed. If there is imminent danger call 000.

Statement template must be completed with detailed notes. Do not investigate. Record those to whom you have reported your concerns, both within and outside the church.

Plan your next actions. Complete the reporting threshold test (specific document) to help plan the appropriate action.

Obligations to report to both statutory and church authorities must be met. Reporting is mandatory under church policy.

Needs for practical assistance and referral should be attended to. Contact details are included in the accompanying reporting and referral guide.

Debrief appropriately.

Making processes easy to understand

Wesley Mission Queensland (WMQ) has updated its feedback and complaints policies and procedures. Procedures for responding and reporting any allegation of abuse or complaint are documented in the WMQ *Child Safe Services* guidelines.

The WMQ *Preventing and Responding to Abuse and Neglect* policy identifies there is a zero-tolerance approach to abuse. It outlines the process that will be undertaken if an allegation is made against a member of the WMQ workforce.

All policies and procedures are subject to a communications review prior to publication to ensure that the language is appropriate and accessible for staff, volunteers, children and their families.

Measure 1.3: Improvements to record keeping and information sharing (Volume 8, Recommendations 8.1 and 8.4)

- *institutions should implement the Royal Commission's principles for records and recordkeeping that responds to child sexual abuse occurring within institutions*

The Church remains committed to sustained implementation of these recommendations. We continue to work to locate, sort and catalogue historical documents in order to facilitate timely access to these records. We are further exploring the best way of archiving these diverse sets of information and how to best put in place information sharing architecture and processes.

For contemporary incidents and allegations of abuse, the Church's National Child Safe Policy Framework includes direction for keeping consistent, full, accurate and up-to-date records and for that information to be used to identify trends, identify and manage risks and to improve our child safe policies and practices.

Induction training across the different Synods includes the various local processes for responding to and record keeping of any incidents of allegations of abuse.

CASE STUDIES

Record keeping review and training

UnitingCare West in WA has undertaken a review of case notes and documentation in children's services, including family group homes, to ensure best practice record keeping for children in care is being maintained. Specific training on writing case notes is provided to staff who work with children to support accurate record taking and keeping.

Uniting Care West has specific local policies and processes in place to guide access to personal records, responding to complaints of past abuse, information management, privacy policy and a data breach response plan to support responsible and correct use of data and records.

Electronic Document and Records Management System

Across 2019, the Synod of NSW/ACT has rolled out an Electronic Document and Records Management System (EDRMS) which is being made progressively available to Presbyteries, Congregations and other Church entities. The roll out has included records management training to help staff and members develop new skills to use the system. EDRMS provides a 'single source' for records and data to be aggregated and analysed. It also provides for enhanced security of data and confidentiality of information.

Theme 2: Children's voices

Measure 2:1 Children participate in decision that affect them *(All relevant Volumes and Recommendations)*

The Church celebrates that children are a vital part of our mission and actively seeks ways to amplify their voices across the life of the Church.

We know that where children are not heard their safety and wellbeing can be overlooked.

The Church's [Tools for Listening](#) has been developed to enable the implementation of the recommendations for the Royal Commission that:

- Children and young people are involved in the strategic development, design, implementation and evaluation of programmes and services in which they participate
- Children participate in decisions affecting them and are taken seriously
- Families and communities are informed and involved



The Tools for Listening resource are being made available across the Church and its entities. Safe Church Officers are able to present the tools to congregations and they are accessible on the [Church's website](#).

CASE STUDIES

Synod of Victoria and Tasmania

Every congregation and associated school in the Synod of Victoria and Tasmania was invited to send four young people, aged 16-21, to the 2019 Amplify Youth Caucus. The event enabled over 40 young people to connect, celebrate and have their voices heard by the Church. Participants explored the Synod vision and mission principles and shared how they felt they were treated within their congregations. Collectively participants expressed a desire for genuine inclusion and safe welcome for everyone in their churches.

Wesley College, Uniting Church Synod of WA

Wesley College is home to 1,300 students from pre-kindergarten to Year 12, including 160



boarders. The school regularly trains and educates its teachers in child protection and safety. The school explicitly includes child protection and safety education into its whole-of-school social emotional learning programme. In doing so it provides a forum for all students to express their views, questions and ideas in relation to child protection and safety. The College has a number of Student Representative Committees, with staff mentoring and oversight, which provide a representative student voice across many issues including student safety and child protection matters.

Uniting, Synod of NSW and ACT

Uniting is responsible for the social justice, community services and chaplaincy work of the Uniting Church in NSW and the ACT, providing care and support for people through all ages and stages of life and with a focus on people experiencing disadvantage and vulnerability.

In 2019 Uniting established the role of Children’s Advocate to facilitate greater participation by children, their families and communities, in the planning of Uniting services. Uniting has also begun a review of its participation policy which outlines the formal structures that support children to be heard by the agency.

Uniting Communities, Synod of South Australia



Uniting Communities provides child, family and community services, disability and aged care services across South Australia. Children who are clients of UC services were invited to enter an art competition to create an artwork that represented ‘what does feeling safe mean to me’. The competition created a new opportunity for Uniting Communities staff to talk with children about their right to be and feel safe and to listen to their different views about what this meant to them.

UnitingCare, Synod of Queensland

UnitingCare provides services to older people, those living with disability, people requiring health care in hospital or at home, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, children and families across Queensland.

UnitingCare’s out-of-home care services hold weekly meetings in each of the residential care settings as one opportunity for children to give their feedback on the support they are receiving and to share their ideas for improvements and changes.

Children accessing any of UnitingCare’s services can also contact the Client Safe Review Team to provide feedback, through different channels including online and by telephone, if they see, hear or experience anything which makes them concerned about their own safety or the safety of others within the services.

SECTION 3: Reporting against institution specific recommendations

All religious institutions (*Volume 16, Recommendations 16.31-16.58*)

Recommendations 16.31 – 16.35

As previously reported, the Church has accepted these recommendations and (as detailed on p.6) the Church's National Child Safe Policy Framework was revised in 2019 to incorporate the standards following adoption by COAG.

Recommendations 16.36 – 16.58

Action that has taken place within Synods and their agencies to further implement these recommendations in 2019 includes:

- Safe Ministry with Children policies and procedures have been reviewed to align with the 10 National Standards for Child Safe Organisations adopted by COAG
- Training for safe ministry with children is required to be undertaken annually by Ministry Agent and Lay Leaders
- Safe Church workshops and refresher training is accessible to all leaders, members and volunteers, and records of participation are maintained
- Trauma informed care workshops for Ministry Agents and Lay Leaders
- Induction training includes child safety information and courses
- Training and information on recognising and responding to grooming behaviour is being rolled out
- Boards and governing bodies must regularly include child safety issues on their meeting agendas
- Communities of practice continue to grow and to drive change and provide advice on child safety issues across the life of the Church
- Synods and their agencies are asked each year to provide information and demonstrate compliance with their obligations to provide a safe environment for children
- A mix of Safe Church Assurance and Support Officers, Children's Advocates, Safe Church Contact Persons and Child Safety Practitioners are working in Synods and their agencies to help keep children safe
- Recruitment processes include appropriate checks such as working with children, police and referee checking
- Advice and support from psychologists during hiring processes
- Performance management processes provide an opportunity to reference performance against codes of conduct, including expected behaviours linked to child safety
- Children and their families are supported to be involved in the design and delivery of services for them through various mechanisms managed by individual Synods and agencies
- Complaints and feedback processes are child focused and accessible
- Creation of new avenues and tools to amplify children's voices

- The Church's commitment to child safety is promoted across its communications, policies and processes to uphold this commitment are published online and in other appropriate formats
- Record keeping has been reviewed, revised and updated along with the delivery of appropriate record keeping training
- Development of a Person of Concern Policy Framework (draft pending approval)

Out-of-home care providers (*Volume 16, recommendations 12.6-12.19*)

The Church, through its agencies, is a key provider of out-of-home care for children in Australia. These children are some of the most vulnerable in our society and include children with high care needs, children in crisis, children who have experienced violence and substance abuse, children impacted by sexual abuse and those at risk of homelessness.

Central to the delivery of the broad suites of out-of-home care services we provide is the belief that all children have the right to be supported in a nurturing environment where they feel safe, valued and heard.

The Church and its agencies are committed to working with all stakeholders, including children and their families, other out-of-home care service providers and Commonwealth, state and territory governments to continually improve out-of-home care services and to reform systems to best achieve stability of placements for children, support them to have positive experiences and set them up for lifelong success.

Out-of-home care services operate in a highly regulated environment and each of our agencies must comply. The Church's National Child Safe Policy Framework also applies and supports the continuation of a child safe culture across these services.

The Church has accepted all of the Royal Commission's recommendations for out-of-home care service providers. Action across 2019 to continue implementation has included:

- Community service checks of prospective carers and any adult house-hold members of home-based carers, in addition to mandatory police, working with children and referee checks
- Annual review of approved carers, including interview with children in care
- Training and support for carers, including recognising and responding to grooming, sexually harmful behaviours and disclosures of abuse
- Documented risk management plans, reviewed annually or at more appropriate time frames
- Trauma informed approach to service design and delivery
- Continued commitment to providing services that are culturally safe and accessible to children, their families and carers
- Intensive therapeutic models of delivery for residential care (where government funding allows)
- Professional supervision by appropriately qualified clinicians for care staff
- Trauma informed care training for staff

- Unannounced site visits to out-of-home care services by client safety teams to undertake internal audits

Non-Government Schools (*Volume 13, recommendations 13.1 - 13.6*)

Schools affiliated with the Uniting Church in Australia operate across the country. Formal governing relationships are unique to each school and each is governed by a School Council or Board.

The Church's National Child Safe Policy Framework applies to all Uniting Church schools and is an important tool in sustaining a culture of child safety.

The Church has accepted all of the Royal Commission's recommendations for non-government schools. Action across 2019 to further implementation of these recommendations has included:

- Reviews and updating of school specific child safety policies and codes of conduct
- Specific child safety training for boarding school staff
- Updating and/or introduction of whistle-blower and complaints policies and processes with specific provisions for child safety
- Inclusion of students and parents in the development of child safety policies
- Information sessions and workshops for students and parents about child safety issues, including recognising and responding to grooming behaviour
- Strengthening of student representative bodies and forums

Prospective work post-2019

The National Safe Church Unit will continue to develop and expand the suite of resources and tools available to Synods and their agencies which will further support action to keep children safe. This will include a dedicated online resource to host information and tools to strengthen a nationally consistent approach to child safety across the life of the Church.

Synods will continue to deliver appropriate child safety training for staff and volunteers; including during induction of new members and appropriately timed refresher training. Synods will ensure that training information is current and aligns with regulatory requirements.

A number of reviews of procedures and practices are underway or planned for 2020 as part of the Church's actions to implement the recommendations of the Royal Commission. These include Synod level reviews of records and information management and retention, feedback and complaints processes and work to create new mechanisms for children to be heard.

The Church is steadfast in its commitment to be a safe church for all people and to sustain a focus on child safety across the life of the Church.