



30 November 2020

Rebekah Kilpatrick  
Head, National Office for Child Safety  
Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet  
PO Box 6500  
CANBERRA ACT 2600

**By email** [nationalofficeforchildsafety@pmc.gov.au](mailto:nationalofficeforchildsafety@pmc.gov.au)

Dear Rebekah,

### **Hillsong Church Australia (Hillsong): Annual Progress Update**

#### **Introduction**

The purpose of this letter is to:

- accompany the submission made by Australian Christian Churches (**ACC**) dated 30 November 2020, in relation to reporting on the progress of ACC in responding to the recommendations of the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse (**Royal Commission**); and
- provide an update to our letter to the National Office for Child Safety dated 28 November 2019.

Hillsong is committed to providing physical, emotional, and spiritual environments that are safe and secure for all children and young people.

Hillsong has undertaken work in the area of child safety since we last provided an update to the National Office for Child Safety in late 2019, including:

- being declared a participating institution in the National Redress Scheme for Institutional Child Sexual Abuse (the **National Redress Scheme**);
- transitioning programs online in response to the public health crisis relating to COVID-19, which required the development of specific risk management plans and resources;
- approximately 3,200 workers have completed online child safety training since online training was launched last year; and
- collaborating with government agencies in:
  - developing the resource titled *Implementing the Child Safe Standards: A Guide for Faith-Based Organisations* with the New South Wales Office of the Children's Guardian (**NSW OCG**); and
  - taking part in a pilot of the new QLD Blue Card Services Organisation Portal.



## Background

Hillsong provides programs to children and young people in the majority of states and territories in Australia (the exceptions being SA and the ACT). On a weekly basis approximately 8,500 children and young people attend Hillsong programs, and we have approximately 3,200 staff and volunteers engaged in child-related work over the course of each year.

Since 2016, the Safe Church Office has been responsible for ensuring the safety of children and young people across all Hillsong programs, including by overseeing:

- the implementation of the Safe Church Framework which is based on the Child Safe Standards and consistent with the National Principles for Child Safe Organisations (the **National Principles**);
- complaint handling;
- reporting to police and other government agencies; and
- screening and training of all people in child-related work.

## Legislative developments

### New legislative requirements

Hillsong continues to monitor legislative developments across the states and territories where Hillsong provides services and activities to children. Since our last update there have been several positive legislative developments, including but not limited to:

- the commencement of the *Children's Guardian Act 2019* (NSW), with religious bodies being included in the reportable conduct scheme overseen by the NSW OCG; and
- persons in religious ministry now being mandatory reporters in NSW as a result of amendments to the *Children and Young People (Care and Protection) Act 1998* (NSW).

Hillsong encourages all states and territories to develop greater uniformity in their legislative approach.

We note that the terminology used for people working in religious organisations often varies across jurisdictions (and even within jurisdictions) which in turn may limit the scope of the duty or obligation being enacted.

For example, in Tasmania the mandatory reporting obligation set out in the *Children, Young Persons and Their Families Act 1997* (Tas) is applicable to 'a member of the clergy of any church or religious denomination'. If read narrowly, this definition would not capture people in religious ministry who are not ordained into a clerical order. This definition does not capture the majority of people in religious ministry, including those that undertake this work at Hillsong.

Despite this, Hillsong would not seek to rely on a narrow reading of these obligations, and we adopt a policy position of making reports as necessary, including via voluntary reporting pathways.

We are monitoring the progress being made in relation to introducing a reportable conduct scheme in Queensland and Tasmania, and the introduction of a single Act in the Northern Territory that covers matters relating to child safety.



## Child Safe Standards

Hillsong is committed to implementing practices that are in accordance with the National Principles. Hillsong continues to monitor and review its implementation of the Hillsong Safe Church Framework.

We welcome the efforts made in various states and territories to implement standards-based legislation that incorporates the National Principles, including the proposed amendments to the Child Safe Standards made under the *Child Wellbeing and Safety Act 2005* (Vic), and the proposed introduction of legislation in NSW.

Hillsong has, along with other members of the NSW/ACT Inter-Denomination Professional Standards Network, collaborated with the NSW OCG on the development of the resource titled *Implementing the Child Safe Standards: A Guide for Faith-Based Organisations*.

Hillsong contributed examples of how it implements the various standards which have been used in relation to Standard 3 and Standard 8 in the guide (pages 17 and 37 respectively).

We acknowledge the great work that NSW OCG is doing in this area and the level of support they have provided to Hillsong and to religious organisations generally.

## Child safety and COVID-19

The public health crisis relating to COVID-19 has required that all Hillsong church services and programs be conducted online, and in accordance with the public health advice provided by different states and territories.

We believe that the transition to online programs for children and young people has had a positive impact on the safety and wellbeing of children, particularly those who have been vulnerable throughout the pandemic period.

Facilitating online programs has been one way of providing a necessary forum for children and young people to share their experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic in a safe and welcoming environment.

In doing this, we have sought ensure to that:

- online programs are run in a safe way and that particular risks relating to online environments are managed;
- children and young people feel safe raising concerns with Hillsong staff and volunteers online, including relating to their safety and wellbeing; and
- concerns raised by children and young people online are acted on.

Hillsong has developed resources about running safe programs online to provide guidance to staff, and volunteers, and all members of the church community.

## Information sharing regimes

Hillsong supports the inclusion of religious organisations in information sharing schemes such as those set out at Part 6A of the *Child Safety and Wellbeing Act 2005* (Vic) and Chapter 16A of the *Children and Young People (Care and Protection) Act 1998* (NSW).

The current exclusion of religious organisations from information sharing schemes may have a negative impact on the capacity of religious organisations to:



- share information of concern with prescribed entities in the absence of statutory protections for the religious organisation; and
- meet their obligations under reportable conduct schemes due to not being able to utilise the information sharing schemes to request information from prescribed entities such as the police, particularly when conducting investigations into reportable conduct of employees.

Hillsong does not consider the absence of statutory protection to be a reason not to share information that relates to the safety and wellbeing of children and notes that there are other ways of doing so such as via the relevant government agency.

#### Working with children checks

Hillsong encourages any move towards uniformity in approach to working with children checks across the states and territories.

During the year, Hillsong was asked by Blue Cards Services in Queensland to take part in a trial of the new organisation portal they have developed. We have been able to provide feedback which has been addressed in further updates to the portal.

We consider the development of the portal to be a positive step in managing the screening of workers in Queensland and congratulate Blue Card Services for their work in this area.

#### Concluding remarks

We welcome the opportunity to provide this update to the National Office for Child Safety. Please be assured of our support for your important work, and our commitment to providing safe environments for children and young people.

If you have any further questions please do not hesitate to contact Kirk Morton, Risk and Compliance Manager, Hillsong Church Australia.

Yours faithfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "George Aghajanian".

George Aghajanian

General Manager

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Kirk Morton".

Kirk Morton

Risk & Compliance Manager