

MEDIA RELEASE

Diocese of Darwin

INQUIRY INTO THE PROTECTION OF ABORIGINAL CHILDREN FROM SEXUAL ABUSE and GOVERNMENT INTERVENTION IN ABORIGINAL COMMUNITIES

July 6, 2007

The release a week ago of "Little Children are Sacred", the report of the Inquiry into the Protection of Aboriginal Children from Sexual Abuse, and announcement yesterday of intervention by the Australian Government in Aboriginal communities, are real concerns for the Church in the Northern Territory, and complex matters for the Church to respond to, says Darwin Catholic Bishop Ted Collins.

Bishop Collins, who is familiar with a number of Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory, acknowledged that there is much to be done to address serious problems that afflict Indigenous people in many Aboriginal communities, including child sexual abuse. He noted that the report of the recent NT Inquiry shows that Indigenous people want to and are committed to responding to this issue and that the participation of Indigenous people in shaping and implementing solutions is vital to achieving success.

Though the recommendations of the report are not specifically addressed to the Church, Bishop Collins said that because of the Church's involvement in providing education and social welfare programs in Aboriginal communities, as well as customary parish ministry, the Church would be involved in responding to the recommendations. "Our approach is to work in partnership with Indigenous people in their local communities. Without their involvement, without their voice, it can easily happen that Aboriginal people, many of whom already feel powerless, end up further disempowered. Yet when we work in partnership with them, Indigenous people know that we recognise and respect that they take first place in dealing with the problems that affect their own lives and their families and communities."

Bishop Collins went on to note how often this has been shown to be true, citing Indigenous school leadership and teaching, and the delivery by Indigenous people of programs in alcohol awareness and family recovery. While welcoming any increase in support and funding of initiatives that respond to the tragedy of child sexual abuse and other serious problems in Aboriginal communities, Bishop Collins stated, "I am concerned that any major intervention in Aboriginal communities happen in ways that promote the capacity of Indigenous people to respond to the problems they face, and build good relationships between Aboriginal Australians and the rest of the Australian people, especially those we elect to govern us."

The Bishop concluded that in the present situation, it is important that all who are involved in responding to the crisis of child abuse in Aboriginal communities take heed of the advice of Rex Wild QC and Pat Anderson in their report, that the way to "help support communities to effectively prevent and tackle child sexual abuse, is for there to be consultation with, and ownership by the communities, of those solutions ... and the strength returned to Aboriginal people".

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