



## "FORGOTTEN AUSTRALIANS" RESOLUTION 2004

### Introduction

The Senate Community Reference Committee Report of the Inquiry into Children in Institutional Care was tabled in Parliament on 30 August 2004. Entitled "Forgotten Australians", the report documents the experiences of children who were in institutional care. Individual and agency submissions were presented to the Senators over a two-year period. The inquiry focussed on the group not previously covered by the Inquiries into Immigrant Children and Aboriginal Children. UnitingCare Victoria and Tasmania made a formal submission to the inquiry and appeared before the Inquiry when it held hearings in Melbourne.

"Forgotten Australians" is relevant to both the Uniting Church and to its agencies, especially UnitingCare agencies responsible both in the past and now for the care of children in institutional and other out of home care settings. The following facilities were operated through the former Presbyterian and Methodist Churches in Victoria:

- Canterbury Family Centre;
- Copelen Street Child and Family Care (South Yarra);
- Dhurringile (Shepparton);
- Harrison House (Hawthorn);
- Kildonan (Canterbury);
- Kilmany Park (Sale);
- Presbyterian Mothers and Baby Home (North Fitzroy);
- Orana Peace Memorial Homes (Burwood);
- Tally Ho (Burwood);
- Wimmera UnitingCare (Horsham) and
- Wesley Youth Services

The report found that over 500,000 Australian children had experienced some form of institutional or out of home care in the last century. The committee was deeply affected by this inquiry, finding that the experiences of many children in care were distressing. There are accounts of physical, emotional and sexual abuse; neglect; humiliation; medical experimentation and deprivation of food and health care. The most harrowing and constant aspect was the frequent lack of love, affection and nurturing afforded to these children.

The committee established that these experiences have resulted in severe, complex and long-term impacts on the children and their families. These include a fundamental impairment of individuals' sense of trust and security, the stunting of personal development and the development of life skills and the undermining of the children's capacity to form and maintain stable and loving relationships. For many children their experiences have contributed to ongoing emotional and mental health problems as adults. These include anxiety and depression, a history of substance and alcohol abuse and greater risk of suicide. Many became involved in illegal practices - evident in the disproportionate percentage of care leavers in the prison population.

The report also documents some positive experiences and affirms the work of those committed staff who provided loving care. Nevertheless, the committee concluded that: "...there has been wide scale unsafe, improper and unlawful care of children, a failure of duty of care, and serious and repeated breaches of statutory obligations".

As a result of its findings the Committee has made 39 recommendations. This 2004 resolution of the Synod of Victoria and Tasmania responds to the major areas highlighted in the recommendations: acknowledgment and apology; access to records; counselling and support and the provision of quality services. Included also is an affirmation of the caring contribution



provided by faithful staff and the request for governments to respond to the "Forgotten Australians" recommendations.





**Resolution 04.4.4.5: Children in Institutional Care**

The Synod resolved:

To affirm the significance of the Senate Inquiry into Children in Institutional Care and the findings documented in its report "Forgotten Australians", and, in consequence:

(a) With regard to the past:

- (i) To acknowledge with sorrow that some children in our institutions experienced:
  - neglect of their social, emotional and physical needs;
  - physical violence, sexual, emotional or spiritual abuse perpetrated by staff who should have been trustworthy;
  - emotional and social trauma and on-going harm;and to apologise unreservedly to those children;
- (ii) To apologise unreservedly to the families of those who experienced abuse in our institutions for the trauma they experienced;
- (iii) To acknowledge those faithful staff who provided secure, safe and loving environments for children and young people in care.

(b) With regard to the present:

To request the Synod Commission for Mission:

- (i) To review current practice for handling abuse allegations and complaints within the Synod and agencies in order to develop a consistent and transparent process;
- (ii) To cooperate with the development of National or State registers of agency records of children in care;
- (iii) To facilitate access to any relevant, available records by individuals who may wish to obtain information regarding their stay in our facilities. Given the sensitive nature of this information, this material should be given in a way that provides support to the person seeking information. This process should also comply with the requirements of Privacy legislation;
- (iv) To ensure ongoing counselling and support services are available to victims of abuse in our institutions.

(c) With regard to Agencies:

To request its existing child, youth and family service agencies that provide/provided institutional or out-of-home care:

- (i) To issue their own statements, in consultation with UnitingCare Victoria and Tasmania, acknowledging the pain and suffering of some residents of their agency's services and expressing deep regret and sorrow that this has been their experience;
- (ii) To ensure best practice in facilitating client access to records and in the provision of support to those affected;
- (iii) To ensure high standards and clear procedures for the provision of quality out-of-home care services to children, young people and families.

(d) With regard to the Federal Government:

In the light of the evidence presented within the "Forgotten Australians" report and the recommendations made, to urge the Federal Government:

- (i) To issue a national statement of acknowledgment and apology;
- (ii) To consult with State Governments, Churches and Agencies regarding the establishment and management of a national reparation fund;
- (iii) To develop comprehensive and consistent national standards and accreditation processes for the provision of institutional or out-of-home care, which build on existing State standards and regulations.

(e) With regard to the Victorian Government:

In the light of the evidence presented within the "Forgotten Australians" report and the recommendations made, to urge the Victorian Government:

- (i) to issue a statement of acknowledgment and apology;
- (ii) to co-operate in the establishment of a national reparation fund; and
- (iii) to participate in the development of national standards for out-of-home care for children and young people.



## **Apology to the Australians who experienced harm in institutional or out of home care as children**

On behalf of the Uniting Church and our agencies, we apologise unreservedly for any physical, psychological or social harm that might have occurred.

We deeply regret that some children were let down while in the care of the Uniting Church and former Methodist, Presbyterian and Congregational Churches.

The recent Senate Inquiry into children in Institutional Care highlighted a number of cases where children suffered at the hands of caregivers.

The inquiry painted a disturbing picture of life for many young people who lived in Institutional Care. The Uniting Church through its agencies managed a number of these facilities and we accept that sadly some did not provide the love, nurturing and care that the children in them so rightly deserved.

The Inquiry highlighted the flaws in institutional care models and the need to ensure they are never repeated.

The Uniting Church, through our family and community services networks, has developed new models for providing care and services to children. The Church is committed to ensuring that children and families receive the best facilities and care possible and we are constantly working to improve them.

We are committed to ensuring that everybody involved in delivering service and care to children will work together so that the mistakes of the past are not repeated.

The Uniting Church welcomes the Inquiry and its recommendations that provide a basis on which Governments at all levels and care providers may move forward together by acknowledging past wrongs and addressing them appropriately. We are committed to working with government to respond to the issues raised during the Inquiry.

Rev Sue Gormann  
Moderator