

It's all sexual assault; a service response in the face of the clergy abuse crisis.

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In 2012 Ballarat CASA found itself in the position of needing to respond to a steady increase of new referrals for men aged in their forties and fifties. At that time, the Victorian Parliament Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse in Religious and other organizations began to reveal the extent of the abuse that had occurred, particularly in Catholic institutions in Ballarat. Both the print and television media throughout Australia had also been focusing on Ballarat and it could be argued that now the name, St Alipius, has become synonymous with the sexual abuse of many boys and the reports of over 45 suicides. Our experience and feminist analysis working with adult survivors, particularly with abuse within the family informed our responses as it clearly became evident, that the institution of the Catholic Church replicates the power, secrecy and structures of the family where traditionally most abuse occurs; where the victims are rendered powerless. This paper will explore these similarities and the structural factors that facilitated this abuse to occur and to continue to silence its' victims. We will also outline the evolving response that took place within our organization to provide appropriate support which has continued for those involved with the Australian Government Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse.

The general public interest and intense media coverage that has surrounded initially the Victorian Parliamentary Inquiry and now the Royal Commission is in stark contrast to the interest in or reporting of the abuse that occurs in families. Research published by the Australian Centre for the Study of Sexual Assault reports the following facts that 1 in 3 women and one in 5 men have been abused by the time they reach 18 and that 80% are more likely to have been abused by family members. While female children are more likely to be abused in the home, male children are more likely to be abused outside the home. More than 90% of female victims knew the perpetrator, and 80% of male victims and women were more likely to be abused by a family member (ACSSA, 2012).

Thomas Doyle, a Catholic priest who has been closely involved in 500 clergy sex abuse cases in countries such as US, UK, Ireland and Australia and Stephen Rubino note in their analysis of Catholic clergy sexual abuse “the focus has been on male victims, which is in line with data showing that most cases in the United states have involved clergy sexual contact with young adolescent male boys” (Doyle & Rubino, 2004, p.552). The numbers coming forward for the current Royal Commission support this finding with male survivors far outnumbering female survivors. (Commonwealth of Australia, 2014).

The Royal Commission’s 2014 Interim Report outlines the following findings, that;

- educational institutions were also commonly reported sites of abuse
- most of these were faith-based institutions, followed by government institutions.
- of the faith based institutions, 68% were catholic and 12% were Anglican

- while almost 9 in 10 perpetrators were reportedly male they were most likely to be members of the clergy or religious orders (Commonwealth Australia, 2014, pp.47,48).

These statistics emerging from the Royal Commission show a representation of survivors from the Catholic Church as being 6 times the number of survivors from other institutions.

David Marr, in his essay about the most senior Catholic in Australia, George Pell notes that when the tide changed against the religious in regard to being charged with sexual assaults in the late 1970's that, "while the religious came from all faiths...most, by far, were catholic" (Marr, 2013, p. 31). Marr (2014) goes on to quote;

Professor Patrick Parkinson of Sydney University, a lawyer and expert on child protection, told the Victorian Inquiry...if you compare the statistics, I would say conservatively that there is six times as much abuse in the Catholic Church as all the other Churches in Australia combined. Putting things in perspective, the Catholic Church is the largest Church, and it also had a great deal of involvement in school work and orphanages, children's homes and so on. Even still, the levels of the abuse in the Catholic Church are strikingly out of proportion with any other Church (p. 32).

It could be said that the Church was the cornerstone of Catholic family lives where church, family, school and community interconnected and this strong interplay is one of the things that has facilitated the abuse and created an environment where sexual abuse could be so prevalent. Ballarat was a particular example of this with Marr (2014) describing Ballarat as "tribal Catholic in a town where priests, nuns and brothers ruled the Catholic roost". (p. 9)

Sexual abuse within the church is certainly not a new or contemporary problem indeed Frieda Briggs (2010), highlights information that dates this phenomenon back 2000 years with harsh penalties cited for offenders. "Accused clergy were dealt with by church courts then handed to secular jurisdiction for further punishment. That did not stop the crimes" (p. 1). While celibacy does not cause sexual abuse, history indicates that the introduction of celibacy merely created a shroud of secrecy around the abuse. This is also supported by McAlinden (2006), who refers to this when examining familial and institutional grooming in the sexual abuse of children.

Briggs (2010) cites many instances where the abuse was reported and either dismissed or the offender moved to another area, adding;

The culture of 'blame the victim' evolved as priests became more powerful. The Code of Canon law 982 contained a canon stipulating that if victims confessed to being sexually abused by priests, the penitents were not to be absolved of sin until a retraction had been made and 'damages repaired'. This code did not suggest that the priests who coerced and blackmailed parishioners to provide sex should be punished (p. 1).

This *blame the victim* response is embedded in sexual abuse scenarios. Briggs (2010) also notes the occurrence of this when reports started to emerge in South Australia in recent times;

Such is the power of the church that when parents in Adelaide and rural Victoria reported priests and monks for sex offences against their sons, the families were ostracized by their Catholic communities and they, not the offenders, were deemed to have brought the church into disrepute (p.10).

As a practitioner I am very familiar with this scenario when a family member discloses sexual abuse and they become ostracized by family members.

While it can be said that the Catholic Church replicated the structure of the family in a patriarchal society it was also embedded in Catholic Families. The entwining of church, school and family life with the authority assigned to priests and brothers facilitated the ease with which offenders had easy access to their victims. As Briggs (2010) explains;

Naïve trusting parents have allowed priests to occupy the same room and even the same bed as their sons when they've had too much whisky. Parents were flattered when priests chose their children to be Altar boys. They were prouder still when their sons were chosen to accompany priests on outings to other parishes or have sleep-overs in seminaries (p. 5).

Briggs (2010) also notes,

While Roman Catholic, Anglican priests and Christian brothers used their authority to abuse children in state care and were often sadistic and violent, the protestants tended to have less power than Roman Catholics and were more likely to have to resort to the grooming methods (p.6).

Offenders groomed not only children but families as well as communities, as explained by Salter (2003);

Grooming behaviour as with the ultimate child victim is intended to make the guardians feel comfortable with the offender. This causes parents and others to drop their guard, allowing the sex offender easy and recurring access to their children (Mcalinden, 2006 p.348).

Briggs (2010) highlights further the difference for protestants in her discussion on Robert Brandenburg an Adelaide Anglicare worker who suicided in 1999,

...after being charged with offences against 26 boys, it was later estimated that he had abused and raped more than 200 boys aged from 7 – 15 years...(and)gained everyone's trust. He asked parent's permission to take groups to football matches. Some parents were suspicious about a single man spending all his time with boys instead of adults" and would ask if everything was alright when they returned home (p. 6).

This is in contrast to catholic priests and brothers who had taken a celibacy vow. The belief by parishioners in this 'magical celibacy' vow removed them from suspicion and further facilitated open access. Celibacy is not the cause of the offence; it is just a cover for offenders who seek easy access to children. Indeed, research indicates that priests have never been celibant however as long as they were not married and were upholding this magical 'ideal' - they were seen to be in a higher position and had unfettered access to unaccompanied children (Marr, 2013, Briggs, 2010) Marr (2013) notes, "the Church has always understood that priests and the vow of celibacy is almost impossible to honour. The deal was that their failings would be forgiven so long as the sanctifying fiction of celibacy was maintained" (p. 87) This view is supported by Benkert and Doyle (2009) "Mandatory celibacy has served to reinforce this mystique that Catholic priests are somehow removed and above other people especially the Catholic laity and their power over sexuality" (p. 228).

The single sex schools the Catholic Church has presided over are underpinned by the values of patriarchy which give more value to the male child. This gives the promise to parishioners that their sons could also achieve this elite status reserved for males in the Catholic religion when in

actual fact it put the boys in a more vulnerable position and supported a culture of separateness and silence. Writing about one such school, Marr (2013) adds;

There were 45 kids in that classroom and he must have tried everyone. Green was sure the staff at St.Patrick's knew about Dowlan. He told me: "All the boys talked about what was going on. I was only 12 years old and it was as plain as the nose on my face. How adults couldn't figure it out was beyond me (p. 19).

Gardner (2011) in discussing these issues writes, "Churches tend to mirror aspects of family life and relationships so the abusive possibilities of one may be replicated in another" (p.99). The starting point for understanding the psychodynamics of child sexual abuse are those of power and control. (Gardener, 2011). *I suggest that these dynamics of secrecy and deception in the institutional church result from a similar desire for power and control.*

Working with survivors of child abuse within the family context has been the core of CASA's work, in particular women who experienced abuse as children within the family home from fathers, brothers, stepfathers, uncles, grandfathers and cousins. (In order of prevalence from Ballarat CASA's statistics). Briggs (2013) cites patterns followed by clergy offenders; however I would say that many of these can also be recognised in intrafamilial abuse within a patriarchal society where Solomon (1992) describes, "male dominance is structured into the organization of society, including the family." (p. 478).

The following are the patterns that Briggs (2013) cites – (writer's comments in italics)

- "The priest is perceived as God's representative on earth which places him in a uniquely powerful position, causing immense fear and confusion for the victim" (Briggs, 2013, p5).

(In a patriarchal society while the father is not seen as God's representative he is seen as "Head of the family" and treated as such by other institutions and members of the society. The Catholic priest is also referred to as Father "which has symbolic meaning for describing the priest's role in the community" (Folger, Shipherd, Rowe, Jensen, Clarke 2008 p. 306).

- "The child is powerless and under tremendous pressure to keep the abuse secret" (Briggs, 2010. p.5).
(Children by their very nature, size and position in society are powerless and dependent on the family for survival. With the father the head of this institution there is the threat of annihilation of the family and the hurt potentially administered to other innocent family members).
- "The child gains the impression that the abuse is his or her own fault and/he is bad" (Briggs, 2010, p5).
(Not only a common perception for children who are ego-centric and perceive the cause of anything bad that happens as themselves but a common perception of most victim/survivors regardless of age which is reinforced by society and the 'blame the victim' attitude).
- When abuse has been revealed to church administrators, their response has seldom been responsible and sensitive to victims" (Briggs, 2010, p5).
(Part of CASA's role traditionally has been to be a support and advocate for victim/survivors who disclose sexual assault. Historically they have not been believed by social institutions, their families or the courts).
- "The parent's trust in the Bishop makes way for manipulation, intimidation and even deceit leading to further damage of children" (Briggs, 2010, p5).
(In a patriarchal society women are dependent on the male and are also powerless).

- “A community that is uninformed about child sex abuse supports offending clergy and church leaders and denigrates victims” (Briggs, 2010, p5).

(Just as an uninformed community supports sexual abuse in any sphere of society).

It is my experience from clinical practice that the horrendous effects of the trauma suffered from a father figure or a priest can be similar. Doyle and Rubino (2004) refer to Lothstein as having “extensive experience in treating clergy abuse victims” and note his claims of “unique damage caused by priest-perpetrators as opposed to other religious perpetrators....And what you hear from victims.....is that they feel their soul has been murdered.” (Lothstein in Doyle and Rubino, 2004, p.606). This phrase is very familiar to me as a counsellor of sexual abuse survivors. The trauma symptoms that Doyle and Rubino (2004) then go on to describe for clergy sexual abuse victims are the same for other sexual abuse survivors – trauma blocking and shame. They state;

Clergy sexual abuse victims respond to trauma in predictable ways.....trauma blocking is the attempt to numb, block or eliminate the pain. Trauma shame emerges from the breach of trust and results in feelings that one is flawed or defective (p. 606).

This is not to say one is more or less than the other rather I wish to note the commonality of the trauma symptoms. One doesn't need to be particularly religious to believe in the soul. In a patriarchal society fathers are held in high esteem. Priests in the Catholic Church also referred to as 'Father' are also held in high esteem. This view of high esteem is incongruent with child sexual abuse. “Therefore the latter reality is downplayed and the troublesome reality projected onto the messenger of the unwanted information” (Gardener, 2011, p. 202). This results in the classic victim *blaming* which is the common dynamic played out in our society and the

courts when sexual abuse is disclosed which ultimately protects the perpetrator.

This historical overview I have presented takes a feminist perspective on the causes of sexual abuse in our community as well as institutions such as the Catholic Church. It is our feminist analysis that has influenced the response to the crisis within our community that has unfolded, in particular abuse within the Catholic Church.

Working with men

Counselling men, who have experienced childhood sexual abuse, both reveals and seeks to ameliorate a lifetime of isolation. The majority of the papers and books, written since the 1980's about the impact of child sexual abuse on adults, have focused on the effects for women, adding to the assumption that abuse of boys is rare (Gartner, 1999). Yet the authors, both experienced sexual assault counsellors and others working in this field, have a different awareness; (that) one in six boys experience some form of sexual assault prior to the age of eighteen (Gartner, 1999. Lew, 2010., Victorian Centers Against Sexual Assault, 2008., Fergusson and Mullen, 1999). Added to this is the imposition of gender expectations, (the myth of maleness), where the awareness for young boys that one day he will 'be a man' (Cochran, 1976), silences, as it does not allow for any signs of weakness or being seen as a 'victim'. Wexler (2013) terms this "shame-o-phobia – adding that "men who have experienced toxic doses of shame early in life will do anything to avoid reexperiencing it later" (p.18). Mike Lew, a world leader in working with male sexual abuse survivors, observed;

"the bloke culture of Australian machismo keeps many boys and men silent about abuse they have suffered" (Lew, 2010: xviii).

The long term effects for men abused as children are similar to the effects for women, though it could be said there are differences. These

differences stem from the isolation and shame and the culturally defined attitudes about sexuality including the negative impact of homophobia (Gartner, 1999). In his work "*Victims no longer*", Lew (2010) lists the following long term effects of male child sexual abuse - shame; self blame; embarrassment; fear of being vulnerable; the need to appear strong; trust issues; sexuality issues; relationship problems; fear and discomfort around other men; difficulty in talking about feelings; difficulty expressing feelings and isolation, that many men experience (Lew, 2010). Gartner (1999) also describes similar effects, though emphasizes; "situations involving trust, sexuality, intimacy, power and authority" (pg320) as being problematic for abused men. The added burden of the male gender definitions in society seems to prevent them from expressing themselves, and in particular create difficulties in interpersonal relationships (Hetzel, Barton, Davenport, 1994). One of the most powerful methods for breaking down these interpersonal difficulties is through group counselling (Thomas, Nelson & Summers, 1994).

A local response

In 2012 the Ballarat CASA saw a steady increase in the number of referrals for males coinciding with the Victorian Parliamentary Enquiry into Child Sexual Abuse in Religious and Other Organizations. The increase in the reporting in the media frequently focused on Ballarat, (McKenzie, Baker & Lee, 2012) and was also a catalyst for men seeking help and assistance. Most of them were in their 40's, 50's and 60's often speaking about their abuse for the first time in their lives. Up to this time, Ballarat CASA's male clients represented approximately 20% of the cases.

Victorian CASA's have traditionally provided services for men who have experienced sexual abuse, who have not become sexual abusers themselves. As an attempt to break down the aforementioned isolation, the author at Ballarat CASA formed a men's therapy group in 2012. In researching and preparing for the group, it quickly became clear that most of the literature

was written by men who traditionally facilitated men's groups, or with a male/female co facilitator model – to give an opportunity to model appropriate interaction between the genders. After all the research I did find myself wondering if the lack of literature about women running men's group possibly was about the fear of actually doing it! With an all female staff at the Centre there were no male facilitators to draw on. It was also especially important to hold a feminist analysis as the facilitator. A feminist analysis within group work provides the insight into the role that gender and power plays in men's lives (Pease, 2003). Mike Lew also supports this, stating "I believe that men recovering from boyhood sexual abuse have no greater ally than the feminist movement" (Lew, 2010. p 36). This semi structured group ran for approximately eight months, with an initial number of six participants. At the end of the year, the decision was made to finalise the group, by that stage some of the men had formed friendships, and one was particularly interested in having a follow up group the next year.

Whilst this group was running, Ballarat was also becoming a centre of media focus, as the Victorian Parliamentary Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse in Religious and Other Organizations highlighted the significant numbers of boys sexually abused in Catholic schools in Ballarat. This included the reports of at least 45 confirmed suicides related to St Alipius and many other premature deaths. It is important to note, that in 1971, all five of the male teaching staff in St Alipius have had allegations of perpetrating sexual abuse against children. After the suicide of one man, one of the survivors of this abuse, took it upon himself to contact other survivors in the area, as he says, he was determined that there would be no more suicides in Ballarat. Some of those contacted formed a group that would meet occasionally to provide peer support. They also, with the support of a compassionate lawyer developed a group submission that represented the combined stories, with the names of approximately 46 people represented on the submission. Some people were willing to have their names published, but there were many more that were represented by a number, not ready to have their stories

made public. This submission was later presented to a public hearing of the Victorian Enquiry, in Ballarat, where some of them were able to tell their stories to the committee, the media and the audience.

In rural communities, connections are often made via word of mouth, and eventually the survivor, who was the instigator of the support network made contact with one of the authors. The frequent contact from other survivors who wanted to tell someone about their abuse, often led to this man feeling overwhelmed and burnt out, so the opportunity to pass these names on to someone he trusted came with relief (a year later he told the writer that he had spent a year checking the writer and CASA out – as he had no intention of referring people to a service that could cause more harm). This connection eventually evolved into a referral pathway; he would get a call, he would either tell the person to contact 'Andrea' at CASA or would get their consent and email the writer the person's details and the author would call them back. In retrospect this was successful as we as an agency stepped out of our normal referral process and placed a particular identity at the referral site (rather than the Intake worker of the day). This created a sense of safety and trust, making it easier for men who had remained silent about their abuse for 30, 40, 50 years to make contact and seek support.

Ballarat CASA had an intake process which involved contact through the intake (duty) worker, details being gathered, case priority identified and cases allocated according to need. The experience within the agency had shown that when men call to request counseling and support, they often withdraw if they have to wait for a service. Though there isn't any research to be found around this phenomenon, it became quickly obvious that the service needed to prioritize these referrals. As a service a decision was made to give Royal Commission clients in particular an immediate service, rather than wait. Anecdotally this proved an effective response as so many men reported that, if after being triggered or overwhelmed by the media reports that if they had to wait, they would have given up and just pushed it down

again. Within the service this decision caused minor discomfort as; being a traditional feminist agency, it was felt by some of the counselors in the team that we were treating men as being more important than the female clients.

Over this period the authors counselling and advocacy role expanded to assisting people in writing their Submissions. This included in one instance digitally filming a survivor's submission and providing support for a number of them when giving their verbal submissions. These processes of referral and support further came to the forefront in response to the new Royal Commission process.

On 12th November 2013 the Prime Minister Julia Gillard announced at a meeting of Federal Cabinet the establishment of the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse. With this announcement, coming on the tail end of the Victorian Enquiry and with information from that enquiry being passed on to the Royal Commission, again Ballarat CASA, found itself at the center of media attention. Already during 2013, David Marr's essay about the Ballarat born and bred Senior Catholic, Cardinal George Pell, "*The Prince, faith, abuse and George Pell*", had been published in the Quarterly Essay. In this essay Marr (2013) described one of most dangerous places in Australia for children in 1973 as being "that corner of Ballarat, St Alipius" (p9).

With a core group of men already involved in these processes, such as counselling or the submission and with the numbers of men seeking support steadily growing, again the need for group support became a sense of urgency.

In August 2013, Ballarat CASA commenced a fortnightly men's support group. Invitations and information was disseminated through letters posted to GP's, and other support agencies and via the email network of one of the leaders of the Ballarat survivors group. The two authors were the co-

facilitators. Initial planning evolved into developing strategic approaches for a semi structured group that allowed time for structure when current issues such as the Royal Commission, media articles, and court cases clearly would be impacting on people and needed to be explored. The group would be an open group, allowing for new people to join (again being aware of the steady influx of new referrals). To break the ice we began with pizza, sat around a table, encouraged open participation whilst encouraging choices about participation. Initial discussion about the group rules were minimal – including confidentiality, respecting others rights, no comparing, leave when you want/need to. With an initial intake of twelve men, the fortnightly meetings became a place of safety and support. (One of the men came along with his friend one evening. He said after he had found himself talking throughout the night, about his experiences in an honest and open way, that he had intended not to say anything, and it was the first time he had ever felt safe enough to be able to talk to strangers without being alcohol affected).

Since commencing the group, we had a break at Christmas time. Most of them returned for the next year. The group member who had arrived thinking he would say nothing reports the group as being something he doesn't want to miss. We have had new members come into the group as it has evolved into a space that is accepting and welcoming. One man, after his first night as a new member, specifically wanted to feedback to the authors that it was the first time in his fifty years that he didn't feel isolated, that he left the group feeling peaceful and that as he listened to the other men's stories he felt like he wasn't the only member of the 'freak show'. He added he wanted to hug the women running the group and say thank you for having the foresight to run the group (permission of the group members has been granted to refer to these comments). It has become clear over the time that these men needed a space to share and talk and not feel judged. Some of the evenings have involved a theme for discussion which highlighted the similarities they share again, breaking down the isolation.

Postscript

We are still in the middle of this response and there is still so much more yet to unfold. It is precisely because of how we work with sexual assault survivors – that we don't own the process, and walk along with our clients, that the group keeps evolving.

It has grown roots, more than twelve men, forming a bond with each other. New people have come into the group, and they are supported, welcomed and accepted from the moment they walk in the door. We have introduced two new 'helpers/facilitators' for occasions when we have other commitments, or are on leave. They tolerate those changes and the newcomers quickly become part of the group. One man, abused within a family context, approached us asking to join the group, whilst the focus began with the Royal Commission – our view that *it is all sexual assault*, enabled him to quickly fit in, and he is not seen any differently. We see that this is because the group has developed a sense of strength and identity – they now call themselves the "BSG" (the Ballarat survivors group) – we joke about them needing to buy caps or t-shirts, with the name BSG, but really it is not such a strange idea. At least they are shifting the sense of identity of not belonging; of being a 'dud'; being loaded down with a weight of shame. These are people who have never felt a sense of belonging to anything before. One man, an aboriginal man who was raised in orphanages, said one night, in the room full of 'white men' – "this is the first time I've ever felt I belonged."

The 'BSG' has provided input into two written submissions to the Royal Commission. They have a planned "group night" with the Royal Commission in September, an informal meeting where they can put names to the faces and share some concerns with the commissioners. We have no doubt that there will continue to be more to write about.

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