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STATEMENT FROM BISHOP WILLIAM MORRIS DD

10 December 2009

The allegations of sexual abuse of children by a former teacher at a school within the Diocese of Toowoomba are shocking and tragic.

Parents and the entire Diocese place a great deal of trust in teachers to care for children under their supervision. The matters which are the subject of the allegations involve a complete betrayal of that trust.

As leader of the Diocese, I take this opportunity to offer a sincere apology for any abuse suffered by children while under the care of the Diocese.

In seeking to determine further appropriate action I have two main references. The first is a review of all available documentation and the interviewing of staff. The second is the summary hearing of the prosecution of the school's Principal which took place in the Toowoomba Magistrates Court on 16 November 2009. Judgement was delivered in this matter on 1 December 2009. The Principal was found not guilty of failing to provide a written report to police pursuant to the *Education (General Provisions) Act 2006* and the charge was dismissed.

While I chose to take intermediary disciplinary action in September 2009, which included the continuation of the suspension of the Principal originally effected in February 2009 and the instigation of important changes to the roles of the two Senior Education Officers involved in handling the matter, the conclusion of the Principal's prosecution now allows me to act without risk of prejudicing those court proceedings.

Before I communicate my decisions I wish to reiterate a statement I made in September 2009 which may have been misinterpreted by some. It was my view then, and it remains my view, that the school and Toowoomba Catholic Education Office staff acted in good faith and there was no deliberate attempt to protect themselves, the school or any teacher in responding to the information received in September 2007. I have never stated that I "cleared staff".

Based on the material available to me, the staff involved, including staff from the Toowoomba Catholic Education Office, exercised very poor judgement and made a number of significant errors in process. However, I do not believe they acted to wilfully or deliberately protect the alleged

perpetrator. My internal investigation concluded that in responding to the information in September 2007 the staff acted in good faith. They did not seek to cover up or resile from dealing with the information.

However, it remains my view that the staff involved made serious and unacceptable errors of judgement. They failed to respond appropriately to the information received – from documenting the concerns to actioning and responding to them. They had an obligation to do everything necessary to ensure that the protection of children in their care remained paramount. They failed in that duty.

I have today terminated the employment of the three employees involved in responding to the information received about the alleged offending teacher in September 2007, namely the school Principal and two Senior Education Officers from the Toowoomba Catholic Education Office.

I now wish to address the position of these three professionals and outline the reasons behind my decision:

1. The school Principal

- During the hearing before Acting Magistrate Stjernqvist on 16 November 2009, the Principal admitted that:
 - the information provided to him by a parent and child at his school gave rise to a reasonable suspicion of alleged sexual abuse;
 - he suspected sexual abuse following receipt of the information and that the information contained allegations which were potentially of a sexual nature.
- The Principal's admission during the hearing that he suspected sexual abuse came as a great shock to me and one which has caused me considerable distress and anguish. Rightly or wrongly this was not a suspicion shared at the time by the school's Student Protection Contact or the two Senior Education Officers involved in the matter.
- Whilst the Principal reported the information to the Senior Education Officers, I do not consider, in light of his suspicion of sexual abuse, that he fulfilled his duty. His actions show a clear lack of understanding of the expected level of behaviour of a Principal in whom I reposed a high level of trust.
- Despite his suspicion of sexual abuse, the Principal did not remove the teacher from his position as one of the school's two Student Protection Contacts.
- Significantly, although the Principal has now admitted a suspicion of sexual abuse, following the resignation of the teacher in June 2008, he sought approval from the Assistant Director of the Toowoomba Catholic Education Office for the teacher to work as a relief teacher. In doing so, he failed to bring the information concerning the teacher's alleged former conduct to the Assistant Director's attention.
- The Principal's conduct compromised student safety by allowing and facilitating the teacher's return to the school as a relief teacher following the teacher's resignation in June 2008.

- The Principal participated in a public farewell for the teacher after his resignation, despite having been in receipt of information which, by his own admission, gave rise to a reasonable suspicion of abuse.

2. *The two Senior Education Officers involved*

- Firstly, I wish to acknowledge that the two Senior Education Officers involved have stated that:
 - in assessing the appropriate response to the information they were given, they relied on what was presented to them by the Principal. They say they did not receive or sight a copy of the school's Student Protection Contact's typed record of the meeting with the parent and child on 6 September 2007 until after the teacher's arrest in November 2008;
 - at no time prior to the teacher's arrest did they suspect he had sexually abused students at the school.

Notwithstanding their statements of belief, I am satisfied that they were aware of information provided by the Principal, either orally or through email correspondence, regarding alleged conduct by the teacher which should have given rise to a reasonable suspicion of sexual abuse and should have been immediately reported to the police and to the Assistant Director or Director of the Toowoomba Catholic Education Office.

- The Senior Education Officers wrongly treated the issue as a disciplinary matter of a non-sexual nature and one of professional misconduct which was inadequate in the circumstances and showed a poor understanding of appropriate risk management practices.
- The Senior Education Officers failed to recognise that the information received should have triggered statutory and Diocesan mandatory police reporting requirements.
- The advice and guidance provided by both Senior Education Officers to the Principal compromised student safety and contributed to the teacher remaining in the active employ of the Diocese.
- Both Senior Education Officers failed to comply with Diocesan policy by not reporting the matter to either the Assistant Director School and Staff Development or the Director of the Toowoomba Catholic Education Office which amounted to a serious neglect of duty.

In line with my zero tolerance policy and unequivocal commitment to the highest standards of child protection, I have acted to terminate the employment of these three employees.

I have also met with the Director of the Catholic Education Office, John Borserio, to direct him to maintain the highest priority on improving the policies, procedures and training in cooperation with the regulatory authorities as we must learn from the very serious errors that have occurred and do everything possible to prevent a reoccurrence.

I am deeply saddened and distressed by the allegations and the failure of staff to deal with the allegations appropriately. These events strike at the heart of our Church's mission and values.

Unfortunately, I cannot reverse what has happened. However, I am committed to doing everything in my power to ensure events such as these never happen again.

In closing, I reiterate that the children and their families affected by the allegations remain my highest priority. Please know that I am fully aware of the trust and responsibility which you placed in our schools and how, on this occasion, we have so terribly failed to live up to that trust.

Yours in Christ

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "W Morris". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "W" and a long, sweeping tail.

Bishop W Morris DD