



Photo by Peter Stoop, Newcastle Herald



# Facing the past Shaping a healthy future

## **BISHOP GREG THOMPSON**

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I have been learning about abuse in the Diocese for some time, at one level through the media reports over the years and now first hand with survivors, their stories and our responses as a church over the last 60 years. I want people to know that the Diocese and I are taking the matters of historic abuse seriously.

A released video presentation with apology was upon the milestone of 500 days since I became Bishop. This was an appropriate date to focus upon the important work that is underway. Working closely with police in their investigations, I informed them of my decision to make this announcement and invite victims and survivors of abuse to come forward. They support these actions. The Police, the Royal Commission and the wider community are looking at us to see if we are serious about protecting children, youth and vulnerable people, and addressing our life.

You will recall at the Diocesan Conference 2014 and at Clergy meetings (when I gave you feedback about the regional listening meetings I held with parish communities over five months last year), I expressed at that time surprise with how little we talked about the experience of abuse in the Diocese and when we did our conversation focused on support for those who offended and not on the victims and survivors.

I want people to join with me in changing this culture. I desire the church to be a community that is not only a spectator on these matters but participants in shaping a healthy future.

Since the public apology I have received many emails, letters and a number of parish petitions which indicate that people want to stand with me about how we address the past and how we work for a life giving future.

If we are to face our past, the victims and survivors must tell their stories. To help this happen we have established a website [newcastleanglicanhealthyfuture.com](http://newcastleanglicanhealthyfuture.com) which provides direct links to the Police, Royal Commission and our professional standards office as well as other information.

There will be some who regard the historic abuse as history, "hanging out the dirty washing" and we all need to "move on". Yet the weight of history tells us that with a blindfold over our eyes we never learn – "hear no evil, speak no evil, see no evil".

One of the most significant things we have learnt about those who have experienced abuse is that it takes courage to speak about their experience and it is easy to be put off. We can communicate disbelief and disinterest so easily. This has to change. When people come forward to share their stories; they must be believed and supported. This begins in all the places where we worship and where we meet as Christian people. People will test you out to see if they can trust you. They will look to see if you believe them. They will look to you for support.

However, our facing the past (which includes victims and survivors speaking) is also an invitation for others to speak who have knowledge of or have suspicions of abuse. They too must come forward and tell their stories.

As part of the wider community and the Anglican Diocese, we must be prepared for more revelations of anguish as Police continue their investigations and the Royal Commission examines our responses to abuse when that abuse came to our attention.

I know that in the past we failed many victims and survivors of sexual abuse. Not only did we not support them when they came forward but we fostered a culture that intimidated them and kept them silent. Such bullying must end. If people feel entitled to bully the Bishop at present I know they feel entitled to this behaviour in our parishes over diverse grievances. Such a culture seeks to oppose matters coming into the light.

Predatory behaviour does not simply emerge because of individuals predisposed to criminal behaviour. It emerges when people who witness this behaviour feel unable to speak of it for fear of consequences. It emerges when people's loyalties to their friends are greater than their love of God or those who suffer. Healthy change will involve people with the practices of effective listening with compassion not fear or cynicism towards those who bear burdens.

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**"As a father, friend and fellow human being, I have been devastated by the accounts of abuse. I am so sorry for the terrible harm done by individuals and by a culture that would not listen and was fearful of consequences in bringing these matters to police."**

We must accept this part of our past if we are to shape a healthy future for our Diocese. The symbol of a tree half in shadow and half growing into the light speaks of what we are about today - leaning or growing into the light.

The failures in the church have been terrible and this is the shadow we face. Through the Royal Commission, we are learning that other parts of society also failed.

One of my memories of growing up in the Hunter was the storm clouds bringing summer rain in a heat wave. As soon as you saw them, you knew there would be a wild and windy time. You also knew that the much needed rain would bring relief, cleanse and bring life out of the ground. You could tell it was on its way by the smell of the rain in the air. The storm clouds while sometimes scary were good news for a parched land.

With a recent Sunday gospel reading from Mark 4:35-41 we read of Jesus and the disciples caught in a storm. The reality for most victims and survivors of abuse is that they have known a storm for some time. The actions within the church may have caused the storm and failed to speak the words of the Risen Christ as the storm raged. As a church right now we are feeling something of the storm. The wind and the waves are crashing in. I am confident that by facing the past and shaping a healthy future we are echoing Jesus' words to the storm, wind and rain - "Peace! Be still!" The work of attending to our culture and practices to bring healing and hope is ahead of us. Our companionship with those who have suffered brings calm.

This coming Diocesan Convention on Saturday August 15 we will hear of practices for shaping a healthy future. The invitation is there as a whole church to be participants in a way forward.

If we are serious about being the light of the Risen Christ in the world we will not tolerate harm and injustice; we will not ignore those who suffer. I am asking you to join with me. As we do this work together the storm will cease for others and it will cease for us as the peace, hope and light of Christ abounds.

+Gregory

