

Letter to Australasian Overseers

Aug 30

WNGS Note: This post shares correspondence from a group of concerned friends to overseers and workers. It is directly supported by 175 people (names at the bottom).

28th August, 2023.

Dear Friends in Australia and New Zealand,

We are writing to you today to share a response that we have provided to our overseers signed by a collective group of concerned friends. This is in regard to the overseers letter of the 18th August, 2023, to inform us of the new advisory group. We are forwarding a copy for your viewing to open dialogue with the ministry and the advisory group. This will help inform the process and we encourage you to communicate any concerns and feedback you may have to our overseers. Being made aware of the questions asked will help you know what has already been raised, to avoid inundating the advisory group with duplications. We would also like to inform you of multiple online resources relating to the current crisis within our fellowship of child sexual abuse and sexual abuse. These platforms are invaluable resources that help us to keep informed and connected.

Concerned and Connected Friends - Australia/New Zealand Chat

(<https://connected~and-concerned-friends.mn.co/spaces/11570094/chat>)

This is an online platform that has been set up for concerned and connected friends all over the world. Within this platform, there is an Australian/New Zealand chat group that we can all use to connect on issues of concern for us. Within this group, we are beginning to develop further ways we can connect through zoom meetings and sharing of resources. We are also looking at ways to provide more education and information. Please join us there if you would like more support during these extremely difficult times.

The Brave Truth Australia - Webpage and Hotline

<https://thebravetruthaustralia.com/>

For more information on the Australian context of child sexual abuse and sexual abuse within our fellowship, this is a helpful resource. On this page, you will find a confidential hotline number where you can report. This does not take the place of formal police reporting but is focussed on accountability and exposure of perpetrators. There is also a private Facebook page available for online connection. Important note on this website is: **If you have information which involves current sexual abuse of a minor you will need to immediately report this information to the relevant authorities in your State or call CrimeStoppers -1800 333 000.**

Wings for Truth - Webpage

<https://wingsfortruth.info/>

WINGS has been advocating for victims/survivors within our fellowship for 15 years and they continue to provide information, support and guidance as we address this grave concern. There is updated and historical information from around the world that will help you to understand the enormity of what we are currently facing.

Advocates for the Truth - Webpage and Hotline

<https://www.advocatesforthetruth.com/>

Since the news was first communicated in regard to allegations of sexual misconduct against late senior worker (overseer) Dean Bruer and the subsequent exposure of child sexual abuse within our fellowship, Cynthia, Sheri and Lauren have been working hard to advocate and give voice and protection to victim/survivors within our fellowship. They also have a hotline you can contact for International and Australian/New Zealand cases of child sexual abuse as well as information on current open and active cases. You can donate on their page to help provide support for investigative and legal expenses, as well as victim therapy.

We are grateful for the effort people are putting in to provide so much support, care and compassion for victims/survivors and our fellowship. There are two concerns that unite us all and that is healing from the past and the safety of our children for the future. Please use these resources available to you as we work prayerfully together towards positive change. Also, we repeat the information provided by the overseers letter regarding support available in Australia and New Zealand.

Australia: <https://www.childsafety.gov.au/> or 24/7 support on 1800 737 732.

New Zealand: <https://www.kidshealth.org.nz/listing-information-support-resources-child-abuse> or 24/7 support on 0508 26 459.

Please look after yourselves and we look forward to seeing you within the chat group of the Concerned and Connected Friends where we can join together in edification and support. Reach out to the communities you feel comfortable in that can support you as you process your individual experiences.

Yours in gratitude,

Concerned and Connected Friends of Australia and New Zealand

Enc. Letter sent to overseers for attention of the advisory group, with signatures

28th August, 2023

Dear Malcolm, Graeme, Wayne, Trevor, Alan Mitchell and Alan Richardson,

We would like to acknowledge your letter of the 18th August, 2023, communicating with the friends and workers in Australia and New Zealand, the work you are undertaking in response to the church's concerns of prevention of child sexual abuse within our fellowship. In the interest of transparency, working openly and your invitation for all of us to support each other throughout this process, we write this letter in reply. We have drafted a letter to the friends and workers of Australia and New Zealand and will be attaching a copy of this letter for their viewing. We also welcome you to share this information widely. This will open up dialogue to ensure that the measures being put in place have input from all stakeholders and in accordance with standard two and three of the Child Safe Standards of the Royal Commission undertaken in Australia (Commonwealth of Australia, 2017).

"Standard 2 - Children participate in decisions affecting them and are taken seriously.

a) Children are able to express their views and are provided opportunities to participate in decisions that affect their lives.

b) The importance of friendships is recognised and support from peers is encouraged, helping children feel safe and be less isolated.

c) Children can access sexual abuse prevention programs and information.

d) Staff and volunteers are attuned to signs of harm and facilitate child-friendly ways for children to communicate and raise their concerns.

Standard 3 - Families and communities are informed and involved.

a) Families have the primary responsibility for the upbringing and development of their child and participate in decisions affecting their child.

b) The institution engages in open, two-way communication with families and communities about its child safety approach and relevant information is accessible.

c) Families and communities have a say in the institution's policies and practices.

d) Families and communities are informed about the institution's operations and governance."

At a recent meeting of concerned friends, a discussion was held regarding your letter of the 18th August, 2023, and we would like to present you with some feedback to help inform the advisory group. We hope they will be able to address some of our concerns and that our questions will help them in future decisions. In the absence of a direct contact on the advisory board, we are communicating in this way in the hope that everyone is informed. **For future communication, we request a direct email to the advisory group.** It has been noted that some survivors do not feel comfortable to go to workers due to past traumatic experiences and would not feel comfortable with information being filtered through senior workers.

While your focus is the protection of children and victim-survivors, it seems that we cannot ignore other members in our fellowship that will take on a significant amount of risk due to the roles they have. Risk assessments for these contexts need to be worked on transparently, as a matter of urgency. For example, our convention owners and families who have fellowship meetings in their home. How can we assure them that they are protected from risk? How will they be involved in this process? Are there contingencies in place such as appropriate insurance cover? Will visiting workers from overseas hold the relevant child safety checks that are equivalent to our Working With Children Checks (WWCC)? There is a duty to consider this aspect of our fellowship. **It raises the question if conventions and fellowship meetings should continue in the immediate future until appropriate safeguards have been put in place.**

Further concerns and questions have been raised and we would like to summarise them for you:

1. Your letter expresses a desire to be open and transparent and highlights that the members of the advisory committee wish to remain anonymous. While we understand the need for victim- survivors to be respected in this process, these two points appear to contradict each other. Also, you mention that the group will need support of each one of us as they progress. How can we offer this support throughout the process if there is no direct line of communication?
2. In relation to your point of 'consultation and engagement will be needed from time to time' - there is a view that this consultation should occur right from the start. How does the advisory group confidently report on the effect of CSA in the fellowship if they do not ask for survivor stories from the beginning? How can they quantify the effect without substantial knowledge?
3. Further to quantifying 'effect', how is that measured? Are they measuring the mental trauma or the financial cost of after care? Are they counting families or individuals? Are they counting historical cases where the predator/perpetrator has died?
4. What is their scope when completing risk assessments? Given the complexity, it would be advisable that these risk assessments be conducted by a third party to avoid any conflict of interest or legal ramifications.
5. Who formed this group, when was it formed and who decided who should be part of this advisory group? Was there a transparent, democratic process in its development?
6. If the advisory group members do not offer the facility to engage with the wider community, how can stakeholders have input in the process if they are only communicated with when the advisory group deems it necessary? You may view it as avoiding external pressures or distraction but from our perspective, it is in contradiction with the Child Safe Standards - 'families and communities have a say in the institution's policies and practices.' What process will be provided for collaboration?
7. Thank you for providing us with the breakdown of the group. We would also like clarification of demographics of the group. For example, how many are from New Zealand and each state of Australia? Are all contexts being taken into consideration? It would be advantageous to have a separate advisory group for New Zealand that is in communication with the Australian advisory group, considering there would be a possible difference in laws. It also establishes local support for victims and accountability of the ministry in this region.

8. Will there be accommodation within future planning to ensure these groups are victim centred and will there be opportunity for listening groups/collaboration with the wider community?
9. You highlight that all members of the advisory group have relevant clearances and training. However, these clearances do not assure other victim-survivors that the current members have not covered up abuse within the fellowship in the past. With this lack of transparency, it is difficult to develop trust in the process.
10. How long a term are members of the advisory group volunteering for? Will there be a rotation of people on the group to share the load long term? An advisory group will be needed indefinitely considering the scope of abuse and there is a need for it to include elements of advocacy. It would seem that it is not a 'one and done' scenario.
11. The advisory board is to advise the ministry and has expressed a desire to act impartially. How can this process be impartial if there are workers on an advisory group that are advising the workers? This appears to be a conflict of interest. Also, as overseers, you have knowledge of who these members are but the community you serve does not. You have an advantage of being able to communicate with them that we do not have. This does not promote impartiality.
12. Further to the topic of impartiality, there is a concern that an advisory group, while coming from a range of professions and experiences, cannot remain unbiased due to their connection with the fellowship.
13. We were made aware that the advisory group is going to use publicly accessible material to inform their risk assessments and guidelines. Will an independent lawyer be engaged to ensure that they are sound and rigorous enough to align with current Australian and New Zealand legal standards? Once again, the engagement of a third-party is needed.
14. How is 'zero tolerance' of harming of children defined by your ministry? We are aware of a number of people still in our fellowship meetings that have allegations and convictions. When will your 'zero tolerance' be followed through?
15. How will our fellowship be made aware of the advice given by the advisory group? What accountability procedures will be put in place? How will we

know that the advice being given has been informed by the law and stakeholders and implemented to fidelity by the ministry?

16. You have acknowledged in your letter that the scope of work to be completed is large and there has been a prioritisation of tasks to be undertaken. Can we please be provided with an indication of areas deemed the highest risk that will be addressed first?
17. In relation to accountability of the appointed overseers, what provisions will be in place there? Would there be a procedure where grievances could be communicated and acted upon?

Important concerns raised that require an urgent response are repeated below:

- **Due to the imminent preparations and conventions in Australia and New Zealand, further clarification is sought on the progress of risk assessments and safety procedures for these gatherings. This needs to be done in a timely and collaborative manner to ensure all measures can be in place.**
- **Provision of an email address to communicate directly with the advisory group to ensure a transparent, collaborative approach throughout the process.**

Once again, thank you for being proactive in beginning the process for change. We hope that this feedback will help you as this important work continues. As mentioned, we will share this letter with the friends and workers of Australia and New Zealand as an attachment to their letter so that they are aware of the concerns raised, avoiding a duplication of questions inundating the advisory group. **We look forward to a formal published and shared response to these concerns being addressed, in the interests of transparency.**

Yours in gratitude,

Concerned and Connected Friends of Australia and New Zealand

Thank you for taking the time to read our response. We have shared this letter through the limited distribution channels available to us to provide an opportunity for as many people as possible to view and sign. The signatures primarily consist of concerned friends of Australia and New Zealand who concurred with the feedback contained within this communication. Some additional signatures have been received from connections to

friends of Australia and New Zealand that also have an interest in ensuring our fellowship continues to prioritise the safety of our children. We are grateful for your careful and prayerful consideration in these matters and look forward to working together in a collaborative way.

David & Wendy McNab, NSW

Roz Buckman

Janean Gay

Robyn Miller

Andrew & Sharlene Mahaffey, WA

Josiah Higgs

Belinda Young, QLD

Annette Jackson

Nikki Olds

Sharon Craig

Joyce Jarrell

Karol Lawry

Rhonda Gordon

Deborah Kent

Jenny Appel

F Hoffman

Phil Hoffman

Lorelle & Don Hall

Clarissa Briggs

Beth & Stan Roberts

Julie Speight

Rachel Taylor

Joy Bell

Darren Bell

Greg Hancock

Wendy Alcorn

C. Crowden

Karlene Munday

Samantha Bonfield (Briggs)

Jan King

Ruth

Jillian Hishon

S Clarke

Barbara Kemp

Ellen Pearce

Campbell Mattson

Lydia Horton

Tenae Earnshaw

Charlie Blundell

YB

Rochelle Tidman

Des Thompson

Angela Major

Don Major

Keri Sullivan

Lorinda Billing

J Hobbs

Lyndal Davis

Dellsa Earl

W. Harding

Dee Watkins

Peter and Patti

Jen Barndon

Vianne Hills

Judy and John Collins

Col Watkins

Ross Bowden

Tim and Olivia Eldridge

Rosie Rasmussen

Marlon Lobegeier

Lynette Speight

Denise Bennett

Neville & Leonie Oliver

Roselyn Tubman

Lyndall Hamling

Graham and Carol Young, OLD

Trish Robertson

TJ Brown

Shona Brennan

David and Carol Chenery

Tess Lawry

Dan and Jen Collins

Ruth Mackay

Rell Oliver-Braddock

Clare Oliver

Jason Walker

L Wilson

Glenls Blackley

Jane McKinnon

JH

Meredith McIntyre

John Bowman

Max Burrows

Kay Burrows

Max and Colleen Hamblin

Mac Baartz

Stewart and Heather Garlick

Daniel Hoffman

Graham & Cheryl Hart

Shelley Nicholls

Mark Burrell

Gareth Easton

Doreen Leven

R K Sloman

Laura McConnell

Hannah J

Linda Young

Darren Johnson

Coral Coleman

Rod Coleman

David Fairey

Ian Leven

Doreen Leven

Brett Wilson

A & R Oxenbridge

Cherie Kropp

Chester Ehrig

Marilyn Chisholm

Julie King

Monique Lucas

Jo Giltrap

Felicity Quirk

Mervyn Long

Carolyn Brown -West Australia

Trevor & Evol Thompson

Kelvin Horton

Alaina Morrison

Suzie Alcorn

Philip Alcorn

Rebecca Kitto

Alan Syverson

M. Morrell

Kelvin Wolff

Russell Gibbs

Rod Coleman

RDP

Elaine Williams

Kaye Ohlsen

Alana Robson

Bronwyn Bird

CCH

E. Martin

Lauren Bird

Danita Clark

Leah Bell

M Eriksen

Leann Kaizer

Kathy Flippo

Conne Jean Paulson

Betty Weigman

Eileen Medina

Jon O'Reilly

M. Campbell

Craig McNab

M Nixon

Col Watkins

Sandra Lomas

Alison Dixon

Anndella Bond

We would also like to acknowledge an additional 18 people that communicated their support to the contents of this letter but did not provide us with their names.