

Letter from MACSAS to NCSC talks



MACSAS – Minister & Clergy Sexual Abuse Survivors
PO Box 622, Brentford, Middx TW8 1AU

www.macsas.org.uk email macsas1@hotmail.com

Friday 30th September 2011

MACSAS has had to consider a number of matters over the summer 2011. It has been with growing concern that we listened to and read about a press conference given by the Head of NCSC and the Director of CSAS which referred to progress and agreement made on responding to victims of abuse perpetrated within the Church in consultation with survivor organisations. This in the context of no progress being made and no clarity as to the aims and purpose of the ‘exploratory talks’ we are all engaged in.

MACSAS also had to consider the impassioned call from Graham Wilmer and his ultimate decision to withdraw from these talks because the actions of the Catholic Church and in particular of the Bishops and leaders of religious congregations are incompatible with developing any healthy or appropriate responses towards those who have been abused by clergy, religious and others in pastoral roles within the Catholic Church.

MACSAS was also compelled to conclude that the current members of NCSC and CSAS involved in these ‘exploratory talks’ do not have the skills, expertise or authority needed to create the necessary space and processes required to engage in complex and painful talks with those who have been so terribly harmed by those placed in positions of power and authority over them within the Catholic church.

Stepping Back and Creating Listening Spaces

On behalf of MACSAS I have spoken to a number of experts in the area of conflict resolution and reconciliation who have the resources, skills and experience in creating safe spaces for listening to take place and for developing processes for reconciliation.

The Rev Dr Inderjit Bhogal, the leader of the Corrymeela Community (leader@corrymeela.org) has offered the experience and wisdom of his community to help and support the efforts of the Church and survivor organisations to take the steps required to create safe listening spaces within which those who have experienced and suffered harm can be heard.

Helen Gilbert, Reconciliation Projects Coordinator at St Ethelburga’s Church in the City of London (helen@stethelburgas.org 020 74961610) has also offered the services, support and expertise of her team within the safe listening space of St Ethelburga’s to enable the church and survivor support organisations to listen to each other and to develop processes for reconciliation.

All those I spoke to this summer advised that we needed to step back and assess what is actually happening. Inderjit warned against making decisions in anger or as a knee jerk response to media pressure. The anger of those who have been harmed and ignored is legitimate and needs to be recognised, the Church meanwhile seems to be in a place of reappraisal and hence the withdrawal of the Bishops, Vincent and the leader of the Religious Congregations from any engagement in these ‘talks’.

MACSAS cannot allow itself to be coerced into a convenient compromise cobbled together in order to placate the media. Unfortunately that is what those who are holding the talks seems to be doing as they constantly refer to ‘consultation and agreement’ with survivor organisations in media conferences and press releases.

A time of reflection

If the Catholic Church is committed to developing processes for integrating the truth of the widespread abuse of children and adults by clergy and religious in positions of pastoral and spiritual authority over them, then these confused and unfocused talks need to be brought to an end. The Bishops Conference and the Congregation of Religious need to be asked to reflect upon what has happened over the past two years and to decide whether they want to engage with the evil that was allowed to enter and destroy so many within the Church, listen to what happened, understand why and take part in a profound process of transformation.

This will require great effort and will be very costly for victims, the Church, and for those who engage with them in this task. It will require the development of listening spaces within our church communities, where what happened can be shared and heard, it will require a real and deep commitment to reconciliation on all sides. There is no point in the Church waiting for the victims to be healed before they work with them, nor for victims to wait for the Church to be healed by they engage with it.

Proper resourcing and funding is required. The Church needs to engage those who have expertise and experience in conflict resolution and reconciliation and this is invariably found within Christian communities such as Corrymeela and St Ethelburga’s.

Costly Efforts

These current talks have been costly to all, as the trust, good intentions and hopes of those who took part have been frustrated and treated carelessly. No proper thought was given by the convenors of these talks, to the processes that needed to be engaged with, or to the hopes and needs of those who have been and continue to be harmed within the Catholic Church and how to manage them.

Time and again MACSAS has set out the needs of victims, their hopes and the harm being caused as they try to engage with Church authorities. Time and again we have asked for reconciliation processes to be engaged with and have presented to you the recommendations made by two commissions and the Time for Action working party, as well as the processes developed in Catholic communities in other countries around the world. None of this has caused the convenors of these talks to pause for thought or reconsider the purpose of these ‘exploratory talks’.

MASCAS raised the fact that ‘other talks’ were taking place which were not shared with the other organisations taking part, to which we were neither invited nor were we told what was being discussed. This dynamic is wholly inappropriate and deeply dysfunctional and has caused division to be opened up between organisations. This, itself indicates that an unhealthy and abusive process is being engaged with.

However MACSAS stands by its commitment to engage with any genuine efforts to develop open and transparent processes for restoring the lives of those harmed within our Churches and the harm caused to the Church itself. MACSAS will take part in any genuine process of reconciliation, and would welcome the opportunity to meet within a supported and facilitated listening space that allows all to be heard equally and to work towards the development of processes that facilitate reconciliation.

We bring this to the table for the next meeting. It’s all we have to offer these current talks at this current time.

Anne Lawrence

Chair of MACSAS