

Child Sexual Abuse and the Churches - Understanding the Issues, by Patrick Parkinson, 2nd Edition, Aquila Press, 2003.

As soon as I encountered this book, I resolved to review it on our reactivated website as important reading especially for all who hold positions of leadership and responsibility in our churches. But when I reached P.199, I realised that there was an added need for a review, and a call for some eating of humble pie. I have no knowledge of the occasion and the press release mentioned, but this council comes in for what looks like thoroughly deserved censure: Under the heading of DENIAL, and noting that there has been enormous reluctance for church people to acknowledge that child sex abuse could happen in a good Christian family or in congregational activities, Parkinson writes about the publication of the first edition of the book in 1997:

" The story was aired on the ABC Television evening news. That day, the NSW Council of Churches issued a hurried press release denying the problem and attacking the author without having read the book! Fortunately much in Australia has changed since that time."

And perhaps in this council too. Only if the book was unread could anyone conclude that here was yet another attack on the churches by a hostile writer. On the contrary, Patrick Parkinson, a Professor of Law at Sydney University and a specialist in family law and child protection, is an active Christian, whose concern for the churches and respect for the authority of the Bible shows clearly throughout his book. We also see the balance of his approach, his avoidance of sensationalism despite the horrific stories he has to tell at times, and his careful weighing of controversial issues, such as the question of false accusations and recovered memories.

To give some idea of the issues covered, I am listing a selection of the chapter headings and sub-topics in the latter half of the book:

7. **The struggle of faith** - When clergy abuse children; Anger with God; Distorted images of God; Making worship sensitive to survivors of abuse.
8. **Forgiveness** - The nature of forgiveness; Forgiveness and repentance; The ethical conditions for forgiveness; Recognition; Repentance; Reparation; Forgiveness and reconciliation; The Church and forgiveness; Unilateral forgiveness.
9. **Issues in Child Protection for Christians** - The sins of the past; Denial; Discomfort; Christian isolationism; Confidentiality; Spiritualising; The sanctity of marriage; Taking child protection seriously.
10. **Disclosure, investigation and the legal process** - Are there any signs of sexual abuse? How children disclose; When children tell; When sexual abuse occurs within a church activity; The question of future involvement in ministry; The unacceptable risk test.
11. **When ministers sin** - The Church as a professional organisation; Complaints procedures and disciplinary tribunals; Principles for disciplinary procedures; The shadow of litigation.
12. **Making churches safer for our children** - Healthy prevention; Unhealthy prevention; Raising the status of children's ministry.

My only real quarrel with the book is with its steep price for a modest 320 page paperback - my copy cost more than \$39. But for those who bear the responsibility of ensuring the safety of all children in churches and church institutions, this is imperative reading, worth every cent. As Parkinson concludes, on a final note of optimism after covering so much that is grimly disturbing:

"It is probably harder now for a sex offender to get away with abusing a child

than at any time in history. The child is more likely to tell, and people are more likely to involve the police. There is a very long way to go, but we have come a long way.

Let us make it harder than ever for offenders to abuse children. Above all, let the churches not be communities in which people can offend with little risk of discovery. There will need to be a new heaven and a new earth before sorrow and sighing will flee away, but we can diminish this pain by working to prevent child sexual abuse. And we can care, along with God, about all the little ones who are suffering today."

Reviewed by Lesley Hicks, August 2003