

Transcript

Uniting Church in Australia, Queensland Synod Moderator Rev David Baker and Steve Austin

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Steve Austin (SA): Let's go to the issue of compensation for victims of sexual or physical abuse in institutions in Australia, in particular looking at the Uniting Church in Australia. There were reports in the paper today that the Uniting Church has said it can't fund any, or potential claims for compensation unless the church trust sells assets. There was some suggestion in today's papers that they would be bringing in some sort of levy, or fee, or charge, I assume to parishioners to fund this. The Rev David Baker is the Moderator for the Uniting Church in Australia. Rev David Baker, good afternoon to you.

Rev David Baker (Moderator): Good afternoon Steve.

SA: First of all, can you pay, or do you have the money to pay any compensation that comes from victims of physical or sexual abuse in institutions run by the Uniting Church?

Moderator: Yes mate, we haven't run out of money. We are able to meet our commitments in our Interim Redress Scheme, the program we set up to get ahead of the game a bit before the Commonwealth got their act together. But, we are ready and able to address those needs. We don't want people who are looking to engage us through that to think that we won't be able to support them. We can, and we will.

SA: Alright, I assume that the church has full insurance for problems like this. Do you?

Moderator: We do have insurance, in some cases it covers, in some cases it doesn't because it's a pretty complex space as you would imagine over the years that we are addressing these questions. But, the truth is that we are committed to responding to victims as they come forward, engaging with them and responding to what they want to seek from us. We are ready and able to do that.

SA: Do you have a figure or a number yet on the number of people who are seeking compensation and what you are expecting the total amount of compensation will be?

Moderator: No, we don't, it's a very hard figure to estimate. But we believe as this role out over time, we will be able to put ourselves in a position to make the response that we need to make.

SA: Now in one of the papers today, it was suggested that you would be levying or taxing with some sort of charge on Uniting Church parishioners, a fee of some sort to pay victims, or alleged victims. Are you?

Moderator: Well it won't be on parishioners, mate. We are working on a number of options and over the past couple of years, we have been gearing ourselves up to say how are we going to deal with this going forward. We have a few options that we are engaging with the church and talking about.

SA: So, what are those options, what are you talking about?

Moderator: Well, some of them will be, not a levy on parishioners but different parts of the church contributing to a central fund and that central fund contributing to the redress scheme as it

determines. Some might be for the particular entities that have responsibilities over the years, maybe contributing a bit more than others to redress payments. So, we are looking at a couple of options that are all within the range of our capacity to respond to and being the type of church that we are, we have to get the family around the table and say, ok, how are we going to work this out.

SA: Are you looking at things like a levy on school fees, so if your ruling out a levy on parishioners, what about a levy on school fees?

Moderator: That's not in the picture.

SA: Will it be in the picture, is that one of the options?

Moderator: I don't think so. You get to the complexity of it. Some of the schools may be making contributions because that's the school where some of the things happened. So that's the dialogue we are having now.

SA: So what other options are you looking at, the Uniting Church runs some very high-end hospitals, some very high-end schools and some aged care facilities. Will there be a levy on aged care facilities?

Moderator: Well, in the life of our church, every part of the life of our church contributes to the running of the church as a whole. That's what we do. That's who we are as a church. That's how we structure our church. So, going forward, we will be looking at how we all share and contribute together to the responses that we have to make because of what's happened, in our life, under our care over the last 30 or 40 years.

SA: So, when will you make a decision, when will you have a clearer idea of new and refreshed funding options for the Uniting Church to pay some of the penalties.

Moderator: I think we will be working that out this year. Over this year we have our national body meeting early next year. But we will be consulting with entities over the life of the church over the next few months and working this through. We will do it thoroughly. We don't have to do it urgently because we do have the resources that we need to respond. We have just started the engagement process of actually doing the formal engagement of all parts of our church so that we can be in a place where people feel comfortable and confident knowing that we can respond.

SA: Is it a bit late in the day to be looking at how to fund this?

Moderator: I think we are early in the game, we have set up an Interim Redress Scheme, with an inference on the word interim. We set this up early because we had people wanting to engage with us over it. We heard what the Royal Commission was saying in terms of what they thought a redress scheme should be like. And we weren't prepared to wait, force victims and survivors to wait until the Commonwealth came up with their mind and states came in. So, we set up something as an interim process to get the ball rolling in response to people who were waiting to get a response.

SA: So, you're not just waiting for a national redress scheme, you're trying to get compensation to those in need.

Moderator: That's right, that's exactly right. Yes, because this is a serious issue in relation to people who were under our care. We made a decision to get the ball rolling early so that they can get on with the journey of their life and deal with the issues that they have to deal with.

SA: Why not just sell assets, many people believe, well you do have, a lot of land, why not just sell them?

Moderator: Well we will see what we need to do, again, the assets are notionally belonged or owned by different parts of the church. We are not just going to rock up at a congregation and say sorry, you're down at the local RSL this week we are taking your church. We are not doing that. This process that we are engaged in is about compensation with all the parts of our church. To see how we can fund this going forward.

SA: So, Rev David Baker, what is your message to victims of different forms of abuse when they were in some sort of organisation or institution managed by the Uniting Church?

Moderator: Well, our message is we are sorry it happened to you, it shouldn't have happened to you and it wasn't your fault. And we want you to come forward so that we can make a response appropriate for you need to go forward in your life.