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Submission from

Grief to Grace Australia

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Advocacy and Support and Therapeutic Treatment Services.

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Grief to Grace Australia thanks the Royal Commission for the opportunity to address the consultation questions outlined in the Issue Paper *Advocacy and Support and Therapeutic Treatment Services*.

Pastoral care, social justice and ministry are at the heart of the Catholic Church (the Church). Grief to Grace Australia is just one of many thriving ministries within the Church Community here in Australia. With the leadership, decision making and facilitation of care coming from within the laity of the Church, Grief to Grace Australia has opened up a new and much needed opportunity for the Church to continue its commitment to addressing the current and future needs of victims of abuse.

Grief to Grace Australia recognises that the Church's response to all abuse; both allegations and those proven in a court of law has often been inadequate and primarily focused on protecting itself. Grief to Grace Australia is not in any way connected to the overall institutional response – known as Towards Healing facilitated through the Truth, Justice and Healing Council. Rather we are a group of church community members; a grass roots organisation, confronted by the harm done by those who are meant to be at the heart of our Church. Grief to Grace Australia is independently run with an ethos of both evidence based practice and absolute transparency.

Grief to Grace Australia is an emerging ministry in Australia. Grief to Grace is a program already well established in the United States, Canada and the United Kingdom which has been endorsed by Cardinal Martino from the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace (June 6th 2007). This program will be fully established in Australia within the next 12 months. This project has a firm Christian foundation, is doctrinally sound and uses up to date and recognised medical and psychological principals in responding to trauma.

We acknowledge that for some victims of child sexual abuse perpetrated by those who were in trusted positions within the Church seeking support and healing from an organisation connected with their place of harm is confronting. Grief to Grace further acknowledges that no one particular response will ever meet the diversity of need associated with trauma recovery and we do not approach either the Commission or the community with the belief that our Ministry will be an appropriate avenue of treatment for everyone.

Grief to Grace can in its unique way bring about honest and transformative healing and reconciliation to those who seek us out. Grief to Grace Australia offers victims of child sexual abuse the opportunity to partake in psychological, spiritual healing and reconciliation within a therapeutic, safe, compassionate, respectful and professional environment. This opportunity is something that is unique to this project.

The program that Grief to Grace Australia offers is a group model of therapy. We know that this type of model is not only appropriate but successful in meeting the needs of child sexual abuse victims. Research tells us that group therapy is effective in a number of ways including¹:

Providing an unparalleled opportunity to address some of the more common secondary elements of childhood sexual abuse: isolation, alienation, secrecy and shame.

Enables a sense of connection and community where individuals are able to share not only their stories of harm and pain but also other parts of themselves such as their own coping skills and empathy. Forming connections through a sharing of the self also allows victims to find a sense of validation and acceptance.

Establishing relationships through common experience allows individuals to create a greater sense of empathy for themselves and for others. This allows for the building or reestablishment of intimacy and trust that is so often stripped away from victims of child sexual abuse.

¹ Herman, J., & Mendelsohn, M., (2011), *The trauma recovery group*. Guilford Press.

There has been a significant cultural shift over the last few decades surrounding the facilitation of care and counselling for victims of abuse. The facilitation of holistic care is more often than not a basic premise of most therapeutic support providers. Holistic care includes the need to recognise, understand, nurture and address the spiritual and/or religious needs of those who seek out help.

Victims of child sex abuse; who are either members of a Church, faith community or are individuals that have some spiritual connection with the Christian teachings and beliefs, can and do seek support from secular service providers. However, for some, these service providers are not equipped to address the unique spiritual consequences that child sexual abuse can bring. Research tells us that when those seeking out support are asked about their experiences with service providers, victims express a deep need for sensitivity and access to “safe and accepting environments”². Something that Grief to Grace has the ability to provide for those who seek access to support that recognises their spirituality and religion and the need for a connectedness to faith and God.

Geographical and financial constraints often make it hard for both individuals to seek out service providers and for providers to facilitate their programs within these rural, remote and regional areas. By forming, what we have identified as “mobile teams” Grief to Grace Australia will be able to bring into these rural, remote and regional communities this program allowing for minimal financial outlay for individuals wishing to access this program and for Grief to Grace to address the geographical limitations faced by other service providers.

Grief to Grace Australia is asking the Royal Commission to recognise the value of a program such as ours; not only for the Catholic community but the Christian community as a whole. Grief to Grace Australia asks the Royal Commission to see the movement within the Church itself that wants nothing more than to offer a safe and professional space for those living with the harm and consequence of abuse within their faith community. By gaining the validation of the Royal Commission, grass roots, community lead programs such as ours will, finally, be able to receive the commitment and financial resources needed from those in positions of power.

² Schachter. Et.al. (2004) Woman survivors: How can health professionals promote healing. Canadian Family Physician, vol 50.