



The Ministry of Reconciliation

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Contents

PREFACE	4
1. Introduction.....	5
2. Discipline of the Anglican Church of Australia	12
3. Administration of the Sacrament	14
4. The Role of the Priest.....	18
5. The Seal of the Confessional	23
6. Is Confession necessary?	26
7. How to make a first confession.....	28
8. The ABC of Confession.....	30
9. A form for hearing confessions.....	32
10. Common objections.....	35
11. Cases of Child Sexual Abuse.....	37
Appendix: Pastoral Guidelines issued by the Australian Bishops	

PREFACE

This work is the outcome of a request from the Australian bishops for material to be prepared which could be used by clergy and those responsible for the formation of clergy in order to offer guidelines and advice for the ministry of reconciliation.

It is many years since material has been written about confession and absolution that is easily accessible. These notes are offered to assist the clergy in this important area of ministry.

These notes are intended primarily for the clergy. There is, of course, no reason why a lay person could not be given these notes, however their purpose is to assist those who may be called upon to hear confessions. Sections 6 to 9 could be used in their present form as an introduction to this ministry.

The Ministry of Reconciliation has been a ministry of the Church from apostolic times and has always been provided for in Anglican formularies. It is a matter of concern that many of our people do not receive any instruction about this ministry. Many clergy are hesitant about discussing the place of confession and absolution in the life of a Christian. This means many in need of this ministry will not have the opportunity (or the understanding) to avail themselves of it.

These notes are offered to the Australian Church with the prayer that our clergy will be ready to offer this ministry to all who may need it. It is also offered with the intention that clergy have some material to assist in their own understanding of this ministry. In particular I commend the idea of making a special confession before significant life events such as confirmation, ordination or marriage. Regular confession is used by many as they seek to grow spiritually.

+ *David McCall.*

Pentecost 2009

1. Introduction

So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. (II Corinthians 5.17-21)

One of the greatest mysteries and challenges for theologians and philosophers is the existence of evil. When people of faith reflect on the wonder and glory of creation they are able to see the hand of God. The words of Genesis find an echo in our hearts: *God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good.* (Genesis 1.31)

This essential goodness and beauty of the created order is reflected in the teaching of Jesus when he says: *Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these.* (Matthew 6.28b-29)

Yet, we know from our experience of life that all is not well. From the beginning of human existence we see alienation and violence, leading to murder and brutality. There is no period in human history that has been free from warfare and destruction. As we enter the twenty-first century the level of destruction and violence has reached frightening levels. Not only are thousands upon thousands of lives at risk, but the planet itself is at risk.

Alienation from God and from one another is a frightening reality. The word commonly used to describe this reality is evil. Whatever is not from God and whatever is not according to the purposes of God is evil. We experience evil (destructive thoughts, desire for revenge, greed and the like) in ourselves as well as in society as a whole.

However, at the deepest level of our beings, we desire unity, peace and harmony. When anger, bitterness or hatred rule our lives, we are not at peace. Our deepest desire is to be free from those things which instinctively we know destroy us.

Our deepest longings point us to God, in whose image we are made. The Christian doctrine of the Trinity helps us to see what lies at the heart of our being. As the three persons of the blessed Trinity are in perfect unity and harmony so at the centre of our beings is the longing for unity and harmony with God and with the whole creation.

In the midst of our disharmony and lack of unity we show signs of this inner longing. Very few human beings wish to be totally and finally alone: that would truly be hell on earth. Even those planning a serious crime will either wish to involve others or will be looking forward to enjoying the benefits in the company of others.

The something better, which we long for, is what the apostle Paul is talking about when he says: *If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation.* Paul goes on to help us understand that the ministry of reconciliation lies at the heart of the incarnation and that through reconciliation with God and with one another we are restored to what we were always meant to be. That is what we mean by reconciliation in its broadest sense.

Jesus came so that we could be reconciled with God and with one another. That is the reason for the incarnation. We see this ministry of reconciliation being fulfilled in the life of Jesus. Jesus himself understood this to be the purpose of his coming: *The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.* (Luke 4.18-19)

These words from Luke's Gospel need to be understood in their broadest sense. The truth is that we are all poor in relation to the riches God has in store for us; we are all captives to false gods of many different kinds; we are all blind to the destructive force of our favourite sins. Christ came so that oppressed humanity could be freed and experience God's favour in the fullest possible measure. *I came that they may have life and have it abundantly* (John 10.10)

When we read the Gospels we see how Christ transformed peoples' lives through his teaching, through his ministry of healing and through the forgiveness of sins. Christ longed for people to be whole and exhorted those who were healed from illness and forgiven their sins to sin no more. (See John 5.14 and 8.11). Often those who were healed were instructed to tell no one (Matthew 8.4); at other times they were instructed to praise God and to declare how much God had done for them (Luke 8.39).

Illness is a sign that the creation is not in perfect harmony with God, however it is a mistake to link human illness directly with human sin. Often our illnesses are a consequence of our own behaviour, but not always (John 9.3). However all of us suffer the consequences of sin, both our own and others, and sin has a debilitating effect on us. When we are forgiven our sins we begin to experience the fullness of life of which Jesus spoke (John 10.10), even if we are physically ill or disabled.

One of the central elements of the ministry of Jesus was the forgiveness of sins, including willingness to forgive those who hurt us, and the exhortation to repentance. (See Matthew 4.17, 6.12 and 14-15, 9.2-8, 9.10-13, 11.20-24, 18.3, 18.8-9, 18.15-18, 18.21-22, 23-35, 26.28; Mark 1.14, 2.3-11, 2.17, 3.28, 9.42-48, 11.25; Luke 1.77, 5.18-25, 5.30-32, 7.36-50, 10.13-14, 11.4, 13.5, 13.24, 15.3-32, 16.19-31, 17.1-4, 18.9-14, 19.1-10, 23.34, 23.42-43; John 5.14, 8.11, 16.7-11, 20.22)

Not only did Jesus have authority to forgive sins on earth (Mark 2.10 and parallels in Matthew and Luke), he specifically gave this authority to the Church (see Matthew 16.19 and 18.18, John 20.23). It would indeed be most surprising if this were not the case. The ministry of forgiveness was an integral part of proclaiming the good news in Jesus' life and ministry and the Church was given the same mandate by Jesus (Matthew 28.18-20 and Luke 24.46-49).

There is a clear link between the sacraments of baptism and the eucharist and the forgiveness of sins, however the Church also has authority to declare sins forgiven and to readmit penitent sinners to the fellowship of the Church (See II Corinthians 2.5-11, Galatians 6.1

and, according to some scholars, I Timothy 5.19-22). There is also the instance of Paul retaining a person's sin (I Timothy 1.19-20) however the intention was clearly to lead those concerned to repentance. In the letter of James the place of confession of sin is clearly enunciated for members of the Church.

The early Church took the matter of repentance and restoration to communion with the utmost seriousness. Serious sin (after baptism) was seen to be a grave matter but was not understood to lead (necessarily) to final condemnation. Clement of Rome (a contemporary of Paul, mentioned in Philippians 4.3) exhorts those guilty of inciting schism to submit themselves to presbyters and be disciplined to repentance, bending the knees of their hearts for it is better for them to be found in the flock of Christ than to be cast out.

The way in which the Church has addressed matters of sin, repentance and restitution has not been uniform over the centuries, however throughout Christian history both the serious consequence of sin and of the need for reconciliation with God have been recognised.

When we read the Gospels it is quite clear that Christ was always ready to forgive the penitent sinner (e.g. Zacchaeus, Luke 19.1-10). For a time in the early centuries of Christian history the view was taken by many that there could be no forgiveness after baptism. Such a view appears to be quite contrary to the teaching of Jesus who taught that *people will be forgiven their sins and whatever blasphemies they utter* (Mark 3.28). The exception was blasphemy against the Holy Spirit which is understood to be such complete identification with the forces of evil that there is no recognition of the need for repentance.

The view of the Church throughout most of her history is that whenever a person is truly repentant forgiveness is possible. This accords with the statement in John's Gospel: *Anyone who comes to me I will never drive away.* (John 6.37) The references in James 5.19-20 and in Galatians 6.1 are also a clear indication of both the possibility and the desirability of restoration after post-baptismal sin. The place of forgiveness and restoration being linked to confession of sin is also clearly enunciated in the first letter of John (1.8-9). This

passage does not refer specifically to the idea of confessing to an authorised minister of the Church, however the place of confession of sin, God's forgiveness and restoration is made very clear.

A matter which needs addressing is the link between reconciliation with God and reconciliation with the Church. It is clear from the New Testament that the Church is the body which brings about reconciliation with God and that serious sin not only alienates the sinner from God but also affects the sinner's relationship with the Church. This is most clearly seen in the way in which Paul dealt with the man living with his father's wife (I Corinthians 5.1-8) and in the restoration of one who had caused pain (II Corinthians 2.5-10, possibly the same person referred to in I Corinthians). The link between the Church, forgiveness and restoration is also seen in James 5.13-20 and in Galatians 6.1. In the letter of James we see the place of confession of sins by members of the Church.

In the Church of the first and second centuries the minister of reconciliation was the bishop, however as the Church grew in numbers so this ministry was delegated to the presbyters.

In both the Eastern and Western churches the ordained priest is given authority to hear confessions and to pronounce absolution *in the name of God and of the Church*. The priest acts as God's minister and as a representative human being. In other words the priest is authorised to receive the confession as God's minister and to receive it on behalf of the faith community and any who have been hurt by the action of the penitent.

At the Reformation the Church of England retained the practice of making confession of sins to a priest. The form of absolution is set down in *The Book of Common Prayer* in the Service of *The Visitation of the Sick*. In this ministry the minister is instructed to examine the sick person as to whether they truly repent of their sins. The sick person is exhorted to forgive, from the bottom of his heart all those who have offended him. The priest is to move the sick person to make a special confession of sin, if they feel their conscience troubled with any weighty matter.

It is important for clergy today to note that this is a requirement (and not an optional extra) when ministering to those who are ill. To fail to minister in this way may be to deny that person an opportunity sorely needed in serious illness or when approaching death.

Mention of confession in *The Book of Common Prayer* is not restricted to ministry with the sick. In *The Service of Holy Communion* the importance of repentance and forgiveness is clearly addressed in the exhortation to be given when people are to be informed of a celebration. The exhortation concludes with the following words: *And because it is requisite, that no man should come to the holy Communion, but with a full trust in God's mercy, and with a quiet conscience; therefore if there be any of you, who by this means cannot quiet his own conscience herein, but requireth further comfort or counsel, let him come to me, or to some other discreet and learned Minister of God's Word, and open his grief; that by the ministry of God's holy Word he may receive the benefit of absolution, together with ghostly counsel and advice, to the quieting of his conscience, and avoiding of all scruple and doubtfulness.*

It is unfortunate that the practice of making a confession to a priest is regarded by many Anglicans as something that Roman Catholics do, but not Anglicans. The truth is that this practice is based on the practice of the Church from the very beginning and was wide spread in the Church of England following the Reformation. Richard Hooker, one of the greatest Anglican divines after the Reformation (greatly respected by Anglo-Catholics and Evangelicals) regularly made his confession to a fellow priest. He also regularly heard confessions. John Cosin (1594-1672), Bishop of Durham, and Jeremy Taylor (1613-1667), Bishop of Down and Connor, were among a number of Anglican scholars in the post-reformation period who saw a place for the auricular confession (that is, the private confession of sins to a priest) in the life of the Church.

The practice of auricular confession should not be regarded as practice invented by Anglo-Catholics. It in no way offends against Scripture or against the Evangelical understanding of Christ as the mediator between God and humankind. In the ministry of reconciliation the priest does not come between the penitent and

God, the priest is there as God's minister to pronounce absolution and to offer such counsel and advice as is appropriate.

The purpose of this work is to inform the clergy about the nature of this ministry and to facilitate its use within the Anglican Church of Australia. It is very much hoped that this is not seen as something that is the preserve of one group of people within the Church. It is offered to the whole Church as a valuable means of grace for the people of God.

2. Discipline of the Anglican Church of Australia

Within the Anglican Church the ministry of absolution has been part of the discipline and practice of the Church from the Reformation onwards. Every Prayer Book since that time has indicated the place of confession and provided words to be said by the priest as a penitent is absolved.

The authority of the priest to be the minister of absolution is given at ordination. In the 1662 *Book of Common Prayer* and *An Australian Prayer Book* the words of Jesus: *Whose sins thou dost forgive, they are forgiven; and whose sins thou dost retain, they are retained* are included in the words the bishop says during the laying on of hands. In *A Prayer Book for Australia* these words are repeated by the bishop after the laying on of hands as a copy of the Holy Scriptures is presented. In addition the phrase *to declare the forgiveness of sins* is included in the prayer of ordination during which the bishop lays hands on those to be ordained.

It is clear from the ministry of Jesus and from the record of the New Testament (as well as the formularies of the Anglican Church) that the ministry of reconciliation is integral to the proclamation of the Gospel. As already indicated in the 1662 *Book of Common Prayer* the priest is directed to raise the question with a person who is ill as to whether the person's conscience is troubled by some weighty matter and to move the person to make confession of sin if that is the case. The form of absolution is included in the rite of the visitation of the sick. In *A Prayer Book for Australia* the same form (in modern language) is included in the Rite of Ministry with the Dying and in the Rite of Reconciliation:

*Our Lord Jesus Christ,
who has left power to his Church to absolve all sinners
who truly repent and believe in him,
of his great mercy forgive you all your offences:
and by his authority committed to me
I absolve you from all your sins,
In the name of God,
the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. **Amen.***

A priest does not have authority to preach or administer the sacraments unless licensed by the diocesan bishop. A parish priest has authority to hear confessions and to absolve as the priest of the parish or district. Assistant priests minister according to the regulations of the bishop and the direction of the parish priest. It is customary not to give priests permission to hear confessions until they have been three years in priest's orders. (In some dioceses it is seven years if hearing a priest's confession.) In an emergency any priest may hear a confession and grant absolution.

The introductory notes to the Rite for the Reconciliation of a Penitent included in *A Prayer Book for Australia* are helpful in understanding the Anglican understanding of this ministry:

The scriptures teach us that whenever a sinner turns to God in penitence and faith, forgiveness is given (1 John 1.9f). Such reconciliation is central to the gospel of Jesus Christ (Romans 5.6-11, 2 Cor 5.18-21), and is operative whenever the word of God is proclaimed. The ministry of reconciliation is signified in the gospel sacraments of Baptism and Holy Communion. It is made visible in and through the care of Christians for each other and for all sinners in obedience to Christ's call to repentance (Mark 1.1-15; Luke 13.1-5). It is proclaimed in all our forms of public worship, and the personal level through the priesthood of the Church and its ministers in declaring God's forgiveness. The ministry of individual reconciliation is part of Anglican tradition (see The Book of Common Prayer Visitation to the Sick and the Exhortations in Holy Communion).

Reconciliation not only involves our relationship with God, but also with the fellowship of the faithful, the Church. The priest exercises this ministry on behalf of the whole Christian community by declaring God's forgiveness, and may, at the request of the penitent, offer guidance, counsel and encouragement.

3. Administration of the Sacrament

As a general rule confessions should be heard in church. This is the place where the community of faith gathers and the sacraments are administered. To go to a church building symbolises coming into the presence of God and is a reminder that the penitent is seeking absolution at the hands of one who is both God's minister and the Church's minister. While this should be considered as the norm, it is not a binding requirement and will depend on the circumstances. If a person is ill then the confession will be heard at the bedside. Confessions may be heard wherever the need requires, just as the other ministries of the Church may be administered wherever it is appropriate. In rural and outback Australia it will often be necessary to minister elsewhere. There will be other occasions when it may not be convenient to use a church building.

Some churches have a place where confessions are heard. This may be a small oratory or in a chapel. It is helpful if to have a prayer desk where the penitent may kneel, on which may be placed the words of the rite. It is also helpful to place a crucifix which the penitent can look upon. A seat should be placed nearby so that the priest is close to the penitent and can hear the confession with the penitent speaking in a low voice. It is usual for the priest to wear a surplice and a purple (or violet) stole.

In some places the practice has developed of the priest and penitent sitting and facing each other. As a general rule it is recommended that the penitent kneel and face an image of Jesus who died for the forgiveness of our sins. This makes it clear that the confession is being made to God and that it is being made in the presence of the priest who is God's minister and the Church's minister.

It is important that a priest makes preparation before hearing a confession, even if there is only time for a brief prayer such as:

*O God, without you we are not able to please you:
mercifully grant that your Holy Spirit
may in all things direct and rule our hearts;
through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.***

The priest should ask for protection so that whatever is heard will not pollute his or her own thoughts. Prayer should also be offered asking that whatever is said will not remain in the conscious thought once the rite has been completed. If the person is a regular penitent the priest will usually find it is possible (if appropriate and necessary) to recall the material of a previous confession when administering the rite at some later time. God does give the grace to put what has been said out of the mind once the rite is completed.

When absolution is pronounced the priest may either lay a hand on the penitent's head or make the sign of the cross over the penitent.

In the case of a mature person preparing for baptism the priest would hear the confession and advise that the forgiveness of sins will be effected through the sacrament of baptism (see Acts 2.38, 22.16, Romans 6.1-11, I Corinthians 6.11, I Peter 3.21).

The confession itself

In many parishes there is a regular time when a priest is available to hear confessions. In every parish a priest should be ready to hear a confession at some other time on request.

When the penitent comes to the place where the confession is to be heard it is appropriate to kneel (unless there is some physical impediment). The penitent may seek a blessing. It is recommended that the rite in *A Prayer Book for Australia* on page 775 should be used.

The priest (seated for ease of hearing the confession) then welcomes the penitent using the words at the beginning of the rite.

It is appropriate for priest and penitent to say together the selected verses from psalm 51 as set out in the rite (section 2).

The priest reads a suitable verse or verses of Scripture (see section 3).

The priest invites the penitent to make a confession of sins using the words at section 4. The penitent then makes his or her confession using his/her own words of the form set down.

The priest may offer counsel, guidance and encouragement. The priest should keep in mind that to make confession of sin takes courage and the penitent should always be encouraged in his/her Christian discipleship. It is helpful if the penitent is given a short passage of Scripture to read or a prayer or psalm to say as an expression of thanks for receiving the benefit of absolution. This would be carried out after the rite has been completed.

The form of absolution is given at section 7. The traditional form (as set down in the *The Book of Common Prayer* and *An Australian Prayer Book*) is the second of the two forms given. Either is satisfactory.

Section 8 is optional, however it is recommended that one of the two alternatives given should be used.

The Lord's Prayer is set down as part of the rite. The conclusion (section 10), which is really a blessing, is an important part of the rite.

After the rite is completed the penitent may return into the body of the Church and recite the suggested thanksgiving. It is best done before leaving the Church.

The priest then should spend a few minutes in private prayer, praying for the penitent, asking that nothing that was heard remain in conscious thought, and offering all that was said and done to God.

Ministry with the sick and dying

A large portion of the ministry of Jesus was spent on people who were ill. When the Church is faithful to her mission she will take special care of the sick and the dying. This is a time when it is particularly important for the priest to talk about the faith and to give instruction about God's forgiveness. It is vital that during such ministry the priest listens to what is happening spiritually, especially if hints are given about some burden of conscience. When a person is seriously ill, it is common that God's forgiveness will be desired and

the priest must be ready to hear the person's confession and pronounce absolution.

It is important that the priest ensures that time is spent alone with the sick person so that any matters that need to be brought before God can be done so when only the priest is present. If a person is seriously ill, then a simple form of confession, a few words of assurance and the pronouncement of absolution is all that is needed. If the person is unable to speak, then the priest might ask whether there are matters to be confessed and suggest that a squeeze of the hand would be the way to answer. Then the person could be asked if they were truly sorry for the sins they had committed. After another squeeze of the hand absolution would be pronounced.

When a person is seriously ill it would also be normal to anoint the person and to administer Holy Communion, however confession and absolution should precede the ministry of anointing and the administration of the Sacrament. After the rite of confession has been completed it would be appropriate for family or close friends to be present for the anointing and administration of Holy Communion.

4. The Role of the Priest

The role of the priest in the ministry of reconciliation and absolution is vital. The priest serves in this role as God's minister and as the Church's minister. Serious sin is a matter for the faith community. In the early centuries of the Church's history there were three sins that required the ministry of reconciliation before restoration to communion – apostasy, murder and adultery. While confession of sin to a priest is not required by the Anglican Church it could well be argued that serious sin of the kind mentioned above should be confessed formally so that the penitent may receive the ministry of absolution.

It is appropriate for every believer to “keep short accounts with God” and to examine the conscience at the end of each day, bringing to the Lord anything that should be confessed. Serious sin should obviously be dealt with in this way, however serious sin is never simply a matter between the individual and God – it also involves the faith community and the person or persons who have been hurt. It may also involve the wider society.

There is a general principle where a person's sin has involved the hurt of someone else that confession and an apology to the person concerned is a necessary part of the process of reconciliation. It is clear that the apostle Paul saw an important role for the Church in the restoration of those guilty of serious offence. It has been the practice of the Church since apostolic times that those ordained to the episcopate or the priesthood have the responsibility of acting on behalf of the Church in this ministry.

It will be helpful for us to consider the various aspects of the priest's role as a confessor:

As God's Minister the priest hears the confession and receives the confession of sin made to God. A priest would only decline to receive the confession (and hence refuse absolution) if there was a sound reason to believe that there was no genuine repentance. As a general rule it would be assumed by the act of making a confession that the penitent is truly sorry and repentant for the offences confessed.

The priest is called upon to exercise judgement and will pray that the Holy Spirit will ensure that right judgement is made (giving the benefit of any doubt). While the priest may need to exercise judgement, the priest should never be judgemental. If no sin is confessed then absolution is not required. While this is unlikely it would be possible for someone to confess something for which she or he could not be held responsible (for example failing to keep an appointment because the car broke down). In such a case the priest would explain that no sin had been committed. It would be wise for the priest to enquire if there are other matters on the person's conscience. If these were then confessed absolution could be given.

The priest has a special responsibility to be a minister of the love of God. Here we look to the example and practice of Jesus who said to the paralysed man: *My son your sins are forgiven you*, and to the woman caught in adultery: *Neither do I condemn you, go and sin no more*. These are words of great comfort and encouragement. Those who pluck up the courage to make a confession of sin need to hear gracious words of forgiveness as they receive the ministry of reconciliation and absolution. The priest is not called on to be like a judge or a magistrate, but rather a loving parent who wants the best for the person who has come to confession.

Those who come to confession may be in need of guidance and counsel, either of a general nature or something quite specific in relation to the matters confessed. For example, if a person confessed to viewing material that was either pornographic or excited improper desires, the priest would give a firm direction that such material was to be strictly avoided. (Sadly, we live in an age when all kinds of material may be legal, but are damaging to the viewer.) If a person confessed to hatred of another person, then the priest would need to give some counsel as to how to deal with such feelings.

It may also be helpful for the priest to give some general direction about the person's prayer life. A rule of life which ensures time for daily prayer and Bible reading as well as Sunday worship is a most useful pattern for all Christians.

As a general rule such guidance as the priest may be led to give should be in the form of encouragement rather than a requirement. A

direction about avoiding occasion of sin (such as pornographic material) is an obvious exception. It is important that the priest does not give advice which is beyond his or her professional competence. In general caution should be exercised: it is better to give no advice rather than bad advice. If it is clear that a person is in need of professional help then it would be appropriate to suggest to the penitent that the matter be raised outside the confessional and the priest's advice be sought as to who might be able to assist.

Every priest will be called on from time to time to give spiritual counsel and advice. Sometimes this will be in the context of a confession, but not always. A priest must be aware of the limits of his or her own competence and always be ready to direct a person elsewhere if it is clear that further help is needed. It is wise for every priest to have knowledge of a small number of such people (who may or may not be ordained).

The confessor's heart and mind must be on Jesus. He or she must not be preoccupied with sin, but with on living in the presence of God. The confessor is called to be a preacher of salvation, not of improvement.

As the Church's Minister

The priest is both God's Minister and the Church's Minister. A member of the Church who commits serious sin not only places a barrier between him or herself and the love and grace of God, there will also be a barrier between the sinner and the Church. The offence may not be known in the Church or the community however any serious sin has an impact beyond the person or persons involved.

If a Christian is guilty of a serious crime (murder or theft) then the Church and the community are affected even if the perpetrator is never discovered. The truth is that we live in community and our actions (even when not known) have an impact. It is easy to see how this principle applies if we think of a small community. If one member of a small community steals something from another, the whole community is affected. A sense of insecurity and suspicion will be activated and people's willingness to trust one another will be weakened. Often the impact of an undetected crime or sin will be greater than one which is discovered. If something is in the open it

can be dealt with. If it remains hidden and unaddressed it will continue to create uncertainty, fear or bitterness of one kind or another.

When a Christian sins the Church is weakened. When a Christian comes to confession the priest receives the confession on behalf of the faith community. It is not just that trust may be broken. As spiritual beings our sinfulness and our sins weaken the moral fabric of society and the Church. We may not be aware that even our thoughts have an impact on others. (This is one of the ways in which prayer works.) A true confession to a representative of the Church (the Church's minister) addresses this matter.

The role of the priest is also to reconcile the offender with God and with the Church. The offender will need to be instructed about reparation and how the hurt that has been inflicted on someone else will be addressed. It may be that a simple apology will be sufficient, or some other action (such as returning a stolen item) may be necessary.

As the Church's minister the priest will represent the wider community as well as the Church. This is because the Church itself is God's instrument for reconciliation and healing for the whole human race. The local Church always has a responsibility toward the community in which it is set and is concerned that people be reconciled with one another whether or not they belong to the household of faith.

The priest as a representative human being

There will be times when it may be impossible for reconciliation with the person who was affected by the sin confessed. In such situations the priest plays a very valuable role in receiving the confession as a representative human being. Imagine that two friends had a major quarrel and things were said that should not have been said and the friendship and trust were gravely weakened. Then suppose one of the two had a fatal accident (or even committed suicide). The person remaining would feel deeply distressed. The sense of guilt could be absolutely overwhelming and very destructive for the person's ongoing life. The sacrament of reconciliation offers a way forward in such a situation. The angry words should be confessed as a sin against both God and humankind (particularly the deceased). The priest could receive the confession and the expression of deep sorrow on behalf of the departed and would rightly pronounce absolution to a deeply distressed person. The priest would advise the penitent that the matter had been brought before God and could safely be left in God's hands.

While the above scenario may seem unlikely it is not uncommon for a priest who regularly hears confessions to hear words which indicate a deep sense of unresolved guilt because of a failure of relationship with a person who has died. The circumstances may not be dramatic (such as a flaming row) but the burden of guilt can be crippling. In such cases the priest is able to stand in the place of the person who was hurt and assure the penitent that God is able to forgive whatever may have been said or done – all that is needed is genuine sorrow and repentance. In such a circumstance the priest may suggest some simple action or service to someone in need as an appropriate expression of thanks for God's goodness and forgiveness, however it would need to be stressed that God's forgiveness does not require some action on our part, other than bringing the matter to God.

5. The Seal of the Confessional

A priest is not free under Church law to reveal what is said in the confessional even if ordered to do so by a court of law. As a general rule it would be unlikely that such a situation would arise as there would have to be some other evidence before the authorities. It is reasonable to assume that such evidence would be sufficient for the person to be prosecuted without requiring the seal to be broken. In some jurisdictions there appears to be no protection for a priest in such a situation. Some ecclesiastical authorities have suggested that the priest could give such evidence under protest, however this would be a breach of the seal. If it is explained that a priest is not free to reveal what has been said in the confessional it is unlikely that the matter would be pursued.

One important question that should be dealt is: *Why does the Church regard the seal as sacrosanct?* The ministry of reconciliation has traditionally been regarded as a sacramental ministry. In ancient Roman times *sacramentum* referred to a sacred pledge of sincerity or fidelity, publicly symbolised by a visible sign such as a deposit of money or an oath of allegiance. The Latin word was also used to translate the Greek *mysterion*, referring to hidden realities or sacred rites. Tertullian is the first known Christian to have referred to the ritual of baptism through which initiates pledged fidelity to Christ as a *sacramentum*. The Ministry of Reconciliation is a sacred ministry of the Church exercised under the New Covenant and under the pledge of loyalty and faithfulness to Christ. (The material in this paragraph relating to *sacramentum* is taken from *A New Dictionary of Christian Theology*, published by SCM Press, 1983).

All Christian ministry is exercised under the authority of Christ who has established a New Covenant. The Church is the instrument of this Covenant and the ministry of the Church is therefore carried out in the name of Christ. While Christians are called to obey the law of the land it has always been recognized that the call of God's kingdom is above the requirements of an earthly kingdom. The law of the land is concerned about the behavior of the citizens of the land and the Church must take all due diligence to encourage its members to observe the law, however that law does not have the authority to intrude into the sacramental ministry of the Church.

In the Scriptures a seal relates to salvation. The original meaning of *seal* in relation to a sacrament was as a seal of salvation, whereby a person was sealed for eternal life. (see II Corinthians 1: 22, Ephesians 1:13, Ephesians 4: 30.) Strictly speaking the seal refers to the absolution or the withholding of absolution which has to do with salvation. The word is also applied to what might more accurately be described as the *confidentiality* of the confessional. Canon Law is about the confidentiality of this ministry.

There are several reasons why the seal should not be broken, however it will be helpful first to consider how the ministry of absolution developed in the early church. As indicated above when we sin we offend against both God and the Church (as well as against ourselves and others). During the first few centuries serious sin had to be confessed to the whole community of faith. This practice is reflected in the New Testament.

Experience showed that there were good reasons why this practice should be discontinued and why the priest should receive the confession in private on behalf of the Church. The public nature of confession was liable to cause scandal. It could also be unhealthy to others who may have been tempted by what they heard. The practice was therefore discontinued.

But, why the seal? The reasons are as follows:

- The first step to amendment of life is repentance. Confession is a vital step in the case of serious sin and the seal is of great assistance in helping such a person come and make confession of sin.
- If the penitent cannot feel secure that the sins confessed will not be repeated then that person will probably not come. If there is serious sin and a person needs spiritual counsel it is important that every help be given.
- Just as the early Church found that public confession could be a cause of scandal or temptation so the same would apply should a priest reveal what is heard in the confessional today.

There are occasions when an innocent person will confess to a crime (usually to the police). Such a confession to the police might be to protect another person or it may be because the person is mentally disturbed. While it is unlikely that such a person would come to a priest, it is possible. Should the confessor come to the view that this is the situation, it should be pointed out that a priest is not able to break the seal and the person should be encouraged (in the case of some mental disturbance) to seek medical help. The priest should only withhold absolution if he or she is quite certain that the person is confessing to something they have not done.

The primary reason for the seal is to assure the penitent that what is said in the confessional will not be revealed or repeated to anyone else. If the priest feels the need of advice then that can be sought providing the identity of the penitent is not revealed. Advice should be sought from an experienced confessor under the seal.

If the matter relates to child sexual abuse the matter must be referred to the priest who holds the bishop's licence to deal with such matters. (See the guidelines contained in the Appendix for such cases.)

It is important to note that the Seal does not simply inhibit the confessor from revealing to any other person what is heard in the confessional. It also inhibits the confessor from talking about what was confessed in future dealings with the penitent. If a penitent, for example, confessed that he had stolen a book from the Parish library, the priest would direct the penitent in the confessional to return the book, but would take no other action, even if the book were not returned. The priest would not even mention the matter to the penitent. If the penitent were to return to the confessional, it would be appropriate to mention the matter under the seal, but no other action would be permitted under canon law.

What should the confessor do if another person's life is in danger?

If the priest came to the view that a person's life was in danger it would be appropriate to take such action as was necessary to protect life without revealing the identity of the penitent or the source of the information.

6. Is Confession necessary?

There is, of course, only one answer to this question. Without repentance, which includes confession of sin, there is no forgiveness. The question for many people is: *Do I need to make confession of sin to a priest?*

The Anglican Church does not require sacramental confession, however it not only provides for it but recommends it in certain circumstances – especially when a person is seriously ill and is troubled by some weighty matter, or if a person is troubled in conscience when preparing to receive Holy Communion (see the Order for the Visitation of the Sick and the first exhortation at Holy Communion in the *Book of Common Prayer*).

The old saying about confession in the Anglican tradition is: *None must, all may, some should.* This reflects the practice of the Church, however it is easy for us to place ourselves in the first category and not to ask ourselves whether or not we should make our confession to a priest.

Some years ago a parish priest was speaking about making a confession in preparation for Easter. During the discussion that followed a parishioner said she regarded the practice as a precious gift from God and a very great help in living the Christian life. This has certainly been the experience of many.

Making one's confession is not easy. It is not an easy thing to kneel down and bring to God the ways in which we have fallen short, in the presence of a priest. People who take this action testify to being thankful for the opportunity to confess sins in the presence of a brother or sister in Christ and receive the benefit of absolution. There is a wonderful sense of freedom and renewal.

It is wise to ask for counsel and to be encouraged by the advice given. Usually nothing would be said that we did not know, however it is helpful to be reminded of the simple truths of living the Christian life. The advice of an old priest to a young penitent is pertinent: *We all need encouragement. Sometimes we stumble along the way. Making confession is like dusting oneself off, getting up and*

continuing the journey. Above all the ministry of reconciliation is an expression of God's love mediated by the Church.

There are undoubtedly times when it is important to make a confession of sin. Any serious matter should be dealt with in this way. Just as a medical practitioner is ill-advised to self-medicate or self-diagnose, so we Christians should not hesitate to seek help, especially when we have committed a serious sin. We almost certainly stand in need of some guidance and encouragement and the blessing of a formal absolution is not to be underestimated. There is an assurance in receiving absolution. Many people do not find that assurance when confessing on their own. Jesus gave this authority to the Church to enable people to truly experience the forgiveness of God.

It is most appropriate to make a special confession of sin to a priest before a significant event in life (for example: confirmation, ordination, marriage or some important new venture). In making a confession we face up to what we have done in the past without attempting to excuse ourselves. This action represents truly turning to God and setting out afresh.

Those who regularly make their confession almost invariably testify to the blessings this practice brings. It is easy for us to live an unexamined life and to pretend that there is no darkness within us. Regular confession is a powerful way of opening ourselves to the light of Christ and assisting us to draw near to God.

Confession in the presence of a priest is not only to "wipe the slate clean", it is also to strengthen our relationship with our Lord and to deepen our awareness of Christ's love for us.

The Bible is clear that the Church has authority to forgive sins. It is also clear about our need for God's forgiveness. When considering whether or not we should make a confession to a priest we should ask ourselves: *What is Jesus saying to me about this matter?*

7. How to make a first confession

1. Give thanks to God for his love for you in bringing you to this point.

2. Make an appointment with the priest at least a week ahead. Usually this would be at some other time than when confessions were regularly heard. Explain that this is your first confession and that you will probably need some help.

3. During the week before set aside some time each day for private prayer and reflection. Ask for the guidance of the Holy Spirit to bring to mind those things which need to be confessed. Think back over your life. It may be helpful to divide it into sections:

- * as a child - before school, at school, after school
- * as a young person - at work, at home, with friends
- * as an adult – unemployed, employed, an employer
- * as a single person or husband or wife
- * as a parent, as a child of your own parents, as a member of your family
- * as a member of the community, locally and nationally.

Think about your relationship with God, with others, with yourself.

Some things will stand out as being on your conscience. Note them down.

Look at the past 12 months more closely. Again note down the things which come to light.

Look at the last few weeks more closely again. Note down whatever you believe needs to be confessed.

Listen to what God is saying to you and write it down. Do not make excuses or long explanations. Be clear and precise. Do not hide things through fear.

Do not mention other people by name. If the matter to be confessed involves another person, simply say *I did this with someone else* (or with others).

When your list is finished, whether it is written or committed to memory, say you are sorry to God and ask him to help you in what you are about to do.

4. Read through the rite of confession. It would be sensible to ask the priest if there is a card to use or which of the alternatives in *A Prayer Book for Australia* to use.

5. Remind yourself that God loves you and calls you into his loving embrace.

6. Pray for the priest who is to hear your confession.

7. When the time comes, go to the place where confessions are heard. Kneel down and wait for the priest to welcome you or say: *Bless me, for I have sinned.*

8. The priest will be sitting beside you. He or she will listen to your confession and will then give some advice.

There is no need to be afraid, the priest is there to help not condemn.

The priest will probably give you a prayer or psalm or passage of scripture to be read when you return to your place.

The priest will then say the formal words of absolution in which you are set free from your sins and assured of God's forgiveness.

9. After the prayer of dismissal, return to your place in the church.

10. Say the prayer or passage you have been given as a thanksgiving. Give thanks to God for his mercy and great love. Pray for the priest who heard your confession. Ask God to help you and strengthen you in your resolve to walk in the way of Christ.

This material is taken from "All Things New", published by the Ministry of Healing and Wholeness, Retreat House, Melbourne.

8. The ABC of Confession

A Ask God to help you to see your sins. Use the Collect for Pentecost:

*O God, who taught the hearts of your faithful people
by sending to them the light of your Holy Spirit:
grant us by the same Spirit
to have a right judgement in all things,
and evermore to rejoice in his holy comfort;
through the merits of Christ Jesus our Saviour,
who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the same Spirit,
one God, now and for ever. **Amen.***

Examine yourself in the light of Scripture passages such as:

Matthew 5.3-10, Romans 12.8-14, I Corinthians 13, Galatians 5.13-26.

Another good basis for self-examination is the Ten Commandments (*Deuteronomy 5.8-21*)

Write down your failures, including the good things you could have done and did not do.

B Be sorry for your sins, above all for your ingratitude to God and for your share in crucifying Jesus. You can express that sorrow by acknowledging your sins and asking for God's grace to grow more like Jesus. *Being* sorry is more significant than *feeling* sorry.

C Confess. You do not need to be afraid. The priest will not think less of you (if he knows you already). He will not be shocked. He will never speak to anyone else about what he hears. You are making your confession to God in order to receive God's forgiveness. Be open and honest. Be ready to receive the priest's advice and God's forgiveness.

After advice and absolution the priest will probably suggest saying a prayer or reading a short passage from the Bible as an expression of thanks and as a token of your desire to respond to God's loving reconciliation given to you. It is best to do this without delay.

Do not be discouraged by subsequent failures or lapses. Jesus said we are to forgive one another *seventy times seven* (that is every time someone seeks our forgiveness). God's love for us is inexhaustible.

A good thanksgiving for absolution is Psalm 103.1-13.

This material is from "Hearing Confessions" by Kenneth Ross

9. A form for hearing confessions (based on the form given in APBA)

1 *The priest welcomes the penitent, saying*

The Lord Jesus who came to reconcile sinners welcomes you.

and/or

May the Lord be in your heart and on your lips that you may make a true confession of your sins, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

2 *The priest and penitent may say together*

Have mercy on me, O God, according to your loving-kindness:

in your great compassion blot out my offences.

Wash me through and through from my wickedness: and cleanse me from my sin.

Create in me a clean heart, O God: and renew a right spirit within me.

Cast me not away from your presence: and take not your holy Spirit from me.

Give me the joy of your saving help again: and sustain me with your bountiful Spirit.

Open my lips, O Lord:

and my mouth shall proclaim your praise. From Psalm 51

3 *The priest says*

Hear the word of the Lord:

If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, God who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

1 John 1.8-9

Other suitable verses of Scripture include:

Matthew 11.28; John 3.16; Romans 5.6-8; 8.1-2; 8.38-39; 1 Timothy 1.15; 1 John 2.1-2

4 *The priest says to the penitent*

My *brother/sister* in Christ, God is steadfast in love and infinite in mercy. Be confident in God's forgiveness as you confess your sins in penitence and faith.

The penitent makes a confession of sins in his/her own words, or using the following form.

Loving and merciful God,
I confess to you and your Church
that I have sinned in thought, word, and deed
through my own fault;
 and especially have I sinned in this way...
For these sins I am truly sorry,
and by your grace firmly intend to amend my life.
I ask your forgiveness,
for Jesus' sake. Amen.

5 *The priest may offer guidance, counsel and encouragement.*

7 *The priest pronounces this Absolution.*

Our Lord Jesus Christ,
who has left power to his Church to absolve all sinners
who truly repent and believe in him,
of his great mercy forgive you all your offences:
and by his authority committed to me
I absolve you from all your sins,
in the name of God,
the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**

8 *The priest may say*

Most merciful God,
in your great love you have put away the sins
of those who truly repent, and remember them no more.
Renew this your servant by your grace and
with your great love sustain *him/her*
 in the unity of the Church,
and strengthen *him/her* with your Spirit,
through the merits of your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

9 *The priest says*

As our Saviour Christ has taught us, we are confident to pray,

Our Father ...

10 *The priest concludes*

Now there is rejoicing in heaven; for you were lost, and are found; you were dead, and are now alive in Christ Jesus our Lord. Go [abide] in peace. The Lord has put away all your sins, and pray for me, a sinner.

The penitent responds **Thanks be to God.**

10. Common objections

Do I have to make my confession in order to receive God's forgiveness?

The answer is both *Yes* and *No*. In order to receive God's forgiveness it is necessary to confess our sins to God. We do not necessarily have to make our confession to a priest, however it can be of enormous help. It is *sacramental* and is a means of grace. If we cannot be at peace when we confess our sin alone, then we almost certainly need to make our confession in the presence of a priest.

Isn't this a Roman Catholic practice?

Yes, it is a common practice in the Roman Catholic Church. It is also practiced in the Eastern Orthodox Churches, the Lutheran Churches and in every member Church of the Anglican Communion. Many people from all of these traditions testify to the blessings they receive from sacramental confession.

Why should a priest come between me and God?

Suppose you were asked the same question with the word *Bible* substituted for the word *priest*. You would say that the Bible was a help, not a barrier, and that it makes the love of God more real to you. It is the same with sacramental confession. We should also remember that when we make our confession in this way the priest does **not** come between us and God. The priest is there as God's minister, and hears the confession both as God's minister and the Church's minister.

Priests are sinners like everyone else!

That is absolutely correct, however in hearing confessions they are ministers of God. They pronounce God's forgiveness, not their own. If we were not willing to receive a blessing from the hands of a fellow sinner then we could never receive Holy Communion! An important principle expressed in Anglican formularies is: *the Unworthiness of the Ministers hinders not the effect of the Sacrament* (Article 26). The article points out that ministers do not minister in their own name, but in Christ's.

I see no point in confessing and then going and doing the same thing again.

Yes – if you mean confessing, with no intention of amendment of life.

No – if you mean confessing, even though you are aware of your weakness and you fear that it might happen again. By bringing our weaknesses to Christ we are strengthened to resist temptation. If our intention is right that is sufficient.

There was the case of a kleptomaniac seeking the help of the Church. The man was in great distress and could not help himself, stealing goods from shops several times a day. The priest directed him to come to the Church and confess **every** time he failed. For the first few weeks the priest was driven to distraction, the man was knocking on his door several times every day. Then it happened less and less. After 12 months the man was freed from this terrible obsession (which was ruining his life).

Based on material taken from “All Things New”.

11. Cases of Child Sexual Abuse

In the case of a person confessing to child sexual abuse the matter must be referred to the diocesan bishop or to the priest (or priests) appointed to deal with such matters. The priest should obtain the penitent's consent to refer the matter to the priest with special licence who is authorised to pronounce absolution in such instances.

Attention is drawn to Appendix 1 headed *Pastoral Guidelines with special reference to Child Sexual Abuse*. These guidelines were issued by the Australian bishops at their annual meeting in March 2006. Much of the material in these guidelines applies to the hearing of confessions in general as well as in cases of the sexual abuse of children. Sections 1,2 and 3 are of a general nature and apply to all confessions. They deal in particular with the matter of the seal where a penitent confesses to a criminal act.

The guidelines issued by the bishops recommend that in each diocese there should be a priest (or priests) who hold the bishop's licence to hear confessions relating to child sexual abuse and that no other priests would have authority to pronounce absolution in such cases. These guidelines should be studied carefully by all priests so that they are able to act appropriately should they hear such a confession.

The priest should say to the penitent: *I am not authorised to pronounce absolution, however I will arrange for an authorised priest to hear your confession for the purpose of your receiving absolution.* It is important to note that the seal still applies even though the rite is incomplete. The penitent should be assured that the matter remains under the seal and that the authorised priest will administer the sacrament in the usual way. It goes without saying that the matter must be attended to without delay.

PRIVATE CONFESSION
PASTORAL GUIDELINES WITH SPECIAL
REFERENCE TO CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE

Preamble

1. The practice of making a private confession

According to both Church law and custom the Anglican Church provides for the private confession of sins in the presence of a priest. This practice is regulated by Church Law. The ministry of absolution has the following elements:

- The desire of the penitent to unburden the conscience in order to receive the benefit of absolution together with spiritual counsel and advice.
- The making of a confession of sin by the penitent according to a rite of the Church (a form for the confession of sins and pronouncement of absolution may be found in *An Australian Prayer Book* and in *A Prayer Book for Australia*).
- After hearing the confession the priest absolves the penitent. **A priest may decline to pronounce absolution or may defer absolution where it is clear that some further action is required by the penitent.**

Canon Law also regulates what is known as the Seal of the Confessional. This means that a priest must not reveal any sin that is revealed when hearing a confession.

It is important to note the difference between *admission to a sin* and *confession of a sin*. If a person admits to a crime the priest may be bound to report the matter to the police. If a penitent confesses a sin which is also a crime the priest is bound by the Seal of the Confessional.

Should a priest form the view that a person wishes to reveal a criminal act, the priest should intervene immediately and enquire if the person wishes to

make a formal confession (according to a Rite of the Church). If the answer is in the affirmative (possibly after some further explanation by the priest) then the priest and the would-be penitent should go to some private place (ideally the parish church) where the confession would be heard.

It is essential that a Rite of the Church is used. If a Rite of the Church is not used the priest may have no protection under the law and could be found guilty of contempt of court for refusing to reveal the matter of the confession.

2. Private Confession of Sins in the Anglican Church of Australia

Provision for private confession of sins and absolution in the Anglican Church dates from both before and after the Reformation. Provision was contained in the Book of Common Prayer of 1662, as well as in the earlier books of Common Prayer of 1549 and 1552. This provision was clearly retained in both An Australian Prayer Book and A Prayer Book for Australia.

It is the law of our Church that when a private confession is made in the presence of a Priest the matter of that confession is not to be revealed. This law is contained in Canon 113 of the Canons of The Church of England of 1603 and also in the Canon Concerning Confessions 1989 which was adopted at the General Synod of 1992. The Canon Concerning Confessions was then adopted by every diocese in Australia except the Diocese of Ballarat. The Diocese of Sydney adopted the Canon Concerning Confessions in 1993, however it was repealed by ordinance in 1997. This means the Canon Concerning Confessions 1989 is the law of the church in every diocese except the Diocese of Ballarat and the Diocese of Sydney where Canon 113 of 1603 applies. It is the law of our church that when a private confession is made in the presence of a priest the matter of that confession is not to be revealed.

According to Canon 113 of 1603 there is one exception in relation to what is known as the Seal of the Confessional. The relevant part of that Canon reads as follows: *Provided always, That if any man confess his secret and hidden sins to the Minister, for the unburdening of his conscience, and to receive spiritual consolation and ease of mind from him; we do not any way bind the said Minister by this our Constitution, but do straitly charge and admonish him, that he do not at any time reveal and make known to any person whatsoever any crime or offence so committed to his trust and secrecy, (except they be such crimes as by the laws of this realm his own life may be called into question for concealing the same), under pain of irregularity.* In Australian law there is no provision for a person to be executed because of concealing a crime of which that person has knowledge. Therefore this exception to the Seal of the Confessional is not applicable in Australia. In other words, under the terms of that Canon the Seal is absolute.

The Canon Concerning Confessions 1989 makes the following provision in relation to the Seal of the Confessional. *If any person confess his or her secret and hidden sins to an ordained minister for the unburdening of conscience and to receive spiritual consolation and ease of mind, such minister shall not at any time reveal or make known any crime or offence or sin so confessed and committed to trust and secrecy by that person without the consent of that person.*

The proviso contained in the General Synod Canon Concerning Confessions relating to the Seal indicates that the Seal is not binding on the priest who hears the confession if the penitent agrees that such matter may be revealed. This exception has generally been acknowledged by Anglican authorities.

3. The Seal of the Confessional and the Law

The question of whether the law requires disclosure of the content of a confession to which the proviso of Canon 113 or the *Confessions Canon* applies can arise in two different contexts:

(a) firstly, where there is a statutory obligation to report child abuse; and

(b) secondly, when questions are asked about a confession and its contents in court proceedings.

The position as to the mandatory reporting of child abuse differs significantly between the States and Territories. Similarly the position as to the disclosure of a confession in court proceedings differs significantly between the States and Territories. The law is set out on the General Synod website.

It must, however, be remembered that Church law is clear about the Seal of the Confessional that a priest must not reveal any matter disclosed by a penitent in the confessional apart from the proviso of Canon 113 or the *Confessions Canon*.

4. Issues relating to the Seal of the Confessional and Child Sexual Abuse

Until relatively recent times the grave damage that abuse did to the abused person was not properly understood. It was widely assumed that it was an unpleasant experience for a child to be abused but it was not understood that this form of abuse, unlike a broken bone or a serious illness, very often resulted in severe psychological and spiritual damage which would impact upon abused children for the rest of their lives, or for many years, with grave and serious ongoing consequences for personal relationships.

It was also not understood until relatively recent times that sex offenders are very often recidivists. In the light of this understanding and of the enormous suffering that abused people experience it is desirable for the Church to issue special guidelines with reference to private confession and child sexual abuse. This is particularly important given the fact that the Seal of the Confessional is still part of the law of the Church. Resolution 24 of the 2001 General Synod requested the House of Bishops to identify appropriate teaching resources and develop pastoral guidelines for the hearing of private confessions, and to address particular issues raised by confessions of child sexual abuse by a member of the Clergy or a lay leader.

The report of the Clergy Discipline Working Group to the 2001 General Synod referred clearly to the obligation of a priest not to disclose the matter of a confession.

5. Principles Applicable to Private Confessions of Sins and Absolution

The report of the Clergy Discipline Working Group noted in paragraph 25 that three elements must be present before absolution is pronounced: contrition; a full and honest confession of sins; and a purpose of amendment. The report further noted in paragraph 26 that: *Contrition and purpose of amendment would require the following action by the penitent in certain circumstances:*

- a) *where the conduct has caused injury to another person, then reparation or the making of amends for the injury done will be necessary. Where appropriate the priest may give advice as to what sort of reparation will be necessary;*
- b) *where the conduct is criminal, then the reporting of that conduct by the penitent to the Police or other appropriate authority may be necessary;*
- c) *where the penitent is a member of the Clergy and the conduct is inconsistent with the standards to be observed by members of the Clergy, then the reporting of that conduct by the penitent to the bishop of the diocese may be necessary;*
- d) *where the penitent is a lay leader and the conduct is inconsistent with the standards to be observed by the members of the Church, then the reporting of that conduct by the penitent to the person appointing the penitent to his or her leadership may be necessary.*

6. Issues relating to the confession of child sexual abuse

The Report of the Clergy Discipline Working Group stated in paragraph 27:

Special care will need to be taken in the case of a confession of child sexual abuse. It is important for a member of the clergy to whom a confession of child sexual abuse is made to be aware that this area of criminal activity involves the following common elements:

- a) *the abuse is usually secretive and known only to the abuser and the victim;*

- b) *offenders generally do not stop at abusing unless there is some intervening factor;*
- c) *often there is a distortion of cognition involved, for example, a belief that the victim enjoyed the sexual interaction;*
- d) *the abuse generally begins with something minor, and gradually builds up to more involved sexual interaction through a process of grooming;*
- e) *the abuse continues because the child often adopts some form of survival behaviour which the offender interprets as acceptance of the activity;*
- f) *whether based on a preference or not, offenders generally enjoy the activity;*
- g) *the sexual abuse is generally not a self-contained incident – it is part of a relationship that is corrupting and violating;*
- h) *when exposed, offenders will generally attempt to justify, minimize or excuse their behaviour, ranging from blaming the victim, to claiming their behaviour was a result of their own abuse or that they were under the influence of stress or alcohol; and*
- i) *offenders are mostly recidivists.*

Paragraph 29 states:

It follows that in a case of a confession of child sexual abuse by a member of the clergy or lay leader the priest could not responsibly pronounce absolution until appropriate reparation had been made by the penitent. This reparation, apart from exceptional cases, would include an apology to the victim, and the reporting of the conduct both to the police or other appropriate authority and to the bishop of the diocese or to the person appointing him or her to the position of leadership, as the case may be.

It will sometimes be inappropriate for such an apology to be made face to face. The guiding principle should be the wishes of the abused person. If the abused person does not wish to have face to face contact with the abuser, then the apology should be in writing. If, however, the abused person is willing to meet the abuser, then the apology should be given in person. Where the abused person is still a child, then the wishes of the child's parents or guardians must be respected.

7. The action of the priest hearing a confession relating to child sexual abuse

- a) The priest must closely question the penitent concerning the nature of the abuse and the frequency of the abuse.
- b) The priest must indicate to the penitent the grave nature of the sin and the dire consequences abuse will almost certainly have on the abused person.
- c) Before pronouncing absolution, if the priest believes the conduct to be criminal, then apart from exceptional circumstances*, the penitent would be required to report that conduct either to the police or other appropriate authority.
- d) The serious consequences of child sexual abuse have already been noted. The experience of the community at large is that great care must be taken where child sexual abuse has occurred. In particular it is important that people with special training and expertise should handle such matters. It is therefore recommended that the granting of absolution in such cases be reserved to priests holding a special licence or authority from the Bishop. This would mean if a priest heard a person making confession involving child sexual abuse that priest (if not an authorised priest) would be bound to say to the penitent, “I am not authorised to pronounce absolution, however I will facilitate an authorised priest to hear your confession for this purpose”.

* Exceptional circumstances would include a confession made by a person near death.

Guidelines for the Hearing of Confessions and the Granting of Absolution with special reference to Child Sexual Abuse

1. Care must be taken when a penitent comes to confession that the confession is heard and absolution is pronounced according to an authorised rite of the Church.
2. The granting of absolution in confessions involving child sexual abuse is reserved to priests holding a special licence or authority from the bishop.
3. All confessions involving child sexual abuse are to be referred forthwith to a priest holding the bishop's licence to administer absolution in such cases. In other words the priest (unless specially licensed) **must decline to pronounce absolution and refer the matter on.**
4. The penitent is to be given clear direction to seek help and counselling from people qualified to do so.
5. Priests holding the bishop's licence are to receive appropriate training and to be properly informed about what professional help is available.
6. Absolution must be withheld until the priest is satisfied that there is genuine repentance and, apart from exceptional circumstances, until the penitent has reported the matter to the police or other appropriate authority.

These Guidelines were adopted by the Australian Bishops at their Meeting in March, 2006.