



Protecting Children Online

June 2019

In 1991 the National Assembly of the Uniting Church resolved:

- (a) That sexual violence be deplored as a sin against God and humanity....*
- (d) That it be acknowledged that in the past, the church has often made inappropriate responses or no response to victims/survivors of sexual violence. This has been experienced by many as a further violation;*
- (e) That the church be committed to hearing the voices of those who are victims of sexual violence;*
- (f) That the actions of people who work for the end of such violence and who support its victims/survivors be supported;*
- (g) That the urgent need for the church community to become part of a "network of prevention" in the area of sexual violence be recognized;*

As technology has developed it has improved our ability to share information and be more connected. This has created many positive outcomes in our lives, but also has its negative side. It has also provided new tools to those that seek to do harm to others, including those who engage in child sexual abuse. New technologies have allowed those engaged in child sexual abuse to network with each other like never before and to be able to conceal the abuse and harm they cause from the police. Last year the Australian Federal Police received about 18,000 reports of child sexual abuse material being accessed by Australians. This includes a growing number of cases where Australians connect with human traffickers in the Philippines via social media to arrange for the live streaming of a child being sexually abused. In these cases a web camera located in the Philippines is used to stream live video of a child being subjected to sexual abuse with the Australian giving real time instructions on what abuse should be carried out. Hundreds of Australians have been detected involved in this abuse, with any single Australian paedophile paying for hundreds of sessions of abuse over the course of a number of years. A single session of child sexual abuse can cost as little as \$20.

Unfortunately, in some cases people engaged in child sexual abuse have been aided by the actions of technology businesses. Mostly, this is driven by greed. Assisting the police comes at a cost to the profits of these businesses, so some would rather not have to assist and only do so if compelled to do so by the law.

The multinational technology corporations also skimp on having enough staff to screen content being uploaded to their platforms and removing it in a timely manner. There has been very public criticism of social media corporations by the Prime Ministers of both Australia and New Zealand for these corporations not having done enough to remove the live streaming of a massacre of people in two mosques in Christchurch by the terrorist carrying out the attack.

In our Christian faith we understand that greed is malevolent because greed obtains unneeded wealth for one's self at the expense of another. Thomas Aquinas put it this way, greed "is a sin directly against one's neighbour, since one man cannot over-abound in external riches, without another man lacking them." The Uniting Church has also committed itself to the struggle against child sexual abuse, both within the churches and the wider community.

We have been attempting to engage with some of the multinational technology corporations to clarify their policies on how they address human rights abuses that are facilitated by their platforms. While Facebook has been helpful, Google has ignored our requests for clarification of their policies and practices.

The Financial Times reported that videos and images of children being sexually abused were being openly shared on Facebook's WhatsApp on a vast scale. Israeli researchers warned Whatsapp that it was easy to find and join dozens of chat groups where people were sharing images and videos of children being sexually abuses. In one case, one of these groups had 256 members.

The re-elected Morrison Government has promised a number of actions to protect children online, which deserve our support, in the face of opposition from some of the multinational technology corporations.

The Morrison Government has promised to:

- Introduce a new Online Safety Act to ensure that Australian laws keep pace with technology change and make sure that safety is embedded in the online world;
- Strengthen obligations for technology corporations to have to remove and block illegal extremist content;
- Make it a crime to provide a website or chat forum to facilitate online dealings with child abuse material;
- Introduce mandatory requirements for major social media platforms to have to report on the number, type and response to reports and complaints about illegal, abusive and predatory content by their users;
- Invest \$1.5 million in the Office of the eSafety Commissioner to provide targeted advice to help women with an intellectual disability and/or communication difficulties to identify and report online abuse, and to enable the safety features on their devices and online accounts;
- Provide up to \$2.5 million for the Office of the eSafety Commissioner to work with and assist First People women in communities across Australia to identify, report and protect themselves and their children from technology-facilitated abuse;
- Establish an Online Safety Charter that states the expectations of the government on what technology corporations should be doing to provide safer products;
- Work with the international community and the G20 to eliminate the ability of terrorists to use the online world to encourage, normalise, recruit, facilitate or commit terrorist or violent acts;
- Work with state and territory governments to develop national principles and a consistent approach to combatting criminal cyber-bullying and online harassment; and
- Amend the *Privacy Act 1988* to protect Australians' privacy online and ensure that social media corporations do not misuse personal information they collect, particularly about children.

Earlier this year the Morrison Government introduced the *Combating Child Sexual Exploitation Legislation Amendment Bill 2019*, but it failed to pass through the Parliament before the election. It would be desirable for this Bill to be brought back and passed.

The Bill introduces criminal offences for:

- A public servant who negligently fails to reduce or remove the risk a child under their care, supervision or authority being sexually abused;
- The use of the online world to advertise or solicit child-like sex dolls, or use our postal services to send child-like sex dolls;
- Possession of child-like sex dolls;
- Possession or control of child abuse material in the form of data held in a computer or contained in a data storage device; and
- Causing a person to enter into a forced marriage.

What You Can Do

Write polite and respectful letters to:

The Hon Paul Fletcher MP

Minister for Communications, Cyber Safety and the Arts
PO Box 6022
House of Representatives
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

The Hon Peter Dutton MP

Minister for Home Affairs
PO Box 6022
House of Representatives
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Salutation: Dear Minister

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Points to make in your letter:

- Thank the Commonwealth Government for their efforts to make the online world safer for all people, including children.
- Seek their assurance that the Government will bring back the *Combating Child Sexual Exploitation Legislation Amendment Bill 2019* to be passed through the Parliament when it sits again.
- Ask that the Government introduce a criminal offence for a technology corporation to not report to police evidence of criminal offences and destroying such evidence through the use of overseas content managers.