

Scottish Child Abuse Inquiry

Witness Statement of

Ronnie McEwan

Support person present: Yes

1. My name is Alexander Ronald McEwan, I am known as Ronnie. My date of birth is [REDACTED] 1954. My contact details are known to the Inquiry.

My first years of ministry were in London. I was employed by Inner London Education Authority and worked in two different youth projects and finally for the ILEA youth service. I lived in the Marist Brothers community at the Angel, Islington. I subsequently went to the West Midlands and worked in the Youth Service for the Metropolitan Borough of Wolverhampton and lived in the local community in Wolverhampton.

2. I returned to work in Scotland in July 1989 and was posted to Kinharvie House, Dumfries. This was a retreat centre, concentrating on spiritual development for young people run by a mixed community of Marist Brothers, Marist Sisters, Marist Fathers and lay people. This was an encounter programme aimed at developing relationships and spirituality. The community provided the educational input and the staff accompanying the students provided supervision.

Role as Provincial

3. While I was based at Kinharvie House I was appointed Provincial in 1993/94 and covered United Kingdom and Cameroon at that time. The role involved the oversight of the Marist Brothers in the UK and Cameroon. It was more of a pastoral role ensuring that the communities and ministries we were involved in were viable.

4. Professional advisors assisted me and I had an elected Council of Brothers. We sought advice from many different professional people. This would include legal advice from solicitors, financial advice from our accountant all of which was necessary because of our charitable status. There would be others giving advice on insurance and some who looked after the property and fabric of the buildings. The Council would meet on a regular basis to ensure we were looking after requests for moves from Brothers, the general welfare of the Brothers and to deal with any requests from Rome. During this period, my main focus was dealing with the downsizing of our Province and closure of some of our communities.
5. The normal period of appointment as Provincial is a three-year tenure with the possibility of re-election for a further three years. I was re-elected for a second term and asked to continue for an additional year to facilitate a worldwide reorganisation of the Institute. After the 7 years as Provincial, I was asked to do a further three years as the country leader. This period of leadership ended in 2003
6. After finishing as Provincial, I continued to work within the Marist Brothers in various administrative roles, including acting as safeguarding officer. The role of safeguarding officer is to offer pastoral care to anyone making a complaint of child abuse against the Marist Brothers. This role came into being after the Scottish Bishops' Conference, in consultation with the Conference of Religious for Scotland, instigated a protocol to deal with abuse.
7. As Provincial based in Scotland and covering the UK, I was accountable to the Superior General of the Marist Brothers, who is based in Rome. In the earlier days of my role, this would be speaking on the telephone, written communication via letter, FAX or meetings with other Provincials from Europe. During my time as Provincial, the Superior General was Benito Arbues. I found him to be a supportive and caring leader. His Vicar General was also a great support.
8. My time as Provincial/Leader ended sixteen years ago in 2003 and at the end, I felt I had done as much as I could for the organisation. I was replaced by Jacques Scholte, then Joseph McKee followed by Brendan Geary. The current Provincial is Robert

Thunus who is based in Brussels. Previously, before the reorganisation in 2000 there were Provincials in Belgium/ Netherlands, Germany, Ireland and the UK.

9. St Joseph's College had been handed over to the care of the local authority long before I became Provincial. Likewise, St Columba's had closed 10 years before I became Provincial.
10. When I took over as Provincial there were no schools run by the Marist Brothers in Scotland. They had all been returned to the local authority or the properties had been sold. Furthermore, at that time, there were no outstanding abuse complaints thus there were no formal procedures in place as to how the Brothers should deal with allegations of abuse.
11. Very soon into beginning my role, I received a visit from the police with the first allegation of abuse. I decided I would deal with all complaints personally due to the fact that I considered this to be a serious matter that merited my involvement. I did not want anyone else distressed with the matters being discussed. I had the assistance of our provincial council as and when required. At that time, there were four or five other members of the council to draw assistance from. The members of the council were all Marist Brothers.
12. As there were no procedures in place for dealing with complaints at that time, I implemented procedures when I took on the role as Provincial. I would personally meet with the complainant as the first point of contact. I would listen to their complaint and make sure that they understood I was taking the information they were providing seriously. I would always offer an apology on behalf of the organisation. If it was appropriate and if the person presenting the allegation, felt it would be helpful I would offer counselling/therapy which we would pay for. The complaints I dealt with were all of a historical nature.

During my time as Provincial, I dealt with all of the complaints received. When I finished as Provincial, I continued to be the person dealing with complaints. I am not sure as to the exact number of complaints I dealt with but they are all contained within the files

of the Marist Brothers which have been provided to the Inquiry. Most of the offences relating to St Joseph's and St Columba's occurred in the early 1980's whilst I was working down South. Others had happened before I became a Marist Brother.

13. The first complaint I dealt with was in relation to an individual named Stephen Behan. The Police, following their receipt of an email from him dated 12th March 2002, referred this complaint to us. I understand that Mr Behan presented himself to Pitt Street Police Station, Glasgow, to make his complaint. I spoke with two of the police officers involved and I believe their names were Kate and Jean. They were extremely helpful and supportive. The complaint itself was of a sexual nature and was referred to the Child and Family Unit in Dumfries, as it occurred at St Joseph's College.
14. At Mr Behan's request, I met with him at his home address and provided him with an apology, on behalf of our organisation. I also offered him counselling. I was aware at that time the person named in the complaint was Brother MFI. As well as visiting Mr Behan, I also called in to the Community to speak with the local Brothers. I was looking to see if any of them were aware of what happened with Stephen Behan or any other similar incidents. I also informed them that there was a possibility of the investigation leading to a criminal prosecution.
15. I took steps to ascertain Brother MFI whereabouts and subsequently found out he was in Ireland. I thereafter spoke with Brother MYZ, SNR at St Joseph's College at the relevant time, as the abuse had allegedly taken place there. He assured me he had no knowledge of inappropriate behaviour. I wanted to find out if he was aware of any issues whilst Brother MFI was at the school. He told me there were no other complaints at that time and that Brother MFI was a good teacher; he did not see him as a threat to any of the pupils.
16. My next step was to make contact with the Provincial in Ireland, Patrick Joseph McGowan, to ensure that Brother MFI was not still involved with children/students. I also informed him that Brother MFI would be required to return to Glasgow for questioning. This was arranged. I went to Ireland and explained the situation to

Brother MFI [REDACTED], telling him he needed to accompany me back to Glasgow for questioning by the police. We travelled back to Scotland that evening.

Police Officers interviewed him the following day. The decision at the end of the police investigation was to take no action. Brother MFI [REDACTED] returned to Ireland and as a precaution, he was no longer allowed any contact with children/students. He was upset about this but it was explained to him it was not only to protect the children/students but also to ensure there were no further accusations.

17. Another complaint I investigated, involved Brother Damian McCann, whilst he was a Brother at St Joseph's College. We received this complaint via letter in October 1996. At that time, Brother Damian was based in Dundee. I travelled to Dundee to bring him to Glasgow. He was subsequently questioned by police officers and denied any wrongdoing. A prosecution did not follow due to Brother Damian's ill health. At the time he had been diagnosed with terminal cancer.
18. We also received a number of complaints via solicitors who represented complainers. I recall receiving one against Brother AKV [REDACTED] during his time at St Joseph's College. From the information we were provided with, I understood that the complainer initially disclosed the abuse to his wife in or around 1996/1997 and thereafter sent a letter to us. At the time of the letter being received, AKV [REDACTED] was no longer part of the Marist Brothers and resided in [REDACTED]. I assisted in having him brought back to Scotland where he [REDACTED] for sexual offences. He was remanded within [REDACTED] prison. Whilst there, I arranged for Douglas Welsh, one of our Brothers, to visit him. This was simply to offer pastoral support. I believe AKV [REDACTED] shortly after he was released from prison.
19. As with other complaints reported to the police and to our solicitors, the only details the Marist Brothers would hold, would be contained within the files which we have sent to the Inquiry.

The most recent complaint was against AKU [REDACTED]. The complaint came via the police and the officer leading the case was Colin Jones. We provided pictures of AKU [REDACTED]

AKU I was concerned that the police acted quickly as I believed he might be working as a teacher in the middle east. At the time of receiving these complaints, AKU was in fact in Scotland. The abuse he was accused of took place in Largs when he was still under temporary vows with the Marist Brothers. He never made final vows.

I am not sure if he taught at St Columba's or what his exact role was within the school/community. After leaving the Marist Brothers, he moved to [REDACTED] and taught with the [REDACTED] AKU [REDACTED] was eventually [REDACTED] [REDACTED]. Again, as with other complaints reported to the police and to our solicitors, the only details the Marist Brothers would hold, would be contained within papers already submitted to the inquiry. I have no knowledge of AKU [REDACTED] AKU [REDACTED]

20. Another complaint came from a patient at the Crichton Hospital, Dumfries. I was contacted and made aware that a person was being treated there and had made allegations against Brother MFQ [REDACTED] during his time at St Columba's, Largs. I was told that he wished to confront him about how he had been treated. I believe that he was persuaded to come and see me by the staff at the Crichton who told me they were happy to refer the patient to me, as they were content their patient would be treated compassionately. As well as making contact with him, I informed the police of these allegations. I am not sure of the exact date but the information will be contained within the files provided to the inquiry. By the time this was reported to us and subsequently investigated, Brother MFQ [REDACTED] was suffering from severe diabetes and this illness resulted in him having [REDACTED]. He also suffered from delirium. Again, the decision from the Procurator Fiscal Service was not to proceed with this prosecution due to ill-health. I am not certain as to who informed us of this decision.

Reporting of Abuse

21. All complaints made against the Marist Brothers were not only investigated by us but they were also referred to the police or we in turn would receive disclosure from the police. I tried to make sure we had a good, ongoing relationship with the police with regard to the issues being investigated. We always co-operated fully with the police

Records

22. The records showing the complaints, which I investigated, are all held by the Marist Brothers. I was fully aware of confidentiality issues. I was sensitive to the detail being kept. As explained, whenever I dealt with a complaint I would try and meet with the complainer to confirm the details of their complaint. If it was appropriate, an apology would be offered along with the offer of independent counselling services. If the Marist Brothers received the complaint, we passed those details to the police for them to carry out any inquiries they deemed necessary. If the Police received the complaint, they normally came to us and we would confirm the details we held on our records for each complainer. We felt and continue to feel it is our role to offer pastoral care to the complainers and if they wish to pursue financial compensation, we would fully co-operate with the process. I would always offer to meet with the person making the allegation and we would ask the police to pass on this offer.

Lessons to be learned

All the victims that I have met with, wished for a better past. This was painful to hear, as this is something that we cannot provide. Our focus was to try to help with the present healing process. There are always going to be people who will try to get around procedures that are in place, but the tighter the procedures, the less likelihood of these types of incidents recurring in the future. I believe the checks and procedures we now have in place are robust.

23. If we were accepting new members, to the Marist Brothers in Scotland today (which we are not) there would be more psychological checks than have been previously carried out on applicants; there would be more rigorous screening before acceptance of new Brothers into the Institute.

Other information

24. As stated, when I finished in my role as Provincial in 2003, I continued to deal with the complaints submitted to the Marist Brothers. I still firmly believe that even one complaint is too many. All the allegations made, go against all our vows and it hurts me personally, as well as the other Brothers that members of our Order have behaved in such a destructive and abusive way.
25. As an organisation, we are open and willing to accept civil actions being taken against the order. It allows us to be more open and to show people nothing is being hidden; we want people to know that we are taking steps to prevent anything like this happening again. There have only been [REDACTED] and this [REDACTED] AKV [REDACTED]. As stated, we worked with [REDACTED] to assist with [REDACTED] AKV [REDACTED]. We were concerned as he was still working with children over there. The [REDACTED] action raised, was dismissed at court due to a time bar issue. I am not aware of any other actions at this time.

Additional Comments

26. I would like to address comments, which have been made during oral evidence to the inquiry by an applicant, LZW [REDACTED], regarding my involvement with him.
27. As aforementioned, I dealt with all complaints, which were received by the Marist Brothers. I understand that LZW [REDACTED] got in touch with Brother Brendan Geary. Brendan was Provincial at the time. Brother Brendan advised LZW [REDACTED] via email, that another Brother would be in touch with him to discuss the nature of the complaint. A copy of this email is produced herewith.
28. Once Brother Brendan sent his initial email, I also sent an email to LZW [REDACTED] advising who I was and offering to meet with him. He responded promptly and our first meeting was arranged. This email is attached.

29. I thereafter met with [LZW] in February 2014 at Hotel Du Vin in Glasgow. This was our first meeting, thus, as a matter of courtesy I introduced myself and explained who I was. I advised him that I was the Brother responsible for meeting with anyone who was a victim of abuse within the United Kingdom. My role was to listen and to see whether there was any scope for pastoral support, which we may be able to offer.
30. I began our meeting by apologising that we had to meet under such circumstances and acknowledging that the decision to come forward must have been very difficult for him to have made. We thereafter discussed his complaint and what we could do moving forward.
31. I understand that reference has been made to my citing of Celtic Football Club. I wish to deny this. At no point did I mention Celtic Football Club, as it had no relevance to our meeting.
32. During the course of this first meeting, I advised [LZW] that it was our policy to inform the police of any criminal allegations which were made. I asked him to provide me with his details to allow me to pass these onto the police. At first he was reluctant to pass on his details. I said I understood and asked him to think about it and let me know if he changed his mind. I contacted Dumfries Police and my first point of contact was Jim Murray. I explained to him that I met with a past pupil who made an allegation about a brother but he wished to remain anonymous. He asked if the brother was alive and I confirmed he was dead. He said this did not prove to be a threat as there could be no prosecution. Shortly after this call, I received an email from [LZW] confirming he was happy for me to pass on his details to the police. At this time, we were having a change in personnel. The Brother who was the safeguarding officer had been appointed to a position in Rome. The Brother taking over the safeguarding role was given [LZW] details. Later I discovered he had not passed on the information to the police. I picked this up again and tried to contact Jim Murray at Dumfries. Unfortunately, I was advised that he no longer worked within the constabulary. When I told the operator that this particular complaint related to abuse at St Columba's, Largs, they advised me to contact Kilmarnock Police Station. I rang, and was told there was no one present who could assist me. I did this a few times,

with no success. I thereafter spoke with Brother Brendan and he advised that he had a contact through the Galloway Diocese and would see if he could get the name of the best person to talk to. The name given to me was Detective Sergeant Pauline Thomson. I wrote to her and subsequently she and a colleague took a statement from me and assured me they would be in touch with [LZW].

33. Given the passage of time, I cannot recall the exact content of my conversation with [LZW]. However, I believe we had an informative discussion about the history of St Columba's, the Marist Brothers and how we could assist him in dealing with his complaint. I advised him that I was not aware of the set up in Largs, however, I did confirm that I was aware of some Brothers going to Largs for a break during the holiday period. I did not have any knowledge as to how the school was established in Largs.
34. I felt that my first meeting with [LZW] was positive and I believed he was grateful to us for meeting with him. Immediately after our first meeting, I sent [LZW] an email thanking him for coming to meet with me and confirming that we would contact Police Scotland. He responded positively. A copy of this email correspondence is attached for the Inquiry's attention.
35. I met with [LZW] on a second occasion at the Kinharvie Institute in Glasgow in September 2014. I again greeted him warmly and after our meeting he asked me to come out to meet his wife who was waiting for him in their car. I advised him that I was still chasing the Police investigation and that I had not heard back from them yet. As our conversation developed, he introduced the topic of financial compensation. I explained to him that unfortunately, we did not have a 'fund' for these cases. As we were a charity, we had to provide rationale for paying out monies and this was best done through legal channels. I explained that we did not want him or anyone to think that we were buying their silence nor did we know how to measure an appropriate level of compensation.
36. I understood at that time, that he had not told his children about the abuse and his meetings with me. I asked him if I could move out of my pastoral role and into more of a therapeutic role. I believe that I may have stated that I would encourage him to let

his family know of his meetings with me. I believe I advised him that a lot of abuse is built on secrets and lies, which can damage relationships. I thereafter advised him that we were more than willing to provide him with counselling, which we subsequently did.

37. Again, I followed up our second meeting with an email to LZW confirming that we were more than happy to provide him with counselling and my advice with regards to telling his daughters. A copy of this email is attached.
38. I met with LZW on a final occasion in February 2015, at his home in England. I contacted him directly and suggested that I travelled down to meet him, given that he had met with me twice in Glasgow. The purpose of this meeting was to discuss the possibility of a donation from the Marist Brothers, to a charity of his choice. Our Provincial believed that some financial payment by us to another charity may bring an element of closure to LZW. It was decided by the Safeguarding Group that this would be better discussed with LZW personally as there were reservations about this as being a way forward.
39. Unfortunately, LZW did not wish a donation to be made and stated he wanted to be personally compensated. I advised him that there was no difficulty with this, however, he would have to explore this via the legal system. I believe he instructed a solicitor and the case was subsequently called in Court.
40. LZW asked me about another male who was also a victim of Brother Germanus' abuse. I advised LZW that we did not have contact details for him, and that contact would be made via our respective legal representatives. A copy of this email correspondence is attached for the Inquiry's attention.
41. I understand that reference has been made to me attending at St Columba's, Largs, on a group visit with other Marist Brothers. I wish to clarify that I have never attended St Columba's, nor did I attend on any group trips. I did not have any contact with students at St Columba's. From 1978, I was based in London.

42. I hope that people coming forward to the Inquiry feel their voice is being heard and that their pain is believed and acknowledged. This Inquiry has come too late for some people. Fair compensation through redress hopefully will be put in place for the actions of abusers. I hope that people will be able to move on from their pain, once it has been acknowledged.
43. I believe the facts stated in this witness statement are true.

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Signed.....

Dated: 22 October 2019