

HOW CHURCH PROTECTED A PAEDO PRIEST AND LEFT A BOY AT BREAKING POINT

Mourners lauded Anglican Reverend Michael Painter at his funeral, despite knowing his sordid secrets. 30 years on, victims still fight for justice

Tim Clarke SPECIAL REPORT

“Do I tell of his charm, his charisma, his wit and humour? His special gifts as pastor, preacher and teacher?

“His unselfishness, his lack of concern for material things, his perceptiveness, his concern for the little people of the Gospel?

“Or do I tell of his seemingly endless capacity to be interested and relate to people of all sorts of conditions?”

So poured the praise for Reverend Michael Painter at his funeral three decades ago.

Among the 1000 mourners listening to the glistening memorial was the Archbishop of Perth, Peter Carnley, along with 90 of the Perth clergy.

A huge remembrance of a life seemingly given to God before that life was taken by Michael Painter’s own hand. A suicide that shocked and aggrieved those who knew him.

“A highly respected and greatly loved priest,” wrote one parishioner.

“We loved and respected our brother Michael in life, as we love him still,” other clergy opined in a letter to the editor.

An incredible cascade of affection. Incredible for several reasons. The main reason was that all of those at Painter’s funeral knew what the 54-year-old was.

Not just a priest, but a paedophile – self-confessed and convicted not two weeks before he killed himself.

That suicide came on the day The Sunday Times revealed on its front page that Michael Painter had, that week, admitted sex offences against a 16-year-old boy.

He said that he had more charges pending from another alleged victim.

And that the Church had known since at least 1979 of grave concerns about Painter's behaviour. But the previous archbishop, Geoffrey Sambell, publicly forgave him, allowing him to continue in the priesthood. And continue to abuse.

After the news of Painter's suicide became public, the Church did not quarrel with any of the printed allegations about its priest's abuse.

What it did fiercely complain about, however, was how the newspaper had exposed the reverend.

"As a society, we have yet to develop the maturity to be able to handle such matters in a balanced and civilised way," Archbishop Carnley said.

"The reporting of such matters needs to avoid the exaggerating distortions that are inevitably introduced by the desire to sensationalise, and the ever-present tendency to homophobia that always seems to be just below the surface in our society."

Furious letters to The Sunday Times written by other supporters of Painter – which ran on this equivalent weekend 30 years ago – aped the Church's outrage while also blaming his victim.

"Your front-page article was a disgraceful example of exaggeration, innuendo, stereotyping and supposition. This trial by media triggered a man's suicide," read one.

"His victim, or possible victims, not only have to live with the effect of his actions but now must live with their guilt for his death."

Benny was also devastated that Painter was dead. But not for the same reasons as his Church and his flock.

"He took the coward's way out," Benny says now. "And I was furious. They gave Painter this incredible funeral. And all of the priests turned up in support.

"This was the 90s we're talking about; there was enough of an idea around. There was a conviction. And there was just an egregious cover-up and lies."

With Painter dead, Benny truly thought his chance for redemption – for justice – had gone to the grave with him, along with the truth of what had happened to him when he was a boy.

It was in 1973, when Benny was 11, that he first came into contact with Painter through a youth group run by the Church in the western suburbs.

“That’s how I ended up being groomed,” he recalls. “Organising to drop me home in his vehicle. Pick me up after school, drop me at church. He managed to isolate me and abuse me.

“He groped me . . . molested me in the robing room. In his car by the river. And there were a number of rapes. It was absolutely horrendous.”

A move overseas with his family broke the abusive cycle. But the damage to Benny was done. Shame, silence and fear followed.

“Painter was just so charismatic,” he says. “He did put the fear into me that you don’t talk – and you won’t be believed. I went through high school suffering from trauma. And I kept this all incredibly quiet.”

Until years later – because of the relationship strains, the career issues, the depression and the anxiety, he couldn’t keep quiet any more.

First, Benny told his best friend. Then, his father. And then the Church.

A Church that already knew Painter was a predator.

Because the priest himself had admitted assaulting a 16-year-old while that young man had been asleep in a Mount Hawthorn rectory in 1984.

Because he was facing more allegations of an aggravated sexual assault of another 13-year-old boy.

Because after Painter’s death, yet more alleged victims had come forward to talk of their ordeals with him. The Church had known for years before that and had done nothing but grant absolution and give more postings.

“They told me ‘there’s nothing that we can do’ because Painter’s dead,” Benny said. “And I was told if I wanted any help, I had to sign a deed of release saying I wouldn’t take any action.

“I just pretty well gave up – I’d write a letter every year or so, telling them I still needed help. I’d get nothing. They never told me how many victims there were; by then, they would have known.

“And the horrendous thing is that it was only the royal commission that blew it all apart.”

Reverend Michael Painter was never publicly discussed during the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse.

But it heard about him.

Benny reveals he gave evidence about his experience behind closed doors about Painter and the Anglican Church, and he presumes others also did.

And it gave him a new voice. And new purpose.

“It was more than cathartic. The royal commissioners were empathetic, understanding,” he says. “It was so healing for me to do that. I’ve got strength from it.”

Strength enough to begin another fight for compensation from the Church for the damage done.

In 2018, with WA’s laws changed to take away the time limits imposed on historical claims of sexual abuse, the door to the courts was unlocked for so many survivors who believed they would remain shut to them forever.

Hundreds have pushed that door ajar. And many have found the path that lies beyond – the path to compensation and affirmation – paved with more pain, much more pain than it should be.

“This process was incredibly traumatic,” Benny says. “It took from 2018 to 2023. We had a claim that was solid. And, you know, the Church just did not want to – in any way – engage. My lawyers were just brilliant with it. They were patient, they were compassionate. But it just took forever.”

Despite Painter having admitted in court that he had abused before, despite other charges being laid before his death, and despite other claimants against Painter in other cases, Benny’s case dragged on for five years.

And it still looked like it would have to go to trial until two days out, when the Perth Diocesan Trustees finally agreed to a settlement. It was for more than \$1 million – one of the

larger payouts in WA for a survivor since the law changed.

“I was an absolute mess,” Benny says. “And it was only with (barrister) Tim Hammond and Rightside Legal fighting to the last breath that we got an offer that was liveable.”

Rightside Legal specialises in historical sexual abuse claims. It won the first case in this State, the case against Barry Cable, and the only two trials held since the legislation changed.

And it has not finished with Michael Painter.

“Painter left a trail of destruction across Perth and in regional WA, and the Anglican Church enabled that by turning a blind eye to many red flags,” says senior associate Julia Wedlock. “This survivor’s story highlights again the devastating impact childhood sexual abuse can have. But there are many Painter victims out there who have never come forward – those people desperately deserve support and recognition.”

When The Sunday Times recently asked the Church about Benny’s case, it said: “It is not appropriate . . . to discuss public matters relating to an individual survivor.”

“The Church is respectful of and responsive to individual survivors’ needs,” said the Diocesan secretary and executive officer Keith Stephens. “The civil legal process is often lengthy for a range of different reasons. It is in the interests of all parties for matters to be resolved as quickly as possible.”

It also failed to directly answer any of The Sunday Times’ questions about Michael Painter.

But it had to fess up when asked about him in WA Parliament last year.

Five years on from the legal changes, the Community Development and Justice Standing Committee embarked on inquiries about the experience of survivors seeking compensation. What members of that committee found was yet more pain.

“Some of their stories were horrific, to say the least. But their experience within our judicial system shocked me even more,” Burns Beach MP Mark Folkard told Parliament.

“Basically, the system that has been produced effectively re-traumatises survivors. That is wrong. And we saw institutions ducking and diving, trying to avoid answering questions.”

Some of those questions were put by the committee to the Perth Diocese of the Anglican Church and current Archbishop, Kay Goldsworthy.

In her evidence, the Archbishop insisted the Church “always wanted, hoped and, I think, at many times, thought, that we were doing the best thing that was possible”.

But when pushed about the survivors’ accounts of denials, of moving priests, of aggressive actions towards them – “effectively covering up what had gone on” – Archbishop Goldsworthy could not avoid the question.

“I do not think I could say that we have never done that,” she said.

The Church put on the Parliamentary record that between 1960 and 1988 Reverend Painter was deployed at parishes in Nedlands, Gosnells, Morawa, Mt Hawthorn, Beaconsfield and the Parkerville Children and Youth Care facility.

In that time, according to Church records, 14 young people were sexually abused by him, making him the most prolific Anglican paedophile priest in WA history.

Known about in 1979. Known about in 1994.

Known about in 2012 – when the mother of another of Painter’s victims told of how her little boy took his own life in 1976 before Painter actually conducted his funeral service. Yet fought over in court with Benny for more than five years.

“Despite the Church’s claim to be trauma-informed and showing compassion to survivors, we had to drag them to the brink of trial before achieving a fair and just outcome,” Rightside Legal’s Ms Wedlock says. “What churches have to recognise is that times have changed, the legal obstacles have gone, and there’s a level playing field for survivors to fight on.”

Benny’s fight is now done. He has some peace, some acknowledgement of what happened to him. His life is tranquil, whereas once, it was in turmoil. He also has a new purpose: to help others who have experienced similar trauma by gently offering advocacy for those who have also suffered and survived.

“The Church just has to change – fighting people tooth and nail,” Benny says.

“I am resilient. But we do lose people and don’t need any more casualties. They are not Christian in the way they behave.

“There is no ethics, no transparency.”

Benny has met and shared time and trust with many survivors. But no one else who was abused by Painter. Yet.

“If you’re out there, just come forward. We know there are 14. We think there’s more. There are more,” he says.

The name Benny is a pseudonym

Those with information on Reverend Michael Painter can contact

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