

LIFEBOAT GEELONG FOUNDATION

ANNUAL REPORT - 2025

The year 2025 has been one of significant progress and development for “Lifeboat” - not necessarily one of spectacular achievements but, by and large, we have “been there” for our clients where and when they have needed “Lifeboat’s” support and help in any number of different ways.

Following on from the 2023/24 Review of “Lifeboat”, we have tried to put into practice some of the insights, inspirations and recommendations which came from the Review. After 13 years of operation, “Lifeboat” can look back (hopefully with a degree of satisfaction!) at what has been achieved since we began in 2012. Many survivors have been helped, encouraged and “kept afloat” (pardon the pun!) by the “Lifeboat Foundation”.

However, what has sadly proved to be elusive for “Lifeboat” is to somehow help break down the defences and denials of the institutional Church regarding the horrendous damage that has been caused to individuals, their families and so many others – lifelong damage which has dismayed, discouraged, disengaged and disgusted so many for so long. The revelations of the past few decades, when added to the long history of clerical sexual abuse, has been a total betrayal of the fundamental command of Jesus to *“Love one another as I have loved you”*. However, years of cover-up and denial has meant that this betrayal has been a shock indeed to the vast bulk of the people of the Church across the last fifty years, in the Western Church especially.

Nonetheless, “Lifeboat has certainly changed, a little, if not a lot for the individuals we have assisted. And ultimately it is the individuals that matter. That has been made possible by the goodness and generosity of so many supporters who give of their time, their listening and their financial support. In so doing, they have done much to assist our “clients” who, as innocent victims, had their lives changed forever by those they had been told they could trust totally.

The “Lifeboat” Staff:

The word “staff” is not really applicable to our key people, as they are our “front line”, and our “heart and soul”, especially in our direct and personal contact with victims / survivors. Sincere gratitude to our Administrator / Secretary (Cath O’Reilly), our Client Support Officers (Trudy Maiden and Josephine Barnes), and (when his health allows it) our Property Advisor (Patrick Caruana). They all give so much of themselves, and along with our Board and many volunteers and supporters, they allow “Lifeboat” to do what it does.

Now we are about to enter our fourteenth year - and they said it wouldn't last! Well, it has lasted until now, and we are doing our best to continue to do what "Lifeboat" set out to do back in 2012.

The "Lifeboat" Board:

On a structural level, the role of the Board has become more significant in taking responsibility for all operations of our organisation. The Board has met monthly and has been able to keep track of the many issues concerning "Lifeboat's" service and our duties to the people we strive to serve.

Membership of the Board has changed a little in 2025, with Sue Wilson and Terry Falkingham, who have given wonderful and dedicated service to "Lifeboat" over quite some years, both stepping away from the Board itself, but fortunately with neither being lost to our organisation and our work.

Brian Kenneally has come onto the Board, bringing with him his own experience and wisdom as a survivor. Unfortunately, Brian's health issues have prevented him from attending many meetings, but we look forward to him being able to strengthen his involvement in 2026.

Current Board membership is Fr. Kevin Dillon AM (Chair), Kevin Larkins (Deputy Chair), David Maiden, Ian Kelly (Treasurer), Bruce Lindsay (Legal Advisor), and Cath O'Reilly (Administration). The Board anticipates inviting at least one and possibly two new members joining it in 2026.

From "Committee" to "Forum":

A clear recommendation from the 2023/24 Review was that while recognising the critical importance of the Board in overseeing the overall management of "Lifeboat", our organisation needed to retain a consistent "open door" approach and enable all those who support us to be involved and to be able to "have a say".

Accordingly, the Lifeboat "Forum" has replaced the "Committee" of earlier years. Beginning in July this year, the bi-monthly "Forum" meetings, chaired by Kevin Larkins, have been an open session and have allowed all people attending (whether in person at the Yacht Club or by "Zoom") to participate and offer their ideas and suggestions, the intention being to help "Lifeboat" work in the most effective way for the benefit and wellbeing of our clients.

Most importantly, the focus of the "Forum" has proved to be the input from and responses to our Guest Speakers. We have been most fortunate in the quality of the speakers who have given of their time, knowledge and experience. They have made a wonderful contribution to each of the three "Forum" meetings conducted in July, September and November this year.

Dr Michael Leahy, whose book “Descending into Hell and Rising Again” is covered in a little greater detail in this Report, provided a wonderful commencement to the “Forum” format in July, and he was followed in September Dr. Jo Durkin, who is leading the St. Vincent’s Health Care research into the spiritual damage caused by church-related sexual abuse. Other speakers at the same Forum were courageous lawyer Dr. Judy Courtin, and Marita Van Gemert, who gave a powerful and moving testimony to the effect of church-related sexual abuse on herself and her family.

Our intrepid Client Support Officer (CSO) for the Melbourne area, Trudy Maiden, will be the Speaker the November Forum, which will precede the Annual Barbecue at the Geelong Yacht Club on November 25.

Finance Committee:

In accord with the recommendation of the 2023/24 “Lifeboat” Review, a Finance Committee has been established to oversee fundraising and the overall financial management of “Lifeboat”. While not necessarily a fundraising committee in itself, the Finance Committee will be responsible for the financial strategy of “Lifeboat”, and the management of our finances.

The Committee will meet at least four times each year, and where necessary and appropriate, will make recommendations to the Board, which will have the ultimate oversight of and responsibility for “Lifeboat’s” finances.

We are fortunate to have been able to secure the support and skill of wonderful people as members of the Finance Committee, including Ian Kelly (our dedicated Treasurer), Judy Schmidt (Senior Partner, Arrow Private Wealth – Financial Advisors), Howard Pratt (highly-experienced retired auditor), and Adam Kaali (retired accountant and manager in recent years of our most effective “Car Donation” project). Fr. Kevin will join the initial meetings of the Committee to assist the new members understand more fully the “Lifeboat” work, vision and mission, and how the funds so generously raised and donated by our supporters can continue to be used in the most effective and responsible ways.

Car Donation Project:

The “Car Donation Project” has continued during 2025, in some cases providing our clients with an upgraded motor vehicle, and in other cases “turning the car into cash” by sale, thereby significantly assisting our general fund-raising. For example, one most generous donation of a quality vehicle raised just under \$20,000 upon sale.

Sincere thanks to Adam Kaali who has done an extraordinary job in (pardon the pun again!) driving the Car Donation Project for the past four or five years. Understandably Adam is trying to hand over this responsibility to someone with a little more energy

than he can muster just at the moment. So, while the concept of the donation of cars remains valid and can still be most productive, it is the “personnel” factor that needs to be addressed to keep it going into the future. From the beginning of 2026, we will be actively looking to find two or three people (preferably in different areas of Melbourne) who may be willing to continue the work that Adam has been doing single-handedly for these past few years.

Loss of Marie Cogan:

For those who were privileged to know her, the death, in June, of Marie Cogan has proved to be one of the most devastating and upsetting experiences for “Lifeboat” in its 13- year history.

Marie had attended several “Lifeboat” meetings. and as a survivor herself, had been assisted in ways that had made a great difference to her, and for which she was deeply grateful. Her own gracious presence at meetings was always deeply appreciated.

“Lifeboat” has always maintained that the protocols, strategies and tactics employed by the Church and its lawyers have all too often proved destructive, if not inhuman to clients whose lives had already been traumatised by Church personnel. Marie, a quiet, gentle and dignified lady, was always deeply appreciative of “Lifeboat’s” support and practical help, but not even these were sufficient to overcome the destructive nature of both the original abuse she suffered (extending over several years), and the process she was required to undergo by the Church in order to achieve any sense of justice or recognition for what she had suffered.

Much more can and should probably be said, but for the purposes of this “2025 Lifeboat Annual Report”, that’s probably enough – at least for now.

May her gentle and deserving soul rest in peace.

Dr Michael Leahy Book:

The self-published book “Descending into Hell and Rising Again” by Dr. Michael Leahy (clerical abuse survivor, former seminarian and priest, teacher and philosopher) was brought to our attention in April this year. The book provided what both the Board and the Forum considered to be an expert and graphic insight into both the nature of how the sexual abuse of children and minors has been so tragically consistent across the Church’s history. It also demonstrated how so many strategies supposedly implemented to address the dire effects of this abuse on individuals and families have been ineffective and of little or no use at all.

Michael’s firsthand experience of abuse as a child and later followed by his time as a Rome-educated seminarian and active diocesan priest for seven years, make for reading which is both powerful and confronting - but in this case it is from an “insider”.

Accordingly, Michael's analysis of this issue, the damage it has caused, and the courageous approaches needed if the Church is ever to truly confront this scourge which has proved so destructive makes for disturbing but still empowering reading.

In the hope that Church leaders might be prepared to listen to the voice of "one of their own" (or at least one who used to be "one of their own"). "Lifeboat" sent a copy of the book to the Bishop of every Diocese in Australia, as well as every Auxiliary Bishop and every Vicar General - about 50 books in all. Each recipient was sent a personal letter signed by me and our Deputy Chair, Kevin Larkins.

What was the response of the recipients to our gift? Well, of the fifty books / gifts sent out, only six received any acknowledgement whatsoever. Of these six, only two replies were of more than four lines in length!

Equine Therapy.

Along with several other similar projects designed to support and directly assist survivors, the "Equine Therapy" project may have been "a bit slow out of the Starting Stalls", but in recent months, the project has developed from a walk to maybe even a canter!

The project has been generously assisted by Tobin Brothers, and we are now supporting one deserving family for whom the benefits may be quite far-reaching. Like the Melbourne Cup and other similar notable equine events, this is not something that will prove itself in the first few furlongs, but "Lifeboat" is confident that it will prove to be a most valuable service to provide to both individuals and to families.

Volunteers and Donors:

Finally, a sincere note of gratitude to all our volunteers and generous donors - which pretty well covers everyone associated with "Lifeboat". All of us believe we can do something – no matter how small – to help lift a burden that should never have been imposed on our clients / survivors / victims. From people giving financial contributions, whether large or small, to those providing transport, to those spending many hours on the phone, caring and listening, or those scrunching up raffle tickets to help make a few extra dollars which in turn will help pay a client's electricity bill - they are volunteers all. Thank you for your goodness, your generosity, your care.

Geelong Yacht Club.

Our sincere thanks to the Geelong Yacht Club for their generous hospitality in providing not only a great meeting venue each month, but also a magnificent setting for "Lifeboat's" Annual End-of-Year Barbecue and Meeting.

Patrons

Finally, a heartfelt word of thanks to our honoured Patrons, Michael and Louise King, whose gracious commitment to the work of “Lifeboat” has been both considerable and consistent over many years. Their practical support and genuine interest have been most important components of “Lifeboat’s” ability to help those so deserving of whatever we can provide. Thank you, Michael and Louise.

And finally, that’s it for the Annual Report for 2025. Thank you for reading this and thank you for your support of and care for the “Lifeboat” mission. Most of all, thank you for your care and support for the people who need that care and support, and who deserve it so much. May God give you many blessings in 2026, just as He has given many blessings to “Lifeboat” in 2025.

Fr. Kevin Dillon AM
Board Chair
Lifeboat Geelong Foundation
December 31, 2025