

## MERCY MINISTRIES

4 June 2008

**The Hon. A.L. EVANS:** I am talking about the Mercy Ministries today. I have titled my paper, 'The truth about Mercy Ministries'. Mercy Ministries was founded in the United States 25 years ago and now operates across the US and internationally. Mercy Ministries Australia commenced in the year 2000 as a Christian-based charity and currently operates a home in Sydney and another on the Sunshine Coast and is in no way attached to Hillsong. That is the truth.

Since being founded in Australia, the program has made a tremendous difference in the lives of many young women via a six-month residential program. The program assists young women who are struggling with life to control issues such as abuse, self-harm, eating disorders, depression and anxiety. Prior to entering the program all young women are made aware of the details of the program, including financial arrangements, to enable them to make an informed decision before entering into the home. The program is voluntary and the young women may choose to leave at any time.

As a Christian-based charity they offer a holistic client-focused approach, which includes physical, mental, social and spiritual needs. The Mercy Ministries is not a medical facility and they are quite happy for the young women to visit psychiatrists, general practitioners and other allied health professionals as required. Mercy Ministries staff are appropriately qualified, including counsellors who have professional and academic qualifications, and a number of staff are continuing in ongoing education.

The program receives regular external reviews, and the staff also request client feedback to ensure quality of service. Mercy Ministries Australia is largely funded by private donations, fund-raising activities and some corporate sponsorship. There is no direct cost for a young woman to attend the program. The lives of Chelle and Ness have been changed for the better since they went through the Mercy Ministries program. Chelle says:

My life was a mess. Fear, anxiety, panic attacks controlled me. For 18 months, after multiple suicide attempts, I had continuous appointments with psychiatrists and dieticians to no effect. I was diagnosed as never being able to live a life free from fear and anxiety. In Mercy Ministries I found hope for the future. I underwent counselling and saw a dietician on a regular basis to overcome my physical struggles. Mercy Ministries was safe, encouraging and offered help and freedom from my past. Since leaving the program, I am no longer on medication. I have not self-harmed once. I am working and have started full-time university studies.

Ness says:

Until 15 I was abused by people close to me. I was hopeless, having depraved thinking about my identity and trusted nobody. Abuse led me to self-harm, suicide attempts, severe substance abuse, violence, anger and eventually living on the streets. I was accepted into Mercy Ministries and surrounded by staff who loved me, valued and accepted me, no strings attached. I graduated in May 2006 and now live with strength and freedom instead of powerlessness and judgment. I am passionate about the cause of justice in my community because Mercy Ministries impacted my life and freed me from what my life would have become.

Over 100 young women like Chelle and Ness have graduated from the program since its commencement, and approximately 90 per cent of graduates have gone on to lead a better life, including attending university, gaining employment and commencing a family.

I note that it is rare and brave for an institution such as Mercy Ministries to have a benchmark that puts it on the public record. I challenge any mental health body or other institution to boast of such a success rate. It is all well and good for others to make accusations, but Mercy Ministries has its benchmark and is happy to stand by its record.