



# THE EVOLUTION OF A LIE

## Chapter 1

*The Story*

Louise Greentree  
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## 1

On Sunday 11 February 2007 Mrs. Machel Dobbs went to church.

In itself, this was not extraordinary. For about 12 years she and her husband, Scott, had been regular worshippers at Figtree Anglican church (FAC) in the suburbs of Wollongong on the NSW coast south of Sydney. Their six children, 2 boys and 4 girls in descending order then aged between 20 and 10 also were regular and enthusiastic members of the church and its' youth group and children's activities. In the case of the two youngest, FAC was the only church they had ever known, and because they were home-schooled, belonging to FAC also provided all their friends.

But this day proved to be a very unusual event which precipitated Machel, Scott and their children into a nightmare. Her beloved church turned on them in a diabolical attack that resulted in all of them being banned from attending FAC or any of the youth and children's ministry activities. Parishioners, on orders from the clergy, staff, wardens and parish counsellors, subjected them to shunning in the worship space of the church, which spilled over into public places in Wollongong, on the streets and beaches, and even into the Anglican private school TIGS where teachers were also members of FAC. This 'cult' activity – shunning and dis-fellowship – is not a usual feature of the Christian faith as expressed through the Anglican communion. It is, however, the weapon of choice among fundamentalist cults.

Machel and her second eldest, son Nathan, were committed to attending all three services that day to set up a commercial espresso coffee machine that Scott, coffee tragic and trained barista, had donated to FAC. He operated it at services and public outreach events, much to the ill-concealed resentment of the members of the 'refreshment team' which served filtered coffee. Nathan also trained as a barista and assisted his father. But this Sunday Scott was away interstate on a business trip with his new employer, FAC parishioner David MacNeice, meeting clients of David's accounting practice.

As she was setting up Machel was approached by Bishop Harry Goodhew, former Archbishop of Sydney who had returned to FAC as a parishioner. To Machel's bewilderment he asked: "What are you doing here?" She explained about standing in for Scott who was away, to which Bishop Goodhew replied: "Well, I suppose that's all right then." As if that was not disconcerting enough, Machel noticed that some parishioners, long-time Christian friends, were averting their eyes from her and even turning their backs, while others were offering sympathy and inviting her to sit with them. These Job's comforters were later to try to force her to denounce Scott as a child sex abuser of Emma Nicholls (the FAC Lie), and even later, they tried to force her eldest daughter to confirm that she had been abused in the home (the 'Clandestine Lie' created by FAC Executive Minister Bruce Clarke, his wife Cathy and daughter Rebecca). Neither was true.

It was only a matter of a few months for it to become clear that, tragically, 20-year-old Emma Nicholls had severe mental health issues and the whole case against Scott which had been brought, not by her but by her mother Lee Nicholls (who had

similar mental health issues), was falling apart. This was not just for lack of evidence and for sheer triviality but also a fundamental misconception of what constituted child and adult sex abuse. It took longer for the Clandestine Lie to be exposed as just that - a lie – when Rebeca Clarke contradicted the main elements of the Lie that her father had attributed to her, when she was interviewed by an investigator engaged by the director of the Professional Standards Unit of Sydney diocese of the Anglican Church (PSU) Mr. Phillip Gerber. The Police and Community Services both rejected complaints initiated by Bruce Clarke and FAC Children’s Minister Yvonne Gunning as being without substance.

This raised serious issues for the diocese as well as for the Senior Minister Rod Irvine and his Executive Minister Bruce Clarke, and Children’s Minister, Church Army Captain Yvonne Gunning. There was the issue of Scott bringing a claim for damages for defamation, as well as the issue of publicity of the brutality of the bans and shunning inflicted on Machel, Scott and all the wonderful Christian Dobbs children by a supposedly Christian, Anglican church.

Something had to be done, and Helen Irvine, wife of Senior Minister Rod Irvine and a senior academic in the Faculty where Scott had been employed, was the one to do it. She was the ‘bridge’ that introduced to FAC and the PSU director Phillip Gerber another Lie to try to prop up the failing FAC Lie. This was the University of Wollongong Lie (UOW) which had been developed about a year or so earlier, totally separately from the FAC Lie and for an entirely different purpose.

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## II

### *The University of Wollongong Lie*

Before the FAC and the Clandestine Lies were even conceived, Scott had been set up with a Lie fabricated in 2005 by three women in the UOW Faculty of Commerce and Business where Scott was a junior Lecturer on casual contract. He had completed his PhD there after attaining the degrees of Bachelor of Commerce and Bachelor of Laws.

These three women were: Corinne Cortese, at the time a PhD student at UOW, Mary Kaidonis, senior academic in the Faculty, and Robyn Weekes the director of the UOW Equity & Diversity Unit. Put bluntly: these three women conspired together to bring a totally false complaint against Scott of sexual harassment of a female student. It was documented as an ‘informal’ complaint, bypassing the University’s code of conduct which required that the details of a complaint and the complainant be disclosed to the accused person, who was given the opportunity to answer it. So, Scott never knew a complaint existed and therefore he was not given the chance to defend himself. The ‘informal’ complaint was placed before the Committee considering his application for permanent employment, having been documented only the day before although containing allegations going back to 1999.

There are two strands intertwining in the evolution of the UOW Lie. The first is that Scott had actual evidence of bribery, cheating and soft marking (passing students who had failed) in subjects Scott was teaching or supervising. These courses involved overseas students, both on the Wollongong campus and the overseas campus in Dubai. His complaints to senior academics in the Faculty were ignored. But there was a strong push by Mary Kaidonis, amongst others, to find a way to discredit him so that his

application for permanent employment would fail (we know this because Corinne Cortese told the diocesan investigator that it was so).

The other strand is more complex. Earlier in 2005 Helen Irvine spoke to a woman who insisted that she remain anonymous (but who we know to be a student named Lee Tran, who called herself 'Anika Rose', the same name as a famous African-American singer). At first this was just a word to Helen some time in 2005, saying that a year or two before, Scott had sexually harassed her by proposing a sexual relationship which she refused. In fact, the reverse was the case: it was 'Anika Rose' who had proposed a sexual relationship with Scott which he refused. Many women and men students found it appropriate to proposition their lecturers to ensure, at least, a sympathetic marker, but also to provide leverage if needed to obtain a good mark in the subject. But this was all that Mary Kaidonis required to discredit Scott sufficiently to get him and his embarrassing evidence out of the University. The problem was that 'Anika Rose' would not make a complaint to the UOW EEDU unless anonymously and this would not be accepted.

So, the plot was hatched: the super self-confident and pretty Corinne Cortese would make the complaint instead. She had to try to cobble together something that related to her own time as a student there, but she could adopt something that Anika Rose had said: that Scott 'pursued her with emails'.

Corinne Cortese had been a student in Scott's seminar class among 15 or 16 students once a week for less than 13 weeks in the second semester of her final undergraduate year in 1999.

Otherwise they had not met.

She then worked for a year or two in a major accounting firm in Sydney, joined the staff of Macquarie University as a junior academic and then returned to UOW and commenced her PhD research with Helen Irvine and Mary Kaidonis as her supervisors.

The reason that Corinne Cortese's complaints are so feeble is that they had to be strung together with no actual material to work with. Scott's only contact with Corinne Cortese was limited to her attendance in class for those weeks among the other students, one occasion only when she briefly came to his UOW office to collect her assignment and he passed on to her his supervisor's offer for her to do an Honours year, which she refused; and two casual and brief meetings at 2 successive UOW Doctoral Colloquiums, in public among some 50-80 other people. However, she also referred to postulated emails (which she said she had not kept) from an anonymous Hotmail account called 'write to me if your lucky' sent to her while she was an academic at Macquarie University inviting her to run away with 'him'. Even the name with its reference to Google netsurfing and Nigerian scams is highly suspect.

She could not even allege that he and she had met regularly or even spasmodically for any social purposes, or even just eaten their sandwich lunches together on the lawn. In fact, they had not met at all in any social circumstances between her final semester in 1999 and making a complaint in 2005. Surely the most optimistic person in the world would not expect a favourable response to such an email proposal without even a brief meeting alone over a cup of coffee to get to know each other rather than having to overcome 6 years of mutual social isolation?

In any event, even if the emails were true, they were alleged to be between a man working at UOW and an adult woman working at Macquarie University, some 2 or 3 years after the woman had left UOW and ceased to be a student. The emails would not breach any code of conduct regarding romantic (if that is the word) liaisons between

adults, of whatever gender, who were not in any inequality of relationship by virtue of a student/lecturer relationship.

However, the story of the emails was not true and Corinne Cortese lied when she signed the complaint that was submitted to the Academic Probations Committee behind Scott's back. She lied again when she allowed the diocesan investigator to interview her, repeating the lie with some amendments and strange omissions. She signed a false statement for the PSU.

The UOW Lie worked and Scott was not granted permanent employment with UOW.

The UOW Lie was never intended to see the light of day apart from this purpose.

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### III

#### *The meeting of the UOW Lie with the FAC and Clandestine Lies*

It was Helen Irvine who dragged the UOW Lie into the light of day. We do not know whether she knew at that stage that it was a complete fabrication, but there must have been a time as the two and a half years of diocesan investigation and preparation for a tribunal hearing dragged on when she at least suspected, even if not given definite information, that there was no truth in the UOW Lie.

At the FAC staff Christmas party in late 2006 she soiled Yvonne Gunning onto the UOW Lie – that stunningly incompetent and malicious woman whose unlovely personality full of jealousy and spite towards not only Scott but Machel and the Dobbs children permeates her interview with the diocesan investigator. Within a few days, Yvonne Gunning had told Lee Nicholls the UOW Lie, condensed into the statement that Scott had sexually harassed several female students at UOW and was sacked for it. Some time before 17 December 2006 Lee Nicholls emailed Pastor Lance Wearmouth, who with a woman known on her email account as SanDee ran an online Seventh Day Adventist counselling and prayer website and who had had a lot to do with Emma Nicholls.

On the 17<sup>th</sup> December 2006 Lance Wearmouth emailed Emma quoting the UOW Lie to her.

But it remained dormant at that stage because Lee Nicholls had already embarked on a delicate mission: this was to get Emma out of the house, where she was causing trouble, by getting FAC to take over Emma's care, find her accommodation, help furnish it and pay upfront expenses and assist her to obtain a pension or student assistance. All without any effort or expense to Lee. To achieve this, she conceived a scheme, undoubtedly with input from Yvonne Gunning and her Child Protection seminars. Emma had 'fallen in love' with Scott. Lee encouraged Emma in her fantasy. Lee it was who got Emma to put herself into Scott's way, like a staked goat, to try to get sufficient material to ground a complaint to the FAC and the PSU Sydney diocese so that money and practical assistance could be obtained, perhaps even a sum of 'compensation'. It was as simple and as brutally effective a scheme as that.

And so, the FAC Lie was born. And the cunning nature of the scheme was such that it played on the jealousies, dishonesty, incompetence, malice and greed for power of various FAC and diocesan personnel.

*The development of the FAC Clandestine Lie*

And so, Rebecca Clarke, daughter of Bruce Clarke, then 16, the same age as the eldest Dobbs daughter, told some lies of her own alleging that the eldest Dobbs daughter was 'cutting herself' and that the bathrooms in the Dobbs home did not have doors on them. Both were false, but Bruce and his wife Cathy happily spread them far and wide. They embellished the lie: the eldest daughter's behaviour meant that she had been sexually abused in her home; the lack of doors on bathrooms meant that there was a culture of nudity and other inappropriate sexualised behaviour in the Dobbs' home that affected the other daughters as well.

And so, the FCA Clandestine Lie was born.

This lie was so inflammatory that it was mainly kept underground and I only found out about it by following some trails through the documented interview notes. Of course, there was nothing in it, but it explains why Bruce Clarke made a notification to the then NSW Department of Community Services as well as the Police. Both notifications were rejected. But the FAC Clandestine Lie permeated the instructions that Phillip Gerber gave the investigator, his questions and the answers given by Bruce Clarke and Helen Irvine.

Rebecca Clarke repudiated her lies from which her father and mother created the FCA Clandestine Lie when she was interviewed by the investigator. And yet Bruce Clarke and Helen Irvine still signed statements containing their contributions to the Lie, statements that were placed before the Professional Standards Committee (PSC) and which, no doubt, contributed to their deliberations and recommendations, even though discredited.

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