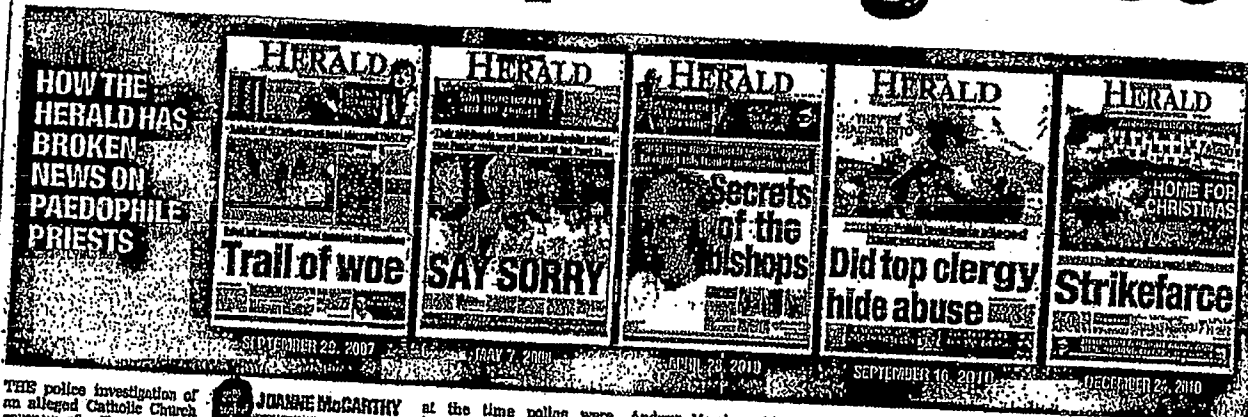


Inquiry into church cover-up 'disgrace'



THIS police investigation of an alleged Catholic Church cover-up of a Hunter paedophile priest has been branded a "disgrace" after nearly a year of delays, including the loss of a three-member strike force charged with investigating it.

Police were back to square one last week in an investigation of serial paedophile priest Denis McAllinden, one of only a handful of formal Australian investigations of alleged church cover-ups of child sex offender priests.

The appointment of Detective Inspector Graeme Parker to head Strike Force Lantia comes almost a year after the Newcastle Herald

JOANNE MCCARTHY

handed over church documents related to McAllinden. The 1993 documents showed senior church figures tried to secretly force McAllinden from the priesthood, in full knowledge of the criminal nature of allegations against him, the "grave problems for the community" his behaviour represented, and without reporting him to police.

The documents showed bishops Michael Malone and Leo Clarke and ^{retracted} had roles in the secret de-rocking

at the time police were investigating another notorious Hunter paedophile priest, Vince Ryan.

One document assured McAllinden, whose victims were young girls aged four to 12, that his "good name would be protected by the confidential nature of this process".

But despite the documents, the refusal of possible witnesses, and support for a full investigation by the Australian Lawyers Alliance and retired NSW Police assistant commissioner John Ura, the police investigation has struggled.

This week, Lawyers Alliance NSW spokesman Dr

Andrew Morrison SC said the police handling of the matter was a "disgrace", and "it seems to me there has been a failure by the police force to pursue very serious issues despite regularly having it down to their attention".

Police handling of the matter has included:

- The failure of police to formally respond to a complaint about police treatment lodged by the first McAllinden victim contacted by investigators.
- The failure of a senior police officer with responsibility for the McAllinden matter to respond to an offer of help last year from the then police officer Troy Grant, who investigated Vince Ryan. Mr Grant, a newly-elected NSW government MP, said this week he was "obviously concerned there still seems to be issues that have to be fully investigated".
- The loss of experienced Strike Force Georgiana detective Shaun McLeod from the police service in June last year after his recommendation for a full investigation of the alleged

McAllinden cover-up was rejected by senior police.

Repeated rejection of Detective Chief Inspector Peter Fox's offers to work on the McAllinden case, despite his investigation of the priest in 1999 when he issued a warrant for McAllinden's arrest. The rejection last year culminated in an order that he hand over statements from several McAllinden victims and cease any involvement with the case. Chief Inspector Fox was also ordered not to make any comment to the media about the matter. Last week Inspector Fox gave evidence in a court hearing involving a serving police officer, which has included allegations of internal conflict about police handling of the matter from last April.

Statements from witnesses alleging a senior Australian Catholic Church figure had knowledge of the serious nature of McAllinden's offences in 1993 when he allegedly spoke directly to a number of McAllinden victims to take action against the priest. Police were not contacted. It was not until two years later, as police

were about to charge Vince Ryan, that the church tried to secretly remove McAllinden from the priesthood.

The transfer of the McAllinden case between police commands and the appointment of Detective Superintendent Wayne Hurphey to manage the case in December after the loss of a three-member strike force to stress and sick leave in the space of a week.

This week, Detective Inspector Graeme Parker conceded there had been problems but said "the matter will be fully investigated and any matters of criminality arising will be prosecuted".

"I'll use whatever resources I need," he said.

Northern Region Commander Assistant Commissioner Charles Berk said Strike Force Lantia had not been dormant.

"This is a serious and complex matter currently under investigation and as such no comment can be made regarding the findings thus far. The community can be assured that NSW Police Force considers this a serious matter and is investigating it thoroughly," she said.

Police bad as institution: victim

A WOMAN who was sexually abused by paedophile priest Denis McAllinden while in primary school said police were "as bad as the church" if they failed to investigate an alleged cover-up of a criminal.

The woman, who still lives in the Hunter, said the police force and the church are both doing the same thing "if they failed to respond to complaints".

She was one of a number of possible witnesses able to give evidence about McAllinden's offending before senior church figures tried to secretly force him from the priesthood in 1993.

Newly-elected Nationals MP and former policeman Troy Grant contacted a senior Lake Macquarie officer last year when told he would head a McAllinden investigation, and was referred to a senior Northern Region Command officer.

"Obviously in 1993 I had the first of these types of cases in the Newcastle diocese with

Vince Ryan, and I was asked to provide background information and I attempted to do so," he said.

He had messages but they were not returned, Mr Grant said.

Australian Lawyers Alliance NSW spokesman Dr Andrew Morrison SC wrote two letters to Northern Region Command in September and October expressing concerns about police commitment to investigating the alleged cover-up.

"What is there about the Catholic church that puts it above the law?" he writes.

In response, acting Northern Region Commander Mick Mitchell said the McAllinden cover-up allegations "have and will continue to receive appropriate consideration" by police.

A spokesman for paedophile priest victims' group Broken Filles said victims wondered if senior church people covered up McAllinden's crimes and "only a proper police investigation can answer this question".