

HERALD**Questions for police on church inquiries**

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AN Australian human rights lawyers' group has requested an urgent meeting with police, expressing "deep concern" about the investigation of an alleged Catholic church cover-up of Hunter paedophile priest Denis McAlinden.

The Australian Lawyers Alliance NSW branch has accused police of not treating documents relating to the attempted secret defrocking of McAlinden in 1995 "with the seriousness they deserve", less than a month after police confirmed the matter was being investigated.

The documents were revealed in the Newcastle Herald in April. They showed McAlinden was urged to agree to a "speedy" seven-week secret defrocking because of the "scandal" created by his behaviour, while being assured that his "good name will be protected by the confidential nature of this process".

The letter was written in the same week that police launched an investigation into Hunter paedophile priest Vince Ryan, unaware of the decades of offending by McAlinden.

In a letter to NSW Police northern region commander Carlene York in September, the Lawyers Alliance expressed concerns about "disturbing rumours from within NSW Police suggesting that some police do not believe it is in the public interest to investigate the matter".

"On the face of it, there appears to be ample documentary evidence, supported by a number of witnesses, giving rise to a prima facie case against at least three senior members of the church," alliance NSW branch spokesman Andrew Morrison, SC, said in the letter.

"The rule of law requires that everyone stand and be judged equally before the law.

"It is unacceptable for any organisation, however wealthy and however influential, to be treated differently.

"Australian Lawyers Alliance calls on NSW Police to prepare a brief for the DPP or explain why it is failing in its duty."

In a letter in response in early October, acting northern region commander Max Mitchell said: "I assure you that the allegations have and will continue to receive appropriate consideration by the detectives attached to the Newcastle City Local Area Command."

"Due to the investigation's current status, however, I am unable to make any further comment at this time."

In a letter to Assistant Commissioner Mitchell last week, Mr Morrison said he remained "troubled that your letter does not deal with the matters of substance raised".

In a statement yesterday, Assistant Commissioner Mitchell said northern region was aware of the concerns.

"Newcastle City Local Area Command is conducting an investigation into the allegations surrounding the late Father Dennis McAlinden and I have every confidence their investigation will be thorough and professional," he said.