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Diocese of discontent

By Richard Sproull and Jeremy Roberts
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JOHN Mountford was chaplain at Adelaide's exclusive St Peters College when he invited a young male boarder to his home one Friday night in early June 1992.

Mountford and the boarder knew each other well, the student having worked as an assistant sacristan in the Anglican school's chapel. But Mountford was contemplating a sinister turn in their relationship.

He plied the pupil with wine and told him to undress and get into bed with another male house guest, a young Balinese male who had returned with the chaplain from a holiday in Bali. Mountford then climbed into bed and indecently assaulted the student. The boy got out of the bed and, dressed in a T-shirt, ran to his housemaster's home and told him of the assault.

According to the report, it is now clear that Mountford, a Briton reportedly living in Bangkok, was a serial sex offender during his short tenure from 1991 to 1992.

But it is the church's dealings with Mountford that has engulfed the archbishop of its Adelaide diocese, Ian George. Details of the assault appear in a 92-page report by an independent board of inquiry into the church's handling of up to 200 cases of abuse.

George commissioned the inquiry last year after a series of allegations surrounding the church, its numerous organisations and clergy members such as Mountford. The inquiry was led by retired Supreme Court justice Trevor Olsson and academic Donna Chung.

What the archbishop didn't expect was to become the focus of concerns about the handling of the June 1992 assault in a series of events that have become a potent symbol of the manner in which the church has handled complaints of sexual abuse.

The report, which refers to Mountford as PO19, says the boarder's complaint was pursued by the school's then headmaster Richard Birchnall and his deputy on Saturday morning. Mountford "acknowledged the truth of the complaint". He was sacked and told to leave the school premises immediately.

The report claims George was told of the matter the same morning, learning later that Mountford and his Balinese house guest were staying at the home of a friend, another member of the Anglican clergy, in Adelaide's south. The archbishop visited the home at about midday.

The report says Mountford was "highly distressed" after speaking with George, telling his friend that the church leader had told him that "unless he departed Australia within 24 hours, the matter would be reported to the police". Flights were booked for the same day, and Mountford and his house guest were on a flight to Bali by 4pm on Saturday.

"It is plain that someone in authority did instruct PO19 to immediately leave the country, although, in the absence of direct evidence from him, the board is unable to make a specific finding of the identity of that person with confidence," the board says.

George denies he made any suggestion to Mountford about leaving the country. Yet the report's authors point to an exchange of letters between the archbishop and the disgraced chaplain after he left the country. Mountford refers to the fact that he had been "advised to flee the country", while the archbishop responded nearly 12 months later, concluding:

"Both the school and I would do exactly the same if it happened tomorrow. You have been a very lucky person to have survived without the horror of court proceedings and the indignity of public disgrace."

Releasing the report on Monday, George attempted to head off the commentary surrounding the role he and the school's headmaster played in the Mountford case.

"Anyone who knows us knows that this suggestion is simply wrong," the archbishop said. "It is important for me to state that neither I (nor), to my knowledge, any bishop or senior member of the church has sought in any way to impede proper police investigation."

He also asserted on Monday that the victim's family did not want the matter reported. But the facts outlined in the report show that the headmaster failed in his obligation to report the matter to the state's community services department until a fortnight later. The school failed to launch an inquiry into Mountford's conduct and police "were eventually notified on June 23 via an officer of the department".

"The board would point out that, if the actions of the person who threatened PO19 were prompted by a desire to negate what was considered to be an undesirable police investigation and successful prosecution, then serious questions may well arise as to whether a criminal offence may have been committed," the report says.

The school told the board of inquiry there was no need for an investigation at the time of the June assault. But the board points to two important indicators that were "simply ignored".

First, Mountford had returned from a holiday in Bali with the young Balinese male, who stayed with him on the school campus for up to 15 weeks, and Birchnall had been aware of the young male's willingness to participate in the sexual activities on the Friday night.

Second, after the assault, the student repeatedly contacted the school, while undergoing psychiatric treatment, to find where Mountford had gone. He had no luck but told the inquiry he eventually spoke with the archbishop, who told him Mountford had "gone overseas on urgent family business". The archbishop denied any memory of the conversation.

As more victims spoke out yesterday, calling for the archbishop to resign immediately, South Australian Premier Mike Rann said the events of June 5 "turned my stomach" when he read them on Monday night.

"What an extraordinary indictment of not only what happened but also the lack of values that underpinned what happened," Rann said. "The people who knew about this incident did not do the right thing and immediately call the police."

Unfortunately for the Adelaide diocese of the Anglican Church, the Mountford case is just the tip of a very large iceberg. This week's report was revelation to most members of the public, but for victims it was like reading diary entries from their lives.

Again and again, in detailed scenarios with names carefully edited out, the officers of the church and the church as an organisation are found to have obstructed justice, harboured and warned offenders in its midst, and treated victims with thinly disguised contempt. But while the inquiry heard evidence from 85 witnesses and its staff interviewed a further 47 people, the inquiry has found no answers to a couple of issues.

First, there is a missing June 1998 letter from the then bishop of Tasmania, Phillip Newel, to the Adelaide diocese warning about the abusive behaviours of a man who would later be exposed as a one of Australia's most rampant pedophiles, Robert Brandenburg.

During the course of Brandenburg's 30-year "career" with the Church of England Boys Society in South Australia and Tasmania, the board of inquiry says, "it is possible that his victims numbered in excess of 80 young lads".

In its attempt to establish who among the church hierarchy knew about Brandenburg and what they did about him, the board notes testimony from a witness, POI2, that Brandenburg fondled him and other boys on holiday in Tasmania in about 1977-78.

POI2 said a complaint to his parents led to a meeting with an Anglican office-holder, POI23, at which Brandenburg had admitted the alleged conduct and was reprimanded.

This is the earliest time at which the Anglican Church appears to have become aware of Brandenburg's abuse and the reports says "it appears that nothing further was done at the time".

"Brandenburg thereafter continued a course of more serious abuse of POI2 until about 1981," the board says.

More than 20 years later, an item appeared in the newspaper of the northwest Tasmanian town of Burnie in which Brandenburg was named as a pedophile. This appears to be the first whiff of public exposure of Brandenburg and it immediately gained the attention of the Tasmanian Anglican hierarchy.

It is clear the board of inquiry is incredulous that nobody in the Anglican Church acted against Brandenburg from the time Anglican officers became aware of complaints in 1977, perhaps earlier. The position of Phillip Aspinall in the "shell game" of who knew what and when was clearly of interest to the board of inquiry.

Aspinall became involved in CEBS in Tasmania, first as a boy in the 1970s, then in 1980 as field officer, state secretary, national delegate and leader and training commissioner. He knew three CEBS leaders known to have abused boys: two Tasmanian priests since jailed, including Louis Daniels and Brandenburg, from the Adelaide parish of Magill.

In June 1998, just before Brandenburg's abuse was reported in the Tasmanian press, Aspinall moved from Tasmania to Adelaide, where he was consecrated an assistant bishop.

Since early 2002, Aspinall has been the Anglican Archbishop of Brisbane, where he played a pivotal role in the resignation of his predecessor, former governor-general Peter Hollingworth, over the handling of sexual abuse in the Brisbane diocese of the church.

Despite the letter Newell sent to Adelaide and Aspinall's long history with CEBS, it was his testimony to the board of inquiry that Brandenburg had not been discussed with Newell. Further, Aspinall denies ever seeing the letter from Newell advising of Brandenburg and Daniels's then alleged sex abuse.

"It remains a mystery as to what happened to the letter," the board says.

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