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Diocese's future a 'deep concern'

By JOANNE McCARTHY

THE Anglican diocese of Newcastle is in crisis over the handling of disciplinary proceedings against four clergy and a church worker including former dean of Newcastle Reverend Graeme Lawrence.

Anglican Bishop Brian Farran issued a statement to all clergy yesterday distancing himself from the professional standards board hearings that have been labelled a "kangaroo court", "toothless tiger" and "star chamber" this week and are the subject of a NSW Supreme Court challenge.

The board recommended sanctions against Reverend Lawrence and Reverend Graeme Sturt over alleged breach of trust issues.

Both priests denied the allegations against them.

The *Newcastle Herald* has confirmed that parishioners outraged at the hearings process repeatedly raised concerns with Bishop Farran in recent weeks, and are preparing a formal complaint to the church's national body.

At a meeting last week parishioners considered seeking an injunction for a formal Supreme Court review of the issues, and many clergy and parishioners contacted by the *Herald* say the issue is the most serious challenge the bishop has faced.

"This is a crisis. That's stating the bleeding obvious," said former Newcastle lord mayor John McNaughton who is a friend of Reverend Lawrence but said his concerns were about the "grossly flawed" hearings where "they're down there believing it's a court when it's not a court".

Mr McNaughton said he was appalled at the potential consequences of the board handing out findings after warnings that the proceedings did not carry the protections of a civil court and were vulnerable to defamation action.

Bishop Farran was challenged about professional standards proceedings at the recent diocese synod.

Clergy contacted by the *Herald* declined to comment on the record, but several confirmed the level of concern about professional standards processes was extremely high.

There was also "deep concern" about the diocese's future, one clergy member said.

"The diocese, I think, is in a very precarious position," the clergy member said.

Former diocese chancellor Paul Rosser resigned in late November.

He disputed a diocese release

this week that he resigned for "personal reasons".

He declined to comment about whether his resignation was linked to concerns about the professional standards board hearings.

He denied his resignation was linked to any real or perceived conflict of interest between his role as chancellor and acting as legal representative for clergy in past court cases.

A NSW Supreme Court challenge by Reverend Lawrence and Reverend Sturt to the sanctions against them was mentioned yesterday and will be heard today.

The board recommended sanctions yesterday against church worker Gregory Goyette.

Diocese professional standards director Michael Elliott said Bishop Farran was unlikely to consider the board's recommendations from this week's hearings until the new year.

Bishop Farran declined to comment about whether the diocese was in crisis over the issue or whether his position was threatened.

In his statement to clergy this week he noted the "emphatic separation of the Bishop from the professional standards procedures".



BISHOP BRIAN FARRAN