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Scientologists in privilege claim

Natasha Bitu | October 26, 2009

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THE Church of Scientology has invoked "confessional privilege" for its refusal to hand over files to the Queensland Coroner.

An inquest into the death of Edward Alexander McBride -- a soldier who killed himself two days after finishing one of the church's intensive courses in 2007 -- revealed last week his "audit" file had been sent to the church's US headquarters.

Scientology spokeswoman Vicki Dunstan yesterday said the file requested by the Coroner was "privileged and sacrosanct". "Essentially these are notations of a parishioner's spiritual progress," she said.

"The church has very strict protocol concerning the confidentiality of a parishioner's personal information in pastoral counselling,

"Edward McBride, during his relatively short membership in the church, expressed his love for and strong relationship with his family, the church and his plans for the future."

McBride was found electrocuted and hanged at an Energex substation in Brisbane in 2007, two days after completing a month of Scientology courses for which he had paid \$25,000, according to the interim inquest findings. He was on leave from the army at the time.

The Australian Defence Force has yet to start its own inquiry into the soldier's death.

In his interim findings last week, Coroner John Lock said the Scientology "audit" and "ethics" files sent to America "may very well have had some information which could give the inquest some assistance in determining what happened". But Ms Dunstan said Queensland police had not sought the files until after the "mother church" in the US had requested them. "The files were not sent to America for some 18 months after Mr McBride's death and were freely available before then but hadn't been requested," she said.

"Having been sent to America they were outside the jurisdiction of the Queensland Coroner's Court and also outside the jurisdiction of the Australian church.

"The church in America treats parishioner files as subject to priest-penitent privilege."

Ms Dunstan said all documents in Australia had been made available to authorities on request.

She said the church had not heard of McBride's death until nearly a year later.

"When we did hear of it, our counsellors co-operated with the police and their inquiries completely," she said.

Ms Dunstan said the audit files had been sent to the US because church representatives in Brisbane had sought advice from the Sydney office, which referred the matter to the US.

"Such administrative files are the property of the church in America and they requested the files for review," she said.

"Whether the files will be made available now or not is a question for America, not for us."

Neither the Coroner nor McBride's father, Alan McBride, would comment on the matter yesterday.

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