

News Watch Article: DJ580

## JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES CHILD ABUSE COVER-UP ALLEGED

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Lack of media attention notwithstanding, to the victims of undisclosed child abuse by members of Jehovah's Witnesses, the scandal is no less heartbreaking and painful than that suffered by victims of the much more publicized Catholic priest child abuse scandal.

Now the problem among Jehovah's Witnesses has been illumined by coverage from NBC's *Dateline*, CNN's Connie Chung, the *New York Times*, and many other media reports, civil suits, and press releases over the past two years. The official Watchtower policy, affirmed in press releases from the Society since the recent flurry of media reports arose, conforms to policy discussed in Society articles in *Awake* in 1993 and 1995 and in *The Watchtower* in 1997. According to the articles and the more recent releases from Watchtower director of public affairs J. R. Brown, the Society's policy could be construed as allowing accused molesters continued access to their victims and to new victims while keeping parents in the dark about a fellow Witnesses's child abuse proclivities.

When long-time Witness elder William Bowen contacted Watchtower headquarters in 1999 regarding a child abuse situation in his congregation, he was frustrated by their inaction and orders for him to protect the accused by ensuring that the charges were kept confidential. Fearful that the abuse would continue and the abuser would recruit new victims through his congregation activities, Bowen resigned as an elder in December 2000. Nearly 18 months later the Watchtower "disfellowshipped" him, treating him as an apostate and ordering all Witnesses to "shun" him. Bowen says their action will not daunt him, noting, "This is evidence for the world to see how the Jehovah's Witnesses treat abuse survivors and those who try to protect them. They silence them with the threat of disfellowshipping."

Disaffected members say that is exactly what has happened in many cases; over 5,000 cases of abuse among Jehovah's Witnesses have been reported to a victim's assistance Web site, [www.silentlambs.org](http://www.silentlambs.org). Bowen claims the Watchtower itself maintains a confidential database of nearly 24,000 suspected child molesters among their membership. A *New York Times* article (August 2002) interviewed women from New York, Minnesota, and Tennessee who said that Witnesses in their own congregations had abused them and that they received no satisfactory help from local or national leaders. Mrs. Barbara Anderson, who had volunteered at Watchtower headquarters for 11 years, said, "Jehovah's Witnesses like to say that we have one of the most crime-free organizations, but all problems are taken to the elders, and the elders keep them quiet."

Scattered legal cases — some civil and some criminal, on at least three continents over the last decade — reveal the typical official Watchtower response, which is often ineffective and at times harsher on the victims who report the abuse than on the abusers.

Critics specifically state that the response within the local Kingdom Hall too often results in the accused being protected by the elders while the victims are pressured to recant or at least keep silent about their accusations. What ensues, say many disaffected Witnesses, is that child abusers remain in good standing in their local congregations with continued access to other children and no warning being given to congregation members or members of the public who might encounter the abuser when the abuser does door-to-door "field work."

Watchtower articles and press releases uniformly decry child abuse, encourage those abused to seek help, and agree that unrepentant abusers should be noted and excluded from the congregation. Critics, nevertheless, complain that the policy demands a standard of proof not often available in child abuse situations. Victims subsequently feel pressured to withdraw their complaints, avoid reporting the abuse to civil authorities, and continue worshipping with their abusers. Abusers who continue to deny their crimes have a good chance of maintaining their good standing — even in positions as elders of congregations. Commenting on a case that had broken free from Kingdom Hall confidentiality into criminal court, West Midlands (Scotland) investigating police officer Steve Colley remarked, “I was surprised. They [the elders] actually said to me unless I could provide two Jehovah’s Witnesses who’d actually seen the offense, then as far as they were concerned the offense hadn’t taken place.”

The Watchtower exercises close and comprehensive control over its followers, teaching followers to conform their lives to the teaching of the organization. The leadership closely supervises followers’ daily lives, from the amount of time they devote to Bible study to whom they are allowed to befriend. Those who continue to flout the rules are removed from membership and shunned, even by their own intimate family members.

The break in silence by Jehovah’s Witness victims of abuse has brought to public light incidents spanning many decades and many countries. In almost all cases, the local elder board failed to act or acted privately with the individual accused, and neither the victims nor the congregation ever heard any abuse accusations until the victims went outside the organization to the press, social service agencies, or police or filed civil suits against their abusers, the affected Kingdom Hall, and the Watchtower.

The same pattern has appeared in public cases in many countries, including Canada, England, Scotland, Denmark, France, and Spain, and in many states, including Washington, Oregon, California, Minnesota, Kentucky, Tennessee, Georgia, New Jersey, New York, New Hampshire, Maine, and Florida.

A Canadian judge, ruling in a criminal case, declared, “The moral punishment imposed by a church is not punishment demanded by law.” Judge John Goldring continued, “I cannot criticize the church sufficiently enough....it’s well known in these courts that churches are criticized for failing to report criminal activity.” Goldring concluded, “The church may have spiritual responsibility but it does not exceed the authority of the state.”

— *Gretchen Passantino*