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Jehovah's Witness Church must change after Royal Commission hearings

OPINION

THE DRUM – PAUL GRUNDY

YESTERDAY AT 10:57PM



VIDEO [9:22] Ex-Jehovah's Witness criticises the group for not reporting child abuse

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The Royal Commission into child abuse has highlighted a number of flawed areas within the Jehovah's Witness Church. It's time for the elders to instigate real change from within, writes former Witness Paul Grundy.

I was raised a Jehovah's Witness and for many years followed the doctrine of the religion.

I believed the teachings of the religion's guiding magazine, Watchtower, and thought I was never going to die. I didn't even expect to finish school before Armageddon - where

God would kill the billions of people who were not Jehovah's Witnesses and leave the few million witnesses to live on this planet forever.

According to the teachings of Watchtower:

Only Jehovah's Witnesses, those of the anointed remnant and the "great crowd", as a united organization under the protection of the Supreme Organizer, have any Scriptural hope of surviving the impending end of this doomed system dominated by Satan the Devil.

In my teen years I "pioneered" - meaning I devoted 20 hours a week to preaching - and at 21 I moved to the Bethel Watchtower headquarters, where I spent three-and-a-half years as a volunteer worker.

I personally came to know a number of the people who have recently been called for interview before the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse.

Terry O'Brien, the Australian Branch coordinator, was in my pioneer training school in the 1980s. Geoff Jackson, one of the religion's governing body, lived in Tasmania, and his wife's family brought my family into the religion in the early 1970s. Vincent Toole, the Bethel lawyer, was someone I knew well and looked up to.

I still think all three of them are wonderful people and are genuinely doing what they think is God's will and is best for the followers.

But the Royal Commission highlighted a number of areas that are flawed within the religion, particularly around the handling of child abuse victims. These include:

- The two-witness rule. A rule within the religion that states officials cannot accept an accusation of child abuse unless there was a second person who also witnessed the abuse - something that rarely happens.
- Women's role (or lack of) in the congregation and judicial committee process. As a patriarchal religion, women are to view men as their head. They cannot be part of a judicial committee. In practise this means a young female victim must go into graphic details of her abuse alone in front of three older men.
- The expectation that the victim confront the perpetrator as part of the process.
- Not making it mandatory for elders to report accusation of abuse. While not being obliged to report accusations may be legally acceptable in some states, the Royal Commission identified

that the judicial committee process meant that often elders would uncover actual proof of a crime, even a confession, but still not report it. At this stage, where it had moved from an allegation to proof of a crime, there was a legal obligation to report.

- Not reporting allegations to the police. This practise was to protect Jehovah's name, and was due to a general mistrust of people in "the world". According to Watchtower: "While some contact with worldly people is unavoidable - at work, at school, and otherwise - we must be vigilant so as to keep from being sucked back into the death-dealing atmosphere of this world."
- Fear of psychologists, based on the belief that they may give advice that is not in line with Watchtower principles.

The Royal Commission also highlighted that because of Jehovah Witnesses' insistence on separation from "worldly" society, they were unwilling to join other organisations in any sort of redress scheme for victims.

Evidence given at the commission also contradicted the claim from those within the religion that child sex abuse was "very rare". The commission heard there were almost 300 cases in the last 10 years, and Toole testified that for the past two years he had received three or four calls a month about new cases. For such a relatively small organisation, that's a huge problem. What's more, this only includes reported cases, and not the many people that no doubt remain silent.

Thankfully, there have been some positive, albeit small, changes in how the religion handles abuse allegations, particularly in the last decade. For example, now two accusations from separate victims can be considered to meet the two witness rule. Also, whilst elders do not actively encourage victims to go to the police, they are advised not to discourage it either. The elders interviewed at the Royal Commission went so far as to say the current policy was to immediately advise going to the police, but it's hard to believe that's happening.

Unfortunately, it was also not always possible to trust what the elders told the Royal Commission, and anyone watching them would have noticed their strenuous efforts to deflect the conversation and answer with irrelevant straw man arguments (although counsel assisting the commission, Angus Stewart, and Justice Peter McClellan were exceptional at keeping the answers on topic).

This approach by the elders may be part of what the teachings refer to as "theocratic or spiritual warfare", where Jehovah's Witnesses may, at least in some cases, be

encouraged to withhold information order to protect the name of Jehovah and the organisation. According to their Awake! magazine:

Being truthful does not mean that we are obligated to divulge all information to anyone who asks it of us. Do not give what is holy to dogs, neither throw your pearls before swine, that they may never ... turn around and rip you open, warned Jesus, at Matthew 7:6.

Watchtower magazine goes on to say:

So in time of spiritual warfare it is proper to misdirect the enemy by hiding the truth.

At the Royal Commission, at least one elder said they could not comply with current Australian law where it conflicted with Jehovah's requirements, as given in the Bible. This is a dangerous stance that needs government sanctions where it results in harm to others, as Watchtower policy on child abuse has done. Indeed, Watchtower does not actually strictly follow the Bible, they follow the current interpretation of select Bible passages. Moreover, Watchtower policy has changed constantly over time as the interpretation of the current governing body changed.

For instance, the two witness rule has already been changed slightly as I noted before. And there is nothing to stop the religion making further changes, such as allowing women on judicial committees. As Justice McClellan pointed out at the hearings, Watchtower only takes the Bible literally when convenient.

In the end, effecting change within the religion will come down to legal, political and financial pressure: if there is enough pressure on the religion, it will change. And I don't say that frivolously.

Despite thousands of Jehovah's Witnesses going to prison as conscientious objectors over decades, Watchtower has made allowances for witnesses to once again perform civilian duty (as they had been until the Second World War). And despite thousands dying after refusing blood components, the doctrine changed in 2000 to allow the use of donated blood - quite illogically though, since Jehovah's Witnesses are still not allowed to donate blood themselves.

Counsel assisting also made an excellent point at the hearings that Jehovah's Witness was a captive organisation. If a person has issues with the religion, which is often the

case with victims of child abuse and the subsequent mishandling by elders, they have the impossible choice of leaving the organisation and losing all family and friends, or having to remain associated with something they don't agree with.

O'Brien tried to downplay this by stating that anyone is free to leave, but it is not that simple. If you leave and are "disfellowshipped" or disassociated, every single one of your family and friends are banned from talking to you under almost any circumstance. You are to be strictly shunned. Even if you are not disfellowshipped, and you fade out to become inactive, you are considered bad association and Jehovah's Witnesses will cut back on dealing with you.

When you have been raised to avoid anyone that is not part of the religion, have been told that anyone that is not a Jehovah's witness will soon be destroyed at Armageddon, and you know your family will most likely disown you, it is an unbearable choice to either leave with no support group or stay with something that you cannot agree with.

I personally struggled with that for more than 10 years, until at 35 I could no longer cope with being part of something that I so strongly disagreed with.

Paul Grundy is a former Jehovah's Witness.

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