

Herald Sun

Former Jehovah's Witness taking on Watch Tower

- **Graeme Hammond**
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A FORMER Jehovah's Witness is to launch a private criminal prosecution against the religion's world headquarters.

His action is in protest at its refusal to require church elders to submit to Working With Children police checks in Victoria

Steven Unthank, who says he was a victim of sexual assault by a church elder in Queensland, says he is taking the drastic step to protect children within the religion and at homes where Jehovah's Witnesses doorknock.

Mr Unthank, from Toongabbie in Gippsland, says he is frustrated over inaction by police and the Justice Department after the religion decided its ministers were not required to undergo police checks.

He hopes the state will take over the prosecution after court documents are filed on April 19.

Mr Unthank, 43, quit the religion in late 2009 after waging a long campaign to persuade the Watch Tower Society, the religion's administrative arm, that elders and door-to-door preachers needed to get police checks before working with children.

Victoria's Working With Children Act requires ministers of religion who have regular unsupervised contact with children to apply for background checks and the Catholic and Anglican churches say all ministers and volunteer workers routinely apply for such checks.

Although Jehovah's Witnesses say all members become ordained ministers at baptism, a spokesman for the Watch Tower Society said elders or other evangelists were not required to gain a police clearance.

"We don't typically work with children, we don't have Sunday schools, so that law doesn't apply to us," the spokesman said.

But Mr Unthank said adult Jehovah's Witnesses often paired up with minors when preaching, with much of their time spent in cars calling on homes. Elders also mentored children and teens from religiously divided homes.

He said elders underwent no background checks before being appointed and were required only to voluntarily declare any convictions for sexual offences.

"Without police checks, how would a member of the public know it isn't a sex offender knocking on their door, talking with their kids?" he said.

Victoria Police say they investigate specific complaints about breaches of the Act, but government sources say the Watch Tower Society's stance remains "a worry".

"A lot of this is about reassurance to parents and the public, so their attitude isn't helpful," one source said.

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