

Abuse victims 'face cruel choice': inquiry

The child abuse royal commission has heard abuse victims who leave the Jehovah's Witnesses face being cut off from friends and family.

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A victim of sexual abuse within the Jehovah's Witnesses would face an "impossible choice" between staying in the church and being cut off from friends and family, the child abuse royal commission has heard.

One of the most senior members of the Jehovah's Witnesses in Australia, Terrence O'Brien, told the commission on Wednesday that a victim would know that by "disassociating" or leaving the church, they would be shunned by other Jehovah's Witnesses.

Counsel assisting the commission, Angus Stewart SC, said in a scenario where a survivor of abuse could not bear remaining in the same organisation as her abuser, the fate she faced was "cruel".

"No one, is it not right, should be put to the choice of remaining in an organisation which she feels is protective of her abuser, and losing her family and social network?" Mr Stewart asked Mr O'Brien.

Mr O'Brien replied that he could only be guided by what the scriptures say.

The treatment of those who leave or are forced out of the church - a practice called "disfellowshipping" - was "to help the person see the benefits of associating", Mr O'Brien said.

The Jehovah's Witnesses' handling of abuse complaints has been under intense scrutiny at the commission, which has heard that not one of 1006 cases of child abuse allegations recorded in Jehovah's Witness Australia documents since 1950 was reported to police.

Also in focus has been its strict adherence to Bible teachings that forbid women from holding positions of authority over men - including on its three-man judicial panel charged with handling abuse cases.

Mr O'Brien said the church would review its procedures following the commission appearance.

Women may be able to be involved in dealing with abuse complaints but not in a decision-making position, he said. Church rules also require abuse allegations to be substantiated by two witnesses.

A solicitor and overseer of the legal department for the Jehovah's Witnesses, Vincent Toole, told the commission that he "may well have been wrong" about laws dictating liability to report allegations of child abuse to authorities.

Mr Toole told the commission he has received three to four calls a month from church elders about child abuse allegations.

The Jehovah's Witness church has 68,000 members in Australia across 821 congregations.

Mr Toole told the commission the Jehovah's Witness church had "no qualms at all about mandatory reporting".

But he was quizzed by Commissioner Peter McClellan on whether he understood that while mandatory reporting required certain individuals to report abuse complaints, there was also a general obligation on every citizen to report criminal offences to police.

"I have become much more aware of it in the last few days," Mr Toole replied.

Joanne Gallagher, a barrister representing a survivor of child abuse, told Mr Toole the law had required such reporting since 1990.

The commission was due to conclude its hearings into the Jehovah's Witnesses on Wednesday but Justice McClellan said he will now call Geoffrey Jackson, a senior member of the church's governing body in New York who is currently in Australia, to appear next week.

The commission has also announced it will start public hearings in September into allegations of abuse at prestigious Victorian private school, Geelong Grammar in Melbourne.

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