

Jehovah's Witness church says it will comply with mandatory reporting of child abuse

Royal commission told that the church records more than one child abuse allegation every month yet in 60 years has never reported them to police

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The Jehovah's Witness church says it will comply with mandatory reporting obligations when they learn about sexual abuse crimes against children in their congregation.

A royal commission into institutional responses to child sexual abuse has heard that the theocratic church records more than one child abuse allegation every month yet in 60 years has never reported them to police.

In the second week of a hearing into the church's handling of abuse incidents, the head of the community's service desk, Rodney Spinks, acknowledged they dealt with matters internally and did not encourage reporting to police.

The service desk under the auspices of the church's legal entity, the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society Australia, is the first point of contact for elders looking for advice on how to deal with child abuse reports.

Spinks said the first issue addressed is the safety of the child, and elders are referred to Watchtower publications on the matter.

They are also given generic advice based on a handbook that says they should never suggest not reporting the allegation to police.

Spinks acknowledged they had not had a practice, "against the wishes of the victim or otherwise, to directly report to police".

The commission chair, Peter McClellan, pointed out there were mandatory reporting obligations when a crime had been committed.

Spinks said he had been made aware of this in these hearings and the church would accept and comply with mandatory reporting, "regardless of our strongly held religious belief that individuals should have the right to decide what is done with that information".

He said when there were mandatory reporting requirements with some sort of uniformity across the country "we will happily and willingly comply".

McClellan pointed out that uniform laws were not yet in place and they would differ from state to state but they would impose "a criminal sanction on a person who knows [about an abuse crime] and does not report".

Spinks said he understood that.

McClellan said the church needed to have a very good look maybe with the help of the church's lawyers at what the law provides.

The commissioner also pointed out that what the Jehovah's Witnesses were doing was different to what other churches might be doing "because you might be taking allegations and resolving, as you see it, the truth of the allegation by reason of your process".

The commission has heard that the Jehovah's Witness process is based on a biblical rule that the wrongdoing is only proven when there are two witnesses, and expect the abuse victim to confront the abuser.

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