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World

Jehovah's Witnesses face child sexual-abuse investigation in Australia

By A. Odysseus Patrick August 14

SYDNEY — The abuse was meticulously catalogued. From 1950 to 2014, the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society amassed 5,000 files detailing sexual abuse of Australian children by 1,006 of its members, who believe that only they — the Jehovah's Witnesses — proclaim the truth about God.

Young girls were assaulted by neighbors. Teenagers were raped by their fathers. Victims were forced to pray with their abusers.

When the children reached out for help, the church's obsession with secrecy and hostility to outsiders kicked in. Victims, ordered to keep quiet, were forced to confront their abusers in person. All complaints — which averaged one a month for 65 years — were carefully recorded in sealed files, along with the church's by-the-Bible responses.

In all, 127 church officials were demoted. No one was reported to the authorities. Child abuse was recorded and hidden away.

Now, sordid details from the closed world of the Jehovah's Witnesses are being exposed that could severely tarnish the image of a powerful organization that has 8.2 million members and has mostly avoided scrutiny.

Two years ago, the Australian government established [a royal commission](#) — similar to a presidential commission in the United States — to investigate institutionalized child sexual abuse.

Wide powers to investigate

The inquiry's primary target was the Catholic Church, whose record of protecting pedophiles was almost as rampant in Australia as in the United States. To avoid singling out one religion, government officials gave the inquiry wide legal powers to examine any organization that may have covered up abuse. The commission doesn't have the power to find guilt or issue punishment. But a spokesman said it has

referred more than 700 matters to authorities and will make recommendations to the government in a final report in 2017.

Of the religious and nonreligious groups being investigated, the Jehovah's Witnesses are exceptional, experts say. In a converted office in downtown Sydney, the organization's doctrines and practices are being parsed by lawyers, victims and journalists, providing rare insight into one of the Christian world's most conservative churches.

The church, which was founded in Pennsylvania during the 1870s to promote a 1st-century interpretation of the Bible, has emerged as the least able or willing to deal with sexual abuse within its ranks, said Anne Cossins, an associate law professor at the University of New South Wales and an expert in sex crimes who is a consultant for the inquiry.

"I find their approach to the issue and victims extraordinarily bizarre — almost medieval," she said in an interview.

Unlike the [pedophile priests of the Catholic Church](#), the Jehovah's Witnesses have no paid clergy. Abusers are mostly regular congregants, who are shielded from official prosecution by the church's strict code of moral conduct. Based on a literal interpretation of the Bible, the rules call for separation from other members of society, who are considered spiritually inferior. Leadership in the church and in families is based on a formal hierarchy headed by men.

The church's deep suspicion of outsiders, who are referred to, derogatorily, as "worldly," is the reason sex abuse among Jehovah's Witnesses is rarely reported to authorities, according to Angus Stewart, a South African lawyer who leads the investigation into the church.

"It is a system in which a group of men who are appointed from above, not by the congregation, stand in judgment over their fellow men, women and children on every aspect of their lives," he told the inquiry last week. "There is no meaningful distinction between family and church."

'Be obedient'

In 1988, a 17-year-old girl in the state of Queensland was abused by her father, a prominent member of the local Jehovah's Witness congregation, while her mother and six brothers and sisters were on vacation, according to testimony given to the commission. He gave her alcohol and showed her pornographic movies.

“The first time that he tried to have sex with me, he came naked into my bed at night whilst I was sleeping and touched me all over my body,” the woman, who cannot be identified under Australian law, told the inquiry last week. “When I protested I remember him saying to me, ‘Shhhh, it’s okay. I’m your father. Be obedient to your father.’”

“My father touched me and tried to have sex with me on at least four or five different occasions,” she continued. “I resisted as much as I could each time, but he was a violent man and prone to snap. I was absolutely petrified of him and tried not to make him angry.”

While she was being raped, her father quoted passages from the Bible and referred to verses of Scripture about being more obedient that he had made her put up on her bedroom wall. “You have to be obedient to me,” he said during the sexual acts, according to the woman, who is now 44.

After the rest of the family returned from vacation, the father prohibited her from speaking to anybody he thought she might confide in. “If I broke his rules, he flogged me,” she said.

When the teenager revealed the assaults to her mother, she learned that several of her sisters had gone through similar ordeals, including one who was 5 years old.

The church has strict rules governing moral behavior. If a Jehovah’s Witness becomes aware that another member has committed a serious sin — such as “fornication, adultery, homosexuality, blasphemy, apostasy, adultery and similar gross sins,” according to the commission — they are advised to tell senior men in their congregation known as elders. The process for handling these complaints is based on notions of justice and procedural fairness devised 2,000 years ago and recorded in the Bible.

The Jehovah’s Witnesses set a high bar for the discipline of their own. Church elders need to secure a confession or the testimony of two credible witnesses to the same incident, two witnesses to separate incidents of the same kind, or strong circumstantial evidence testified to by at least two witnesses. The accuser also has to justify his or her allegations to church elders, often in the presence of the alleged perpetrator.

Church officials acknowledge the process can be difficult for victims but say they have no choice but to follow the Bible. “All Scripture is inspired of God,” Rodney Spinks, one of the church’s top administrators in Australia, told the inquiry. “We, like many Christians, we are not fanatically trying to find references to make life difficult. We are applying Scripture as we read it, in the best way we can, to sensitively integrate with modern society.”

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Those found guilty are often banned from the church for a number of years, or they are demoted in the church hierarchy.

When the 17-year-old complained to church elders of being raped, two of her father's friends carried out the investigation. "Did you enjoy it?" she said she was asked. When she was forced to repeat the allegations in front of her father, he said, according to her: "You seduced me."

She later filed a police report, left the church and tried to commit suicide. Her father was expelled from the church, convicted of rape and sentenced to three years in jail.

Four years after the abuse, he was allowed to become a Jehovah's Witness again. "I remember that when it was announced to the congregation, all of the brothers crowded around my father, shaking his hand and patting him on the back," his daughter told the inquiry, referring to male members of the church. "Despite many people in the congregation knowing what he had done to me and my sisters, I heard members of the congregation say, 'Welcome back.'"

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