

Jehovah's Witnesses 'fostered distrust' of secular authority – royal commission counsel

Church's response to child sexual abuse fell short of best practice, says Angus Stewart QC in his damning submission, published on Tuesday

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A damning submission to the royal commission on child sexual abuse has recommended 77 adverse findings against the Jehovah's Witnesses in Australia.

It was open to the commission to find the church fostered distrust of secular authorities and its response to child sexual abuse fell short of best practice, counsel to the commission Angus Stewart QC found in his submission, published on Tuesday.

Since 1950 the church has received 1,066 allegations against its members and did not report any of them to police.

Stewart's recommendations arise out of a public hearing into the Jehovah's Witnesses and its oversight body, the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society of Australia, in July.

He said the Witnesses received about three or four reports of allegations of child abuse a month.

The Jehovah's Witness organisation presented its members with "conflicting and ambiguous teachings regarding their relationship with secular authorities, thereby fostering a distrust of such authorities", Stewart said.

He was critical of the church for requiring abuse victim BCB, who gave evidence at the July hearing, to confront her abuser and for not allowing the involvement of women when her complaint was being investigated.

He said it was "inconsistent of the elders' professed sympathy for BCB".

The evidence in July was that although elders in the Western Australia congregation at Narrogin - where BCB was abused by elder Bill Neill - believed her, Neill was allowed to keep his job because under "witness" regulations, based on a second-century interpretation of the Bible, two witnesses are needed to prove a crime.

BCB - who was in her mid-teens and had been groomed by Neill for a number of years - was made to continue to attend Bible classes with him and discouraged from discussing the abuse with anyone, Stewart found.

Among the other findings open to the commission was that there was no justification for the Jehovah's Witnesses not to report to police when the victim was a minor and others were still at risk, Stewart said.

One of the most senior members of the Jehovah's Witness church, Geoffrey Jackson, who is on the New York-based governing body that oversees decisions made internationally, gave evidence on the final day of the public hearing.

On Tuesday, Stewart said it could be found that Jackson, by familiarising himself only with the testimony of church witnesses and not reading the testimony of survivors, "belies his stated empathy for the survivors and his stated recognition of the importance of their perspective".

In a submission responding to Stewart's proposed finding, the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society of Australia said the finding that the Jehovah's Witnesses organisation fostered distrust was "just not true".

The submission said Stewart was selective in what doctrinal teachings he used to support the proposed finding.

Stewart's logic around the church's relationship with secular authorities was flawed because Witnesses believed it was their "Christian responsibility to be good citizens", and encourage obedience to the law, the submission said.

The submission said many of Stewart's proposed findings were based on "incorrect assertions" and the proposed finding against Jackson did not reflect what he actually said.

He had been in Australia to care for his ailing father and did not expect to be called to the commission, the society said.

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