

NSW

Paedophiles repeatedly promoted to positions of authority in Jehovah's Witness church royal commission told

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Counsel Assisting the Royal Commission, Angus Stewart SC has told the royal commission that church elders could now face criminal charges. Picture: Jeremy Piper/ Supplied

Officials in the Jehovah's Witness Church destroyed notes, including those involving allegations of sexually assaulting children, in case they fell into the "wrong hands" — like those of their wives.

Church Elder Max Horley told the child sex abuse royal commission today that it was protocol to destroy notes including those he made during meetings between another elder Bill Neill and the teenage girl who accused him of abusing her.

Mr Horley, a Jehovah's Witness all his life, said he had not considered it a "crime" for Neill, who is now dead, to have secretly watched the girl showering from the age of 15 and to have

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Church destroyed abuse notes to keep wives in dark

tongue-kissed her regularly when she stayed with his family.

Mr Horley had organised the meetings in 1991 after he was told of the abuse which took place at Narrogin in Western Australia but never considered reporting it to the police or encouraging the girl to go to police.



Justice Peter McClellan and Commissioner Helen Milroy at the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse. Picture: Jeremy Piper/ Supplied

He was asked by commissioner Justice Peter McClellan why the notes were destroyed.

“Well, I guess it[’s] because we don’t want them to fall into the wrong hands and other people to find them and then go through them,” Mr Horley said today.

Justice McClellan: “What are the wrong hands?”

Mr Horley: “Well we don’t want our wives knowing our stuff, what sort of things we are dealing with. We don’t want other people in the congregation coming across that information.”

He denied that the elders wanted to keep such details secret.

The commission has been told that Jehovah’s Witness is a “tightly controlled, rule-bound organisation that seeks to keep its members in relative isolation from the rest of society” and women are expected to defer to the authority of their husbands and children are taught to obey their parents.

Earlier the royal commission heard that the Jehovah’s Witness church repeatedly promoted paedophiles to positions of authority and never reported any case of child abuse to the police.

Church elders could now face criminal charges for concealment of serious indictable offences and failure to disclose sexual offences against minors, counsel assisting the commission Angus Stewart SC said.

The church holds no insurance for child sex abuse and its corporation, Watchtower Australia, in 2008 considered forming a separate legal entity to minimise liability, Mr Stewart said.

One church Elder, who had sexually abused all four of his daughters, was "disfellowshipped" not for his crimes but for "unrelated loose conduct and lying", the commission sitting in Sydney was told.



Justice Peter McClellan at the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse public hearing into allegations of child sexual abuse by Jehovah's Witness. Picture: Jeremy Piper/ Supplied

One of his daughters will give evidence that she had to be interviewed by three church Elders together with her father and that instead of being supported, the Elders made her feel to blame.

Her father blamed her for seducing him.

In 2004, the father was convicted and jailed for unlawful and indecent assault and attempted rape.

Mr Stewart said the church's own files reveal 1006 allegations of child sex abuse made against church members since 1950 but the Jehovah's Witnesses dealt with them using "Biblical standards" and not the police.

They only believed victims if the alleged abuser confessed or there were two "credible" witnesses despite there rarely being witnesses to sex assaults beyond the victim and the perpetrator, Mr Stewart said.

"(There will be) evidence that the Jehovah's Witness Church believes that loving and protective parents are the best deterrent to child abuse," Mr Stewart said.

He said the church believed the end of the world is near.

"Documents will be tendered which show that Jehovah's Witnesses believe that the only way to finally end child abuse is to, as they put it, 'embrace God's Kingdom under Christ' and to 'love God with all your heart and your neighbour as yourself' so as to be saved when the end comes," Mr Stewart said.



Counsel Assisting Angus Stewart SC at the public hearing into allegations of child sexual abuse by Jehovah's Witness's.

The church has 817 congregations across Australia with over 68,000 members, a growth of 29 per cent since 1990.

It deals with claims of sexual assault by having two Elders speak to the victim and the alleged offender but they can't take any action unless it is proven to the Biblical standards.

If the Elders believe there is proof, they can form a judicial committee to determine “firstly if the individual is guilty of violating God’s laws and secondly, whether the individual is genuinely repentant,” Mr Stewart said.

Over the past 65 years, the requirement that there be two or more witnesses to child sex abuse has prevented at least 125 allegations of sex assault from proceeding to a judicial committee.

Since 1950, 401 alleged child sex abusers have been disfellowshipped, 78 of them on more than one occasion.

Another 190 were “reproved”, 11 of them more than once. This is a lesser form of discipline and allows the abuser to stay in the church.

In the same time, 28 alleged abusers were appointed to positions of authority and of 127 alleged abusers deleted as church leaders, 16 were reappointed.

The hearing is set down for two weeks.

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