

## Ex-Jehovah's Witness faces new child sexual abuse charges in Mont-Laurier, Que.



Michel Courtemanche, 63, was acquitted of assaulting 1 of alleged victims in 1996

Pasquale Turbide · Radio-Canada · Posted: Feb 14, 2019 4:30 AM ET | Last Updated: February 14



Carolle Poudrier told Radio-Canada's investigative program *Enquête* of alleged sexual contact by Michel Courtemanche, right, over a period of months when she was 11. (Jasmin Simard/Radio-Canada)

A former Jehovah's Witness from Mont-Laurier, Que., is facing new charges of sexually assaulting two girls in his congregation in the 1980s — 23 years after he was acquitted of the sexual assault and indecent assault of one of the alleged victims in the case.

Michel Courtemanche, 63, is charged with three counts of sexual assault, one count of sexual interference of a minor and one count of indecent assault. He is to appear in court in Mont-

Laurier, 240 kilometres northwest of Montreal, on March 18 to enter a plea on those five charges.

It will be the second time Courtemanche will face judicial proceedings in connection with a complaint by the main alleged victim, Pénélope Herbert.

- [Quebec police probe possible cases of child sexual abuse in Jehovah's Witnesses congregation](#)

In 2017, Herbert told Radio-Canada's investigative program *Enquête* she was just 11 years old when she began babysitting Courtemanche's children while he was leading a Bible study group.

She recounted to *Enquête* that her alleged aggressor began by touching her on the chest and the genitals, and the attacks escalated, leading to sexual intercourse by the time she was 14.

"He would drop by to visit my parents and stay for the night," Herbert, who is now 44, recalled, breaking down in tears.

"Those nights, he would come to my room. I am talking about rape, night after night."

## Botched police investigation

According to *Enquête*, Herbert's parents lodged an internal complaint with the congregation about the alleged assaults on their daughter.

The congregation elder, a friend of Courtemanche's, allegedly did not question Herbert to learn the details of her complaint, as required by Jehovah's Witness protocols in such matters.

Disillusioned with how the Jehovah's Witnesses had handled her complaint, Herbert took her allegations to police in 1995.

Courtemanche was charged but acquitted a year later, after what some people later described to *Enquête* as a botched police investigation in which no witnesses were interviewed.

Courtemanche remained a Jehovah's Witness after his acquittal but was ultimately expelled in 2014, *Enquête* found out, after two other women filed internal complaints alleging he had

assaulted them as minors.

- Watch [\*Le silence des anciens\*](#), a new report by *Enquête* (in French only)

## Alleged victims meet



Pénélope Herbert and Carolle Poudrier met in 2015 and, after exchanging stories of their experiences, went back to the Sûreté du Québec in Mont-Laurier to file complaints against Michel Courtemanche in 2017. (Jasmin Simard/Radio-Canada)

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Nearly 20 years after Courtemanche's acquittal, Herbert met Carolle Poudrier, who told her she, too, had been sexually assaulted on two different occasions by Courtemanche, some years before the alleged attacks on Herbert.

Poudrier was 11 years old at the time, but she says she still remembers exactly what her alleged assailant told her.

"He crouched next to me and told me, 'You know, you mustn't say anything, because your father, he wouldn't be happy. You are a big girl now, so he wouldn't be happy that you sat on top of me.'"

"I told him, 'I won't say anything to him.'"

Poudrier says she, too, went to the authorities at her Jehovah's Witnesses congregation in Terrebonne, just north of Montreal, in 1983.

It appears that that information was never passed on to leaders of the Mont-Laurier congregation to which Courtemanche and Herbert, then a child, belonged.

After Poudrier and Herbert exchanged the story of their experiences, the grown women went back to the Sûreté du Québec in Mont-Laurier to file complaints in 2017.

## **Other incidents lead to new charges**

Courtemanche cannot by law be charged a second time for alleged crimes that he'd been acquitted of in 1996.

However, when Herbert went back to police and began to go over the chronology of the assaults she says she endured, she remembered two incidents she'd forgotten to tell police about when she first laid a complaint 24 years ago.

"OK, those are two things that we might be able to go with," she says the investigator told her.

Those two incidents — one that happened in Laval and the second, in Montreal — form the basis of the new charges, which were laid after an 18-month investigation by the Sûreté du Québec.

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*Translated by CBC's Loreen Pindera, from a report by Enquête's Pasquale Turbide*