

In the statement of claim for a class-action lawsuit against the Jehovah's Witnesses filed in Quebec, Lisa Blais says she was sexually abused from age 10 months into early childhood, and again at age 16. Blais told an elder of her congregation, according to the claim. However, she says no one reported her abuse to the authorities. Photo by Christinne Muschi

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**“I’ve given a lot of thought into how I should start this.** I don’t really know if there is a good way to start it. So I’m just going to come out and say the toughest part to begin with, and that is: My name is Melissa\*, and I am a survivor of childhood sexual abuse from the ages of six, possibly younger, to 14, and during that time, I was being raised a Jehovah’s Witness.”

This is how Melissa begins her first video blog divulging some of the horrific abuse she endured at the hands of her father while her family was living in Ontario and British Columbia. Her voice trembling but filled with conviction, she talks for 23 minutes from her living room in Edmonton in November 2016. “I will say my earliest memory is coming home from school sick,” she confides. “[My dad] went out and got me McDonald’s. He said I would get it after we cuddled for a bit. Well, we didn’t cuddle.”

At this point in the video, Melissa pauses as the weight of her words settles on viewers. She doesn’t share “the nitty-gritty,” as she calls it, because “nobody needs to hear that.” Instead, she explains how the rules and structure of the Jehovah’s Witnesses allowed the abuse to continue despite her mother reporting the situation to elders in multiple Kingdom Halls (their place of worship).

“My anger is more at the church than him,” the now 34-year-old said in a recent phone interview. “I know that might sound ridiculous, but I’ve only ever known my dad to have a severe brain injury, and that resulted in his lack of impulse control. I don’t forgive him, but I do hold the organization more accountable.”

Melissa remembers how, at age 12, she disclosed to an elder what was happening at home. His response? She should keep quiet and respect her parents, or else she’d bring shame on Jehovah (God). This scared Melissa because, like all Witnesses, she believed in Armageddon, an imminent battle between God and worldly enemies that only God’s true servants will survive. Melissa thought that if she mentioned the abuse again, Jehovah would literally kill her. So the preteen didn’t reach out to anyone, even though she suffered from depression, experienced learning delays and felt isolated.

“I’m hoping that it will at least let others know that they’re not alone,” says Melissa on why she finally shared her story so publicly 20 years later. (Her video has been viewed more than 17,000 times.) “This is an issue that needs to be taken seriously. . . . It’s very, very damaging.”

Around the world, lawmakers are starting to pay attention to this insular religious organization. The British government, via its Charity Commission, is conducting an investigation into how Jehovah’s Witnesses handle cases of child mistreatment. In the United States, judges have ordered the organization to release files on childhood sexual assault incidents; the church has so far refused and is incurring a \$4,000-per-day fine. Another inquiry in Australia determined that the denomination’s policies are inadequate when it comes to keeping children safe from sexual abuse. In fact, for a complaint to be taken seriously by church leaders, the Jehovah’s Witnesses impose requirements that few victims can meet. As a result, survivors feel the organization better protected their abusers than them.

Canadian survivors, like Melissa, are also seeking justice. For this article alone, five former Witnesses from across the country shared their stories. Dozens more have already joined two proposed class-action lawsuits filed against the organizing bodies of the Jehovah’s Witnesses. Their experiences reveal startling similarities in how the religious group handles sex abuse cases. “A lot of the victims want change,” says Bryan McPhadden, the Toronto lawyer leading a national class action filed with the Ontario Superior Court of Justice. “They [also] just want to be believed. Because many of them were involved in the Jehovah’s Witnesses, and they came forward and even then were not believed.”

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**On their international website**, the Jehovah’s Witnesses define themselves as a group of diverse Christians, each of whom “regularly

spends time helping people learn about the Bible and God's Kingdom." They claim eight million members around the world, with over 115,000 here in Canada. The organization emphasizes that becoming a Witness is voluntary. Once you're in, membership is all-consuming, according to former Jehovah's Witnesses interviewed for this piece.

Everyone in the congregation is a "publisher." They traditionally meet three or four times a week and spend at least 10 hours a month evangelizing. If they become a "pioneer" (a full-time evangelizer), those hours increase to 70 or more. Members avoid socializing with anyone outside the faith because they don't live in "the truth" and could influence Witnesses against their beliefs.

Unlike most other Christian groups, Jehovah's Witnesses don't have paid clergy. The organization's website explains that men who demonstrate "fine spiritual qualities" and a "co-operative spirit" can become a "ministerial servant," taking on the tasks needed to run the Kingdom Hall. Ministerial servants also assist the "elders," who are the spiritual leaders of the congregation appointed with the help of the holy spirit. (Women cannot be ministerial servants or elders.) Members are to submit to and obey their leaders, even when they don't agree with the decisions.

Other than evangelizing, Witnesses live separately from the secular world. They are discouraged from seeking a post-secondary education or even reading material beyond what's produced by Jehovah's Witnesses. They see themselves as "temporary residents" of Earth who will only become "permanent residents" after Armageddon, when God has expunged all the evildoers. This means they don't vote, sing national anthems, serve in the military or join political parties.

Jehovah's Witnesses are still expected to respect "worldly" authority, however, by paying taxes and complying with the laws. "We do not wish to bring reproach on Jehovah's name by being punished for wrongdoing," explains an issue of The Watchtower magazine. But their obedience only goes so far. Another Witness publication states, "We do not submit to the secular authorities if they ask us to disobey God."

For the most part, Jehovah's Witnesses follow a strict set of guidelines, all of which are based on their version of the Bible, the New World Translation of the Holy Scriptures. Disobey, and an unrepentant Witness could be "disfellowshipped" — cast out for committing a spiritual offence.

"Any religious institution has power over its members, but in the [Jehovah's Witnesses] organization, that power is increased exponentially because of the practice of shunning or 'disfellowshipping,'" observes Halifax lawyer John McKiggan, who is preparing another class action against the Jehovah's Witnesses. "It's [the threat of], 'If you do this, you'll never be able to talk to your family members again; you'll never be able to talk to friends again; you'll never be able to talk to anyone in your church again.'"

This is exactly what happened to Edith Knox of Hamilton. Normally, she watches do-it-yourself videos on YouTube about how to make jewelry or paint pictures. But in 2016, she viewed hours and hours of footage from Australia's public inquiry into how Jehovah's Witnesses handle sex abuse cases. The titles grabbed her attention, not only as a lifelong Witness but also as an abuse survivor.

When Knox was growing up in a small New Brunswick village, an elder in the Kingdom Hall took a special interest in her. He'd invite her to ride in his car for field service, and he'd make comments about how he was going to ask her on a date when she got older. She was only six and thought he was just being silly. But she didn't laugh when he started to touch her face, stroke her hair and pat her bottom. "I would get this feeling in the pit of my stomach, like I was doing something wrong," remembers Knox.

Finally, at age nine, she told a woman in the church, who was also a close family friend. When the woman informed the elders at their small Kingdom Hall what was happening with Edith, she was told to tell the little girl to stop talking about it because "it will bring reproach on Jehovah's name."

Young Edith stayed quiet, but the woman tried to make sure Edith was never alone with the elder, who was in his 40s, and that she didn't ride in his car. That watchful eye may have helped: just four years ago, Knox was told the elder went on to molest other children. If so, "he's ruined a lot of girls' lives," she reflects. "If only someone had listened to me. I feel responsible in a way."

These memories compelled the now 53-year-old to watch the videos from the Australian inquiry, which was run by a government-appointed Royal Commission. What she saw left her queasy and depressed. "I realized this has been going on for all these years," she says. She raised concerns about revelations from the investigation with an elder last summer — and was subsequently disfellowshipped for being an "apostate" (someone outside their beliefs). She says elders told her she was "a poison" that would destroy the congregation.



Despite being cut off, Knox refuses to be silenced again. "You want to accuse me of being an apostate? Well, here you go," she scoffs, referring to some signs she made, which include the messages, Jehovah's Witnesses "Protect Pedophiles" and "Australian Royal Commission [Investigates] Child Sex Abuse." She holds them when she protests outside her former Kingdom Hall, trying to raise awareness among the congregants.

"It's like the floodgates have opened ever since the Australia Royal Commission. It's motivated us to speak out and try to get the attention of people who might actually be able to help us — and others," says Knox. "There are so many other little kids out there in that organization."



Edith Knox, a former Witness and a survivor of sexual abuse, protests outside a Kingdom Hall in Hamilton to raise awareness among congregants. "There are so many other little kids out there in that organization," she says. Photo by Cathie Coward

**The Royal Commission formed in Australia** in 2013 to investigate how different institutions deal with the sexual abuse of children. The commissioners held 57 public hearings, two of which were devoted to the Jehovah's Witnesses. The first started in July 2015 and the second in March 2017. The commissioners pored through thousands of documents and listened to testimony from high-ranking members of the organization and survivors of abuse. The initial case-study report determined: "We do not consider the Jehovah's Witness organisation to be an organisation which responds adequately to child sexual abuse. . . . The organisation relies on outdated policies and practices to respond to allegations of child sexual abuse. . . . The policies and practices are, by and large, wholly inappropriate and unsuitable. . . . The sanctions available within the organisation's internal disciplinary system are weak and leave perpetrators of child sexual abuse at large in the organisation and the community."

In the 110-page case-study report, the commission outlined key areas of concern in the Jehovah's Witnesses' internal process. Essentially, when an allegation is made, two elders will investigate, requiring the survivor to divulge specifics of her or his abuse and answer questions in detail. If the elders find the accusations credible, they will form a "judicial committee" and call another meeting. As post-secondary education is considered worldly, a typical elder's only training in how to deal with these cases comes strictly from Jehovah's Witnesses literature, such as

the elder handbook, *Shepherd the Flock of God*.

In both meetings, the victim often has to face her or his abuser. The commission's case-study report says this process is "inherently wrong" and results in "the inevitable further trauma" of the survivor. Elders who testified at the Australian inquiry said that this practice ended around 1998. However, the organization's literature didn't explicitly exclude child sex abuse victims from being in the same room as their accused until August 2016.

Another troubling protocol is the two-witness rule. For elders to find an alleged abuser guilty and take internal disciplinary action, Jehovah's Witnesses require either the abuser to confess or the evidence of at least two witnesses. This policy has been central to the organization's disciplinary process since its founding in the late 19th century. The survivor is considered one witness, but if the abuser denies the allegations and no other witness comes forward, the alleged abuser is considered innocent.

As the commission's final report points out, "child sexual abuse almost invariably occurs in private, where the only witnesses to the abuse are the perpetrator and the victim. . . . [The two-witness rule] shows a failure by the organisation to recognize that the rule will more often than not operate in favour of a perpetrator of child sexual abuse, who will not only avoid sanction but also remain in the congregation and the community with their rights intact and with the capacity to interact with their victim and other children."

The commission also revealed that the Jehovah's Witnesses have kept records of sexual abuse allegations since 1950. The organization submitted documents from complaints against 1,006 of its Australian members. Among those, 579 (57 percent) admitted to sexually abusing children, and 401 were disfellowshipped (230 were later reinstated by the organization). However, the Royal Commission found "no evidence" that Jehovah's Witnesses notified authorities about a single case.

In fact, the organization's submissions pointed to a "passive policy" for elders: if approached, they "should not discourage" congregation members from reporting allegations to authorities, and ensure they know it is their right to do so.

During the first public hearing, Geoffrey Jackson, one of the seven members of the Governing Body (the group that oversees Jehovah's Witnesses worldwide), took the stand. In his testimony, he explained that elders can experience a "spiritual dilemma" over whether to report childhood sexual assault cases to police and quoted verses from Proverbs: "Do not rush into a legal dispute. . . . Plead your case with your neighbour, but do not reveal what you were told confidentially." He also suggested that a child's parents should be the ones to go to the police. At the second hearing, the organization testified that it has a new Australian "child safeguarding policy" that instructs elders to inform police when they learn of "a case of child sexual abuse in which a child may still be at risk of harm."

**Mark\* was honoured when he landed a job** at the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society of Canada (the national headquarters, which is also called Bethel or the branch office) in Georgetown, Ont., back in the early 1980s. A gregarious young man in his early 20s, he had grown up as a Jehovah's Witness and was already a full-time pioneer. For Witnesses, a position at Bethel is considered the highest privilege; Mark jumped at the chance.

For five years, he worked a factory job at Bethel's printing house, publishing *The Watchtower* and *Awake!* magazines and other literature, but then moved to the legal department, where he was an assistant to one of four lawyers. He anticipated the cases would mainly be about child custody and blood transfusions. "It wasn't until I actually got into legal that I started learning about the child abuse issues."

In 1989, the same year Mark started in legal, the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society of New York (the denomination's international headquarters) sent out a confidential letter to elders outlining how to handle legal issues, including child abuse. "Many states have child abuse reporting laws," the letter reads. "When elders receive reports of physical or sexual abuse of a child, they should contact the Society's Legal Department immediately. Victims of such abuse need to be protected from further danger."

The instructions were short, but Mark says that before the letter, it was a "Wild West." "The elders were running these things pretty much as they saw fit. If they knew the guy and it was a good ol' boy, then it didn't go anywhere. The two-witness thing would be used as an excuse to sweep it under the rug."

Mark will never forget the first phone call he took from an elder about a child being abused. "I was appalled," says Mark. "To think that somebody could do something like that to a child shocked me, and then the secondary shock was that this could happen within God's organization."



Mark quickly passed the elder off to a lawyer. But the inquiries kept coming. In the three and a half years he spent in legal, Mark estimates he saw about 24 cases of childhood sexual abuse from across the country each year.

“A case file was opened with pertinent details, and whatever advice was given by the lawyers to the congregation was documented,” he says of the records they kept of the calls. “A copy of that report was sent up to the branch committee. . . . And then it was just a matter of providing legal advice and working with the service department, which is the group that co-ordinates all the spiritual advice to congregations. For these cases, it was usually a joint effort between the legal and the service departments.”

Mark points out that neither Bethel staff nor the elders had training in even the basics of abuse-victim psychology. He didn't realize “that survivors will still feel guilt — and that's not to be interpreted that they were complicit in it.” He recalls a case where a woman started crying and apologizing about the incident. “We took that as a sign of guilt, that it was a consensual act. . . . [The case] was dismissed simply because of that. I didn't know any better at the time.”

He says about half the callers were immediately told to call the police, and that one of the deciding factors about going to authorities was if the situation could come back to the Jehovah's Witnesses. “Sometimes calling the police was the better optic for the organization. [It wasn't always about] what was in the best interest of the kids.”

What concerned Mark most was how elders dealt with the alleged abusers. Unless there were two witnesses, Mark says that at most the person might be “marked,” which means elders would keep an eye on him. “So there are still abusers wandering the corridors of . . . their Kingdom Halls with people not having any idea except the elders.”

Mark also remembers getting calls from survivors who weren't happy with how the elders processed their cases. They could appeal to Bethel, but Mark says judgments normally sided with the elders. The legal department would also remind survivors, “The most important thing is not to lose their faith, and trust in Jehovah that he will see that justice comes through.”



Christian Gutierrez (left) of Calgary is the representative plaintiff of a national class action that is seeking \$66 million in compensation from the Jehovah's Witnesses for survivors of sexual assault. The statement of claim outlines Gutierrez's abuse as a child by a congregational elder. Even though he later reported the incident to other church elders, the organization didn't address it, according to the claim. Gutierrez is pictured here with his wife, Katja, who is also a former Jehovah's Witness. Photo by Lyle Aspinall

**Christina\* heard similar responses** from elders when she informed them of her sexual abuse. When she was nine years old, a teenager from her Kingdom Hall in Oshawa, Ont., started molesting her. Her mother reported it to the elders at the time, but they didn't consider it abuse since the boy wasn't an adult. Instead, they told her mom not to worry: they'd handle it; there was no need to call the authorities.

Christina isn't sure if the elders actually did anything, though, because the abuse continued, always in the bathroom of the hall during meetings. "He remained as a Witness," she recalls. "He was always around and remained active. I always felt threatened by him. Our meetings were three times a week, so I would see him three times a week. I just didn't feel good about going because I would see him there."

After three years, the molestation finally ended. Instead, the abusive teen started to write Christina love letters, which also disturbed her. "I suffered a lot of depression through my life, a lot of anxiety. And I just never put the two together," she says. "I never realized it usually comes from a traumatic event."

Christina was devoted to her faith. After quitting high school in Grade 10, she went to hairdressing school to make money — all her clients were Jehovah's Witnesses. In her 20s, she served as a full-time pioneer in Ontario and Prince Edward Island. She eventually married another Jehovah's Witness, and they had a daughter.

That was when Christina felt like a veil lifted. "When I had my daughter, everything changed for me. I'm looking at this little person, and I'm [wondering], 'What if I don't want to raise her the way I was raised? What if something weird happens to her, like it happened to me?'"

Besides questioning her faith, she also started to realize that she had to leave her marriage. Finally, in 2012, she left everything behind, taking her daughter to a shelter until she could find an apartment of her own. Shortly after, she received word from the elders that she was disfellowshipped.

She decided to write a letter to Bethel and the Durham Regional Police, detailing her abuse and naming the elders who knew about it at the time. In 2013, she received a letter back from the Georgetown headquarters. "Sexual abuse of innocent children is among the vilest of perversions," it reads. "We recognize that when victims of this abuse become adults, many still carry painful wounds that are real. The Christian congregation can be a place of comfort for those with a 'down-hearted spirit.'"

The letter goes on to say that Christina's abuser is no longer a Jehovah's Witness and that they don't know where he is currently living. They also acknowledge that Christina had informed the police. "Whatever the outcome of any police investigation, be assured that ultimately Jehovah God and Christ Jesus render everlasting judgment in justice." The letter makes no mention of investigating the elders who had dismissed her abuse.

Dissatisfied with the Jehovah's Witnesses' response, and knowing the police were unable to lay charges, Christina has joined a class-action suit. "I might be able to help other Witnesses who are going through something similar to what I've been through," she says of her decision to take legal action. "Because a lot of them just bury it. It's horrible. They don't want their life to fall apart."

The Watchtower Bible and Tract Society of Canada declined to answer questions about the two class actions filed with the courts, the specifics of how elders currently handle cases of childhood sexual abuse and how many complaints it has on record against its members. It also wouldn't provide proof of notifying authorities (in most parts of the country, it is mandatory to report certain suspected cases of childhood sexual abuse to child protection agencies). In an email, Bethel spokesperson Jonathan Ursuliak said that any questions relating to the lawsuits "would not be appropriate for us to comment on at this time."

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The court issued a restraining order, and Melissa was finally free. But the impact of abuse is a life sentence.

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He did provide a statement, which reads in part: “The safety of children is of the utmost importance. . . . We do not protect any child molesters from the consequences of their actions. Elders report all suspected cases of child abuse as required by provincial child protection legislation. The so-called ‘two witness rule,’ based on scriptural passages, is not a prerequisite for elders to act on an accusation of child abuse. Even if the only witness to come forward is the victim, elders have long been instructed to comply with child-abuse reporting laws. We also provide spiritual comfort to any who have suffered from this terrible crime.”

In a Jehovah’s Witnesses video from 2015, a member of the Governing Body, Stephen Lett, seems to take a much harder stance on the concerns over the organization’s conduct around the sexual abuse of children. “Think about the apostate-driven lies and dishonesties that Jehovah’s organization is permissive toward pedophiles,” says Lett. “I mean, that is ridiculous, isn’t it? If anybody takes action against someone who would threaten our young ones, and takes action to protect our young ones, it is Jehovah’s organization. We reject outright such lies.”

In September 2017, the organization sent out a letter to all elders in regard to “protecting minors from abuse.” It replaced the previous letter of instruction on this topic, which had been sent out in August 2016. In terms of reporting cases of child abuse to authorities, the Jehovah’s Witnesses added a clause that states, “The congregation’s handling of an accusation of child sexual abuse is not intended to replace the secular authority’s handling of the matter. Therefore, the victim, her parents, or anyone else who reports such an allegation to the elders should be clearly informed that they have the right to report the matter to the secular authorities. Elders do not criticize anyone who chooses to make such a report.” It also includes a clause, first introduced in the 2016 letter, that states, “Individuals who learn of an allegation of child abuse may be obligated by law to report the allegation to the secular authorities.”

Another change in both the 2016 and 2017 letters is that “a victim of child sexual abuse is not required to make her allegation in the presence of the alleged abuser.” As well, the words “two witnesses” weren’t included in the letter. However, the elders are instructed to consider “sufficient Scriptural evidence” to determine whether or not a judicial committee needs to be formed. And the Witnesses firmly believe the two-witness rule is scriptural.

In a video released last November, Gary Breaux, an elder who assists the Governing Body, stresses that the two-witness rule isn’t going anywhere. “Christ Jesus establishes the fact that there has to be two witnesses,” he states. “Now, it doesn’t mean that if there is only one witness that there are no consequences. There might be, depending upon the situation, but the scriptures are very clear. Before a judicial committee can be convened, there has to be a confession or two witnesses, so we will never change our scriptural position on that subject.”

These changes still wouldn’t have protected Melissa from her father back in the 1980s and ’90s when her mother repeatedly went to the elders asking for help. In a letter, her mother described how some elders told her she was overreacting, others suggested the behaviour wouldn’t happen if she “wasn’t such an independent female,” and still others told her that the abuse was the family’s fault for “pushing his buttons.” To Melissa’s knowledge, none of them called him before a judicial committee or took any disciplinary action, and they didn’t call the authorities.

When her dad started to stalk and make advances on other women in the church, Melissa’s mom finally sent him packing. The elders threatened to disfellowship her, so she appealed to Bethel herself, and the organization agreed with the separation.

Her letter also outlines what happened in family court. Melissa’s dad had to go through a psychological assessment. Melissa and her siblings met with a therapist who recommended that the kids have no further contact with their father — even supervised. The court issued a restraining order, and Melissa was finally free. But the impact of abuse is a life sentence.

As a teenager, she would cut herself and felt suicidal. In her early 20s, she started to recognize that the problems she was having in relationships stemmed from her abuse. After a breakdown during the summer of 2016, Melissa started seeing a trauma specialist and a counsellor who specializes in working with survivors of sexual assault. Thanks to their help, Melissa feels like she is doing much better now and is more determined than ever to bring about change among the Jehovah’s Witnesses.

“This is not just an issue with such a small group of people — it actually extends into being a community problem and a national problem. . . . These guys are out there coming to your doors,” she says. (Elders disfellowshipped her father after the divorce, but Melissa heard he has since been reinstated.) “Our religious freedom laws make for a culture where so many people respond with, ‘Well, let people believe what they want to believe,’ and to an extent that’s right. But when it’s harming other people — that’s when we, as Canadians, need to step in.”

*\*Some names have been changed.*