

Jehovah's Witnesses: Internal judicial process 'catastrophic' for members alleging child sex abuse

Radio-Canada's *Enquête* investigates allegations that the closed religious movement fails to protect children

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Mélanie Poirier was 10 when she started taking piano lessons and it would prove to be an experience that changed her life forever. At that very first lesson, she said, her piano teacher sexually assaulted her. It went on for five years.

"Week after week, at every piano lesson, he would masturbate in front of me. And he would ask me to touch him," Poirier told Radio-Canada's investigative program, *Enquête*.

Her father, Benoît Poirier, was in the next room waiting for her lesson to be over, completely unaware, she said.

Poirier said she couldn't tell her father, who was a Jehovah's Witness elder, or anyone else what was happening because her piano teacher was also an elder in the congregation that her family belonged to in a Montreal suburb.

"He was well-known, an elder, an example to follow," she said.

The biggest obstacle, however, was the fact she didn't have a second witness to the alleged abuse — a key requirement of the church's internal judicial system.

"If I told anyone, nothing would have happened. I wouldn't be believed. The elders wouldn't have even stopped to listen to me," Poirier said.

Internal policies — and no police

The Poiriers are among several former Jehovah's Witnesses in Quebec and the United States who spoke to *Enquête* about the church's policies for dealing with allegations of child sexual abuse and their failure to protect victims.

Among those policies: complainants are made to answer inappropriate questions if they report an assault, and their stories must be corroborated by a second witness for a case to even be heard by an internal judicial committee. Until this past summer, accusers were also forced to confront their alleged abuser before a panel of elders.

Radio-Canada also heard allegations that a five-year-old boy from a Quebec congregation was made to repeat his story in front of the man he said abused him. The boy's mother told *Enquête* the allegations were dismissed because the child did not have a second witness to the alleged assault.

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In its investigation, Radio-Canada obtained a questionnaire designed to guide Jehovah's Witness elders interviewing children alleging sexual abuse. It includes the question: "How many elders believe the victim is to blame or willingly participated in the act?"

The questionnaire was drafted by the headquarters of the Jehovah's Witnesses, the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, in the state of New York. The Watchtower Society declined *Enquête*'s request for an interview.

Rules rooted in scripture

The Watchtower Society's leadership bases its policies on a strict interpretation of biblical scripture.

Its policy on making an accuser justify her or his allegations in the accused's presence, for example, is based on a line from the Book of Matthew:

"If your brother commits a sin, go and reveal his fault between you and him alone." — Matthew 18:15

An elders' manual distributed to congregations cites the books of Deuteronomy and John as the basis for the two-witness policy.

"There must be two or three eyewitnesses, not just people repeating hearsay." — Deut. 19:15

"No action can be taken if there is only one witness." — John 8:17

While the Watchtower tells elders it is the "absolute right" of members to report allegations of child abuse to police, doing so is effectively discouraged by an organizational emphasis on dealing with such matters internally and avoiding "unnecessary entanglement with secular authorities," as stated in an internal document from 2014.

A recent royal commission in Australia found 1,006 cases of alleged child sexual abuse filed in the Jehovah's Witness church. Not one was reported to outside authorities.

Since 1997, the Watchtower leadership has required that every allegation of child sexual abuse brought to a congregation's attention be sent to the organization's national headquarters.

Earlier this year, a California court ordered the Watchtower Society to submit a database of the alleged pedophiles among its ranks, but the society has yet to do so.

'Catastrophic' complaint process

Mélanie Poirier kept her story of alleged weekly assaults by her childhood piano teacher to herself for 20 years, until she met another alleged victim of the same man. Together, they decided to bring their case to the congregation's elders.

Both women were made to defend their allegations in a meeting at which their alleged abuser was present.

"I thought it would be difficult, but it wasn't difficult — it was catastrophic," Poirier said.

"He asked me questions. He said I was mistaken, my memories were wrong, why do I want to do this to him. I was revictimized that evening," Poirier said.

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Based on his alleged victims' testimony, a judicial committee composed of elders expelled Poirier's former piano teacher from the Jehovah's Witnesses. He appealed, however, twice — meaning Poirier and the other alleged victim were made to confront the man a total of three times.

The story doesn't end there. Poirier's alleged abuser soon joined another Jehovah's Witness congregation, despite never having admitted to any wrongdoing or repented for the sin he was accused of committing — conditions set by the Watchtower Society for regaining membership.

Enquête contacted Poirier's old teacher, who is still a Jehovah's Witness and doing door-to-door work. He denied the allegations and refused an interview.

Poirier left the Jehovah's Witnesses soon after her ordeal, as did her father. Benoît Poirier said he's never recovered from seeing his daughter treated the way she was, and he's encouraging others to come forward with their stories.

"You're not sullyng the organization by speaking out," he said. "These people are traitors, abusers, criminals. ... They're sullyng the organization with their actions."

Poirier has since taken her case to police in Laval, Que.

Translated and edited from a report by Radio-Canada's Pasquale Turbide

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