

News 3.5.2014 16:58 | updated 3.5.2014 20:54

NGO calls on Ministry to probe closed religious groups; Jehovah's Witnesses under scrutiny

The UUT - the Support group for the Victims of Religions - has asked the Ministry of Justice to study ways in which to intervene in the activities of closed religious communities. The group released a report Saturday on the Jehovah's Witnesses, which UUT claims uses its own internal judicial system with a board that interrogates members and hands down sentences for infractions.



Jehovah's Witness marketing material may sometimes show up in the mail. Image: YLE / Mari Siltanen

The report authored by UTT, the Support Group for Victims of Religions and published Saturday claims that the Jehovah's Witnesses religious group uses its own internal tribunal known as a judicial committee, which questions members about alleged wrongdoing and hands down sentences.

The report indicates that persons who are alleged to have sinned are harassed, bullied, publicly reviled and isolated from loved ones. The report is based on the experiences of 18 former church members with the judicial committee and their practice of ostracising errant church members.

The UUT hopes its report will spur Justice Minister Anna-Maija Henriksson to investigate and determine how to intervene in the church's practices to protect members from the threat of violence.

A closed community

Jehovah's witnesses in Finland appear to lead a somewhat isolated existence within their own communities. According to the report the church is part of a major global movement about which there has been relatively academic research.

Jehovah's Witnesses are described as a religious movement that wields great influence over its members and is said to possess "a rather rigid fundamentalist outlook".

The report noted that the organisation behind the church is highly hierarchical and tightly regulated from above. Elders in the church are said to possess a handbook known as "*Shepherd God's Flock*", and which ordinary members are not allowed to read.

UUT managed to obtain an English language version of the primer, which lays down strict prescriptions for matters such as the operation of the judicial committee. According to the Jehovah's Witness doctrine, the literature represents God's teachings and must be treated with a corresponding degree of seriousness.

Committee passes judgment on "grave sins"

The judicial committee itself comprises three elders, all of whom are men. Hearings are conducted behind closed doors and are usually attended only by the accused and the committee members.

The judicial committee convenes when a church member is suspected of having committed a grave sin. Such infractions include disputing the teachings of the church, repeated acceptance of blood transfusions, participating in party politics, celebrating Christmas or birthdays, smoking or murder. Repeated infidelity is also just cause for a sitting of the committee.

Jehovah's Witnesses also cannot hide behind the shield of individual privacy, according to UUT. Congregation members may be subjected to random home inspections to unearth evidence of sins such as engaging in pre-marital sex. Judicial committee hearings dealing with sexual offences often involve questions about intimate details of alleged sex acts.

Shunning a severe sentence

The report claims the committee may in some cases hand down a sentence of shunning. In such cases the community expels the offender and other congregation members are not allowed to speak to or even greet the individual. Family members and relatives are also encouraged to shun former church members. However shunning may not apply in cases where family members live in the same household.

The aim of shunning is to persuade offenders to return to the flock, but those who do so must then undergo a humiliating repentance exercise which involves attending services twice weekly for a month without being greeted by congregation members.

Suicide a path to freedom?

The UUT report describes the activities of the justice committee and the practice of shunning as exceptionally cruel and a violation of human rights. In some cases offenders have suffered severe health problems or even attempted suicide.

However persons who attempt suicide are not referred to the committee. According to the teachings of the church attempted suicide is adequate expression of regret and does not require intervention by the judicial committee.

According to the UUT report Jehovah's Witnesses are suspicious of higher education so elders are not well-educated. The organisation said that this may be the reason why elders do not fully understand the consequences of expulsion and shunning.

In spite of the penalty of leaving the church, many members choose this option. A US study involving a random sample showed that just 37 percent of children of Jehovah's Witnesses grew up to become members of the congregation.

Sources Yle