



Deaf Aotearoa flooded with complaints about Jehovah's Witness church

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Deaf Aotearoa has asked the Jehovah's Witness church to respond to claims of a deaf information database.

New Zealand's deaf community is fed up with unsolicited house calls, claiming the Jehovah's Witness church is targeting deaf households.

Deaf Aotearoa has received multiple complaints from around the country and says church members visited certain homes because they were aware a deaf person lived there.

The organisation released a statement on Monday, saying it was looking into the possibility the church holds a database listing the details of members of the deaf community.

Jehovah Witness spokesman Rod Spinks said there was no such database and deaf people were not being targeted.

The Deaf Aotearoa statement was posted on the group's Facebook page, and received a flood of comments from frustrated people.

One woman said a group of Jehovah's Witnesses had come to her house and asked "for the deaf person who lives here." She said they refused to explain how they had her details and didn't visit her neighbours.

Another said church members had turned up at her work and asked for her by name.

Hamilton man Royce Flynn said he had been visited six times over the last nine months, despite repeatedly saying he was uninterested in the house calls.

He said the church members were always able to sign and also brought deaf people along, which lead him to believe he was being singled out.

Flynn said contacted local police, who told him it was a privacy issue and referred him on to the Office of the Privacy Commissioner.

He said he had been been in contact with local Labour member of parliament Sue Moroney.

Deaf Aotearoa acting chief executive Jill Dean said complaints about the church were a recurring issue.

"Certainly the concerns that have been raised recently are about how do the church know where deaf people are."

With the number of deaf who primarily sign only around 4000, Dean said she found it "an almighty coincidence" that a "minority church" would have turned up at the number of deaf homes they had with a signer in tow.

"It's beyond reasonable to think it's a coincidence," she said.

Dean's main concern was for privacy of the community.

"Deaf people value their privacy very highly," she said.

"I think a lot of that is around that it's very difficult for people to have a private conversation ...

usually there is a third person involved."

"It's a very precious thing. Any kind of breach of that, it just feels very much worse to a deaf person."

"It's difficult, people are isolated and it can be quite an intimidating to have several people on your doorstep."

She said she would be waiting for a response from the church but if the answers received were unsatisfactory, the organisation would escalate the matter to the privacy commissioner.

Spinks said he was unaware of the allegations and said there was no database.

"I think it's well known that Jehovah's Witnesses call on every house in the community," he said.

"We certainly are not targeting deaf people, we call on everyone and we speak many languages."

Spinks said thousands of church members has taken the time to learn sign language and it was common for people to have basic signing skills.

He said groups who went out visiting did not intentionally knock on the doors of deaf people.

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But, he said, if the church members met a deaf person and couldn't communicate with them, it was likely that somebody who could communicate would return to the house - if it was felt the person was responsive.

He said the claims of "targeting" sounded like a misunderstanding, and should he see a complaint, the church would "take it seriously straight away."

Dean said deaf people who felt harassed should contact the local meeting house of the church and make a complaint.

"[Let] people know they're not welcome to call in any unsolicited way," she said.

"If people are wanting to make a complaint, we've got staff around the country happy to support them."

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