

# Campaigners issue Jehovah's Witnesses abuse warning

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The Government has been asked to introduce mandatory reporting to police whenever an allegation of child sex abuse is made within the Jehovah's Witnesses

Victims of child abuse within the Jehovah's Witnesses may never see the perpetrators brought to justice unless the Government closes a loophole allowing criminals to evade justice, campaigners have warned.

The Government has been asked to introduce mandatory reporting to police whenever an allegation of child sex abuse is made within the faith group.

Currently, the so-called "two-witness rule" means Jehovah's Witnesses deal with allegations of "sins" internally and only investigate themselves if the claim is corroborated by a second testimony - something lawyers say is unlikely given that many victims are abused on their own, in private.

Concern over the number of "hidden" victims has prompted campaigners to hand a letter to Downing Street calling on the government to take action.

Victim Nick French, 43, who was abused by his stepfather Gary Moscrop from the ages of seven to 13, said introducing mandatory reporting would reduce the risk of paedophiles offending.

The salesman, originally from Glasgow but who was raised in Brighton, claimed: "When there are institutions that have rules that protect paedophiles, then something really needs to be done about that."

"When it's one word against another, they can get away with it. Certainly in my case, it just allowed him (my abuser) to become worse and worse in his criminal activities.

"What a faith group like the Jehovah's Witnesses would say about child abuse is they still view it as a sin, rather than a crime.

"In this day and age, as soon as a crime is reported it needs to go to the people who are qualified to deal with such a crime. It shouldn't be kept within the confines of society."

Mr French, a father-of-two, waived his right to anonymity when Moscrop was jailed for ten years in January this year.

He said: "What we want to do is highlight this and really petition government to make sure that faith groups - when they're aware of cases such as child abuse - contact authorities such as social services."

The call comes after a landmark case in which a woman abused as a child by a Jehovah's Witness minister won £275,000 damages at the high court.

Kathleen Hallisey, senior solicitor with London-based AO Advocates who represented the woman in court, said the Royal Commission investigation into institutional child sexual abuse in Australia revealed thousands of victims - and said she expected there to be hundreds of "silent" victims within the church in the UK due to the two-witness rule.

She said: "I think it's a very difficult situation for government to intervene in private religious matters.

"The way around that is to introduce mandatory reporting that in essence would mean the moment an accusation is made within the Jehovah's Witnesses, that would immediately be turned over to the authorities.

"If there hadn't been the two-witness rule and the Jehovah's Witnesses had reported the allegation of child sexual abuse to the police, the great likelihood is that my client and many others would not have been abused by that same person."

In a statement, a Jehovah's Witness spokesman said child abuse was a crime that occurred "in all sectors of society".

He said: "Anyone who commits the sin of child abuse faces expulsion from the congregation. If such a person is serving in a position of responsibility, he is removed.

"Any suggestion that Jehovah's Witnesses cover up child abuse is absolutely false.

"We are committed to doing all we can to prevent child abuse and to provide spiritual comfort to any who have suffered from this terrible sin and crime."

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