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Child sexual abuse inquiry considers Jehovah's Witnesses UK investigation

Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse says there have been 'a considerable number' of complaints

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The national public inquiry into child sexual abuse is considering whether to conduct a separate investigation into The Jehovah's Witnesses UK after it received a large number of reports about the organisation.

The Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse (IICSA) is currently looking at the extent to which institutions in England and Wales failed to protect children from sexual abuse.

It is examining institutional failures in the Anglican and Roman Catholic churches but has yet to do anything specific on other religious organisations.

An IICSA spokesperson said that while it was currently delivering its existing programme, the panel would “consider calls for a Jehovah’s Witnesses-specific investigation carefully” as work progressed.

IICSA would not say how many reports it had received about the Jehovah’s Witnesses but said there were a “considerable number”. It noted that both members of the public and MPs had raised their concerns, but would not say which politicians had spoken to them.

One solicitor representing abuse victims said she believed there were thousands of complaints of abuse in the UK.

As with other other religious groups facing IICSA scrutiny, there are claims from victims’ representatives and campaigners that practices within the Jehovah’s Witnesses UK organisation compromised child safety. Alleged child abuse victims within the faith had been told not to report it to the police, numerous sources said. And one solicitor said that in order for alleged victims to take allegations of sexual abuse further they had to have two witnesses.

There are also concerns that the power held by senior Jehovah’s Witnesses has historically made alleged victims of abuse fear that they will not be believed. It is alleged that in some cases the fact that Jehovah’s Witnesses who are excluded from the faith, or disfellowshipped, are cut off from their family and friends makes coming forward too great a risk to consider.

In a statement, Jehovah’s Witnesses insisted that congregation elders were not shielded from abuse and that the organisation had robust child protection policies.

Alex Chalk, the Conservative MP for Cheltenham, told the Guardian that he was one of those who wrote to IICSA after two constituents approached him saying that abuse in the Jehovah’s Witnesses was systemic.

He said: “I am waiting to hear back from IICSA and depending on what they say, I am planning to raise the issue in parliament and seek a backbench debate on it. I am not prepared to see this rest, not least because if we are going to drain the swamp it would be a huge missed opportunity not to deal with this [the Jehovah Witness abuse allegations] at same time of other aspects ... it would be regrettable unfinished business.”

IICSA was set up in 2014 to “expose those failures and learn the lessons” from the past after the 2011 death of BBC presenter Jimmy Savile, when hundreds of people came forward to say he had abused them as children.

In 2015 the IICSA ordered leaders of 18 religious groups, including the Jehovah’s Witnesses, to release documents of interest to the inquiry. It said it encourages all victims and survivors of child sexual abuse to engage with the inquiry.

Kathleen Hallisey, senior solicitor in the abuse team at Bolt Burdon Kemp, said she welcomed news of a potential new investigation but wanted a firm commitment.

“The Jehovah’s Witnesses refuse to recognise the issue of child abuse in their organisation or to create robust safeguarding procedures to protect children. An investigation by IICSA into the Jehovah’s Witnesses is an opportunity for the inquiry to effect real change in an organisation that refuses to shine a light on child abuse and protect children,” she alleged.

Hallisey said she is currently acting on behalf of 15 alleged victims of abuse in the Jehovah's Witnesses and believed there were thousands more complaints of abuse in this country.

Louise Goode, a former Jehovah's Witness, says she left the faith because of its responses to allegations of child sexual abuse. "Since leaving ... I have become an activist and my aim is to ensure that all abuse cases or suspected safeguarding issues are reported immediately to the police rather than being dealt with in a secretive way in house by three elders who have had no safeguarding training."

Along with colleagues she started a charity called JW Support Foundation to direct ex-members to information, help and support with all the issues they face when leaving the group.

The Charity Commission is already investigating the Jehovah's Witnesses charity, the Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Britain. It is examining the child safeguarding policy and procedures further.

In 2017, a Jehovah's Witness congregation in Manchester was criticised by the Charity Commission over its handling of allegations of child sex abuse by a senior member.

In a statement, Jehovah's Witnesses said it "abhorred child abuse, and view it as a heinous crime and sin. The safety of our children is of the utmost importance."

It added: "Whether the victim or parents decide to report the matter is not contingent on the number of witnesses to the offence or whether a confession has been made. Congregation elders do not shield abusers from the authorities or from the consequences of their actions."

Case study: 'Once I was older I realised I had been groomed by a respected member of the community'

The abuse I experienced happened over a period of about three to four years from when I was 14 years old. This was the late 1990s. I was in a congregation in north west England at the time and the person who abused me was an elder. He would arrange for me to work with him in doing door-to-door preaching and I couldn't say no as we were taught to respect and obey the elders. At first he was very nice.

He began arranging the territory so that we were alone on a quiet street and then he would grope my breasts and stroke my bum. It was quite subtle, but it was persistent and deliberate. He would invite me to his house for coffee and biscuits after our preaching and he would use this as an opportunity to touch me and stand very close to me. I felt like I couldn't say no. I didn't want to make a scene. And I didn't think anyone would support me. They would just think I was a troublemaker with an overactive imagination. It was very subtle at first, but escalated as time went on. I found out he had done similar things to other girls in our congregation. It was only once I was older that I realised I was being groomed.

When I was 18 I became more confident and I would move his hand away or turn away from him when he tried to touch it. But I never said "stop" and never spoke to him about it. I moved away and never really saw him again. I never told anyone because I didn't think I would be believed.

I had a "hypothetical" conversation with another elder who was a friend about what someone should do in that situation and he said to do nothing because no one would believe a young girl. They said I could even be "disfellowshipped" for being a liar. If this happens then none of your

family or friends speak to you, they completely cut you out of their lives. As I had no friends other than witnesses, this was too great a risk to take.

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