

Jehovah's Witness elders were 'spiritually corrupt and morally bankrupt', court told

Mark Sewell, 53, has denied 12 sex charges against girls and women across a 10-year period, at Merthyr Crown Court

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Mark Sewell is standing trial at Merthyr Crown Court

Church elders in a Jehovah's Witnesses congregation where a worshipper allegedly raped a woman and abused children were "spiritually corrupt and morally bankrupt", a court heard today.

The father of Mark Sewell, who denies 12 historic sex charges, even tried to "conceal" a rape claim against his son, it was claimed.

Jurors trying the 53-year-old heard from the father of Sewell's first alleged victim, who was just a child when the defendant is said to have kissed and touched her.

The man, in his 60s, said Sewell had been a close friend of his after they met through the church, even describing him as "the brother I didn't have".

When his daughter was aged about 15, he said, she began self-harming.

She later left a note for her parents on their bed detailing the alleged abuse by Sewell against her.

The man said he and his wife and daughter went to Sewell's house to meet the defendant and his wife where they handed them a copy of the letter.

"He (Sewell) actually laughed but didn't say anything," the witness told the court.

"His wife did all the talking and said 'If you show this to the elders (of the church) we are finished, you won't be coming round to our house any more and we won't be having anything to do with you, you will be cut off.'"

He said despite the fact that it Jehovah's Witnesses believe that to "bring someone to account and to find guilt" at least two witnesses to an incident were required the family still felt the matter should be raised with the church.

He added: "The other thing Jehovah's Witnesses believe is that the victim has to do the challenging so I'm afraid my daughter, who was 15 or 16, had to attend a meeting in the Kingdom Hall with two elders."

Following that meeting it had to be decided "whether there was a case to answer", he said.

Around the same time the witness, who was a long-serving member of the church at the time, was asked to meet with a woman and her husband at their home.

The woman claimed she had been raped by Sewell and made the allegation at a meeting which was also attended by the defendant's father, Anthony Sewell, who was then an elder in the church.

Before the pair left the home, the man told the court, Anthony Sewell said something "quite startling" to the woman and her husband.

The witness said they were told: "We will handle this. You might not even hear anything more about it."

Giving evidence in court the man said: "As he said those words I remember thinking 'This is crazy, what do you mean they won't hear any more about it?' But that's what he said."

Outside the house, he said, Anthony Sewell argued for the rape claim against his son to be "kept between us to handle".

He added: "What I was hearing was foreign to what I knew was the right thing to do."

The man said he informed the chair of the elders in Barry - known as the presiding overseer and then a man by the name of Tom Brown - about the claims and he said he would "think about it".

The witness said: "I have to say I was absolutely astounded."

He then met a travelling overseer - an elder from outside of the congregation - and told him what had happened and the matter was passed to the church's head office in London.

"I do remember head office in London saying they would not accept any more phone calls from the people in Barry congregation until they find out what's going on," he added.

Officials at head office appointed a seven-man committee to investigate what had happened.

As a result Tom Brown was stripped of his post as presiding overseer but remained as an elder, while Anthony Sewell was removed as an elder.

"He was removed as being an elder because of events he concealed and tried to conceal," the witness said.

A four-man committee then investigated the claims of assault and rape against Sewell, resulting in him being 'disfellowshipped', which meant being removed from the church and "shunned" by other Witnesses.

The alleged victim's father told the court: "I was privy to the reasons [he was disfellowshipped] in that I wanted to know 'did you discover, did he say he did those things, did he admit to you?'"

"All I was told was because it was one person's word against another and there weren't two witnesses the matter couldn't really be established.

"But he was disfellowshipped because of his belligerent and unforgiving attitude."

While giving evidence the man told Merthyr Tydfil Crown Court: "During that period, though not necessarily within the Sewell family, some of the elders were spiritually corrupt and morally bankrupt."

A friend of the first alleged victim also told the court Sewell kissed her and told her to remove her bra so he could give her a massage.

The woman - now in her 30s - claimed fellow worshipper Sewell would kiss her on the lips and once gave her a massage in the living room of his home where he would also hold weekly Bible study groups.

The woman, who is not one of four alleged victims in the case, told the court she was "intimidated" by church elder Sewell.

Between 1985 and 1995 Sewell is alleged to have abused two young girls and also raped a woman.

He is also accused of indecently assaulting another woman by rubbing his groin against her as she made a cup of tea.

Sewell, wearing a grey suit with a white shirt, dark tie and brown shoes, appeared to be making notes as he followed proceedings on a hearing loop from the glass-fronted dock.

The defendant, of Porthkerry Road in Barry, denies 11 counts of indecent assault and a single count of rape.

The case, which is expected to last three weeks, continues.

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