

Jehovah's Witness elder denies cover-up at church over 'massaging half-naked schoolgirls'

Devoted churchgoer Mark Sewell rejected suggestions his seniority in the Barry congregation meant allegations of child abuse would be "swept under the carpet"

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Mark Sewell

A former Jehovah's Witness elder today denied massaging half-naked schoolgirls because he knew his church would "cover up" the allegations due to his position.

Devoted churchgoer Mark Sewell rejected suggestions his seniority in the Barry congregation meant allegations of child abuse would be "swept under the carpet".

The businessman, 53, denies 10 historic sex charges against girls and women in a period spanning more than eight years.

During cross-examination by prosecutor Sarah Waters it was put to the defendant that he "took the risk" of massaging topless schoolgirls because he believed his standing in the church would spare him from allegations of wrongdoing.

Ms Waters said: "What I'm suggesting, Mr Sewell, is that it was a cover-up and no-one was allowed to talk about it."

Greying Sewell, wearing a navy suit over white shirt and patterned blue and yellow tie, told Merthyr Crown Court: "Not at all, no."

Ms Waters said: "You knew, because of your position in the congregation, this could be swept under the carpet."

The former Butlins holiday camp driver replied: "No."

The court had earlier heard claims Sewell indecently assaulted a young girl by giving her massages in his bedroom while she was not wearing a bra.

A witness in the case also claimed she had been given a topless massage by Sewell while she was a teenager, though none of the charges relate to that claim.

Referring to the alleged victim, Sewell claimed the girl's parents "always knew" what was going on.

"They were the ones that didn't mind it being done," he added.

Ms Waters put it to the heavily-built defendant that he had "instigated" the massages.

"That's totally incorrect," he replied, telling the court there was "nothing sinister in it".

Ms Waters asked: "You bullied them in to agreeing to have a massage, didn't you, when they didn't really want one?"

Sewell told the court: "I don't recall ever bullying anyone."

Ms Waters also asked the defendant whether he "got a sexual thrill out of seeing those young girls' half-naked bodies".

He said: "Not at all."

She continued: "They weren't asking for massages were they? You were doing it for your own titillation weren't you?"

Father-of-three Sewell replied: "No, definitely not."

The defendant said he had "certainly" not raped a woman in his own home in an attack which allegedly left her pregnant, while he also denied a claim he indecently assaulted another woman by pressing his groin against her backside.

He admitted asking the woman he is alleged to have pressed himself against to sit on his lap or give him a kiss but said this was always done in a "jocular" way.

"Sometimes I wish I was stuck in a box and didn't come out and talk to anyone - then I wouldn't be here," he told the four men and eight women of the jury.

Ms Waters asked the defendant: "These allegations, Mr Sewell, have all come out of four separate people because those four separate people - in various means and ways - you sexually abused them, didn't you?"

Sewell answered: "Incorrect."

He added: "Those stories have got larger and larger until we are standing here today."

The court had earlier heard how respected Jehovah's Witness Sewell used his "position of power" as an elder in the congregation to "exploit and abuse" women and children.

Between 1987 and 1995 Sewell is alleged to have abused two young girls and also raped a woman, all of whom were fellow Jehovah's Witnesses.

He is also accused of indecently assaulting another woman more than 10 years his junior.

Sewell, of Porthkerry Road in Barry, denies nine counts of indecent assault and a single count of rape.

Judge Richard Twomlow earlier directed the jury to find him not guilty of two other counts of indecent assault, which he had also denied.

The case has now been adjourned until Monday.

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