

# Jehovah's Witness elder used 'position of power' to 'sexually abuse' women and children, court told

Mark Sewell, 53, denies 12 sexual offences, including allegations he sexually abused two young girls and raped a woman

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Mark Sewell

A senior Jehovah's Witness used his "position of power" to "exploit and abuse" women and children over a period of a decade, a court heard today.

Trusted church elder Mark Sewell, 53, sexually abused two young girls, raped a woman after he overpowered her and ripped off her knickers, and indecently assaulted another woman, it was alleged.

The businessman, who denies 12 sexual offences, used his influence "to perpetrate such sexual abuse over a number of years for his own sexual gratification", said prosecutor Sarah Waters.

She told the jury of eight women and four men at Sewell's trial: "He is a sexual predator that took opportunities available to him to satisfy his sexual desires.

"For example he would use his high position in the Jehovah's Witness congregation to act in a sexually inappropriate manner with women, being 'touchy-feely' and insisting that he kiss them on the lips."

During the period of the allegations, between 1985 and 1995, Sewell was an elder within the church in Barry, Vale of Glamorgan, "which meant that he had a highly-respected and influential position within that congregation".

Ms Waters said: "This was only achieved once you had attended many meetings, undertaken various roles and responsibilities in the day-to-day running of the congregation and also taking responsibility for the spiritual teaching of the congregation.

"Elders, as you would expect, were supposed to be members who set an example as well as being responsible for disciplining members who had done something wrong.

"The prosecution say that the defendant used his elder status to manipulate, intimidate and bully these women.

"At times he could be charming and would do great things for people and would be as helpful as he could.

"At other times he would be forceful and imposing."

Ms Waters told jurors Sewell abused one girl in the 120-strong congregation when she was aged between 10 and 15 years old.

He would "insist" the little girl should kiss him on the lips and would also rub her on top of him, it was alleged.

The girl reported the abuse to her parents who confronted Sewell but he denied it and said she had "misunderstood, lied or exaggerated things".

The abuse continued and only stopped when the teenager wept and said she didn't want him to touch her any more, the court heard.

Ms Waters said Sewell then told the little girl: "No one believes you so even if you go and tell anybody else now they're not going to believe you."

When she subsequently reported the alleged abuse to the Jehovah's Witness congregation in Barry they convened a "quasi-hearing" which saw three elders sit on a "judicial committee", said Ms Waters.

She told the jury at Merthyr Tydfil Crown Court: "The prosecution say that their handling of the complaint was perhaps not done appropriately."

Sewell is also accused of raping a female member of the congregation at his home in 1990 as she begged him not to.

The following day, said Ms Waters, he asked her what had happened the day before and said he had drunk a bottle of whiskey.

"She told him what he had done and he cried and got on his knees, begging for her forgiveness."

Several weeks later the woman realised she was pregnant who, she claims, said he hoped the child would be a girl.

Ms Waters added: "A few weeks later she miscarried, which she described as a blessing in disguise."

Three of the alleged indecent assaults involve Sewell allegedly "massaging" a topless girl when she was aged between 12 and 14, while he is also accused of indecently assaulting a woman by rubbing his groin on a woman's backside as she made a cup of tea.

Of this alleged incident Ms Waters said: "The defendant's sexual deviancy was being played out on another vulnerable female."

She added: "The prosecution says that there is a clear theme emanating from their accounts that this defendant was a manipulative and powerful man who would regularly behave in a sexually over-familiar way with women."

Sewell, wearing a grey suit over a white shirt and blue patterned tie and with his greying gelled hair cut short, looked stony-faced as he sat in the glass-fronted dock.

The defendant, of Porthkerry Road in Barry, denies seven counts of indecent assault against girls aged under 14 and three counts of indecent assault against a girl aged under 16.

He has also pleaded not guilty to a single count of rape and a charge of indecent assault.

The court later heard from the first of four alleged victims, who cannot be identified for legal reasons, as she described how Sewell left her "terrified" and "frozen".

The woman, who is now in her 30s, was just 10 when she said the defendant began to make her feel "uncomfortable" by kissing her.

She said he would first kiss her on the lips and then later engineer situations when they would be alone and kiss her "with tongues".

The woman also described how Sewell would get her to lay on top of him and would even strip down to his underpants and caress her back.

In a recorded interview with a detective played to the court she said the alleged abuse by the church elder made her feel "sick".

The woman said: "It was a strange feeling because it was like part of me knew it wasn't right but then because of how I felt about him - I looked up to him - I don't know why but I just let him do it.

"I was frightened of him as well. I was scared."

She added: "In a weird way I didn't want to upset him or make him feel I had let him down if I said no."

The woman said she and other young members of the congregation would discuss Sewell and refer to him as "creepy".

But the woman said when she told her parents what had been going on and they met Sewell to discuss her claims he convinced them the schoolgirl had "misunderstood".

She claims the abuse continued for a further year before she again approached her parents who this time took her with them to see Sewell and his wife, hairdresser Mary, at their home.

The woman said Sewell branded her a liar who was exaggerating.

"I thought, 'Is there something wrong with me? Am I not getting this?' Again nothing was done about it," she said.

Describing the alleged abuse she added: "I thought it was wrong, it felt wrong, it was just a weird feeling.

"It didn't feel right, I just didn't feel comfortable.

"I felt frightened, I felt frozen, I felt sick."

She described Sewell's abuse as a "power-trip" and added: "I think it was the fact that when I look back now I was so innocent and vulnerable."

The trial continues.