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Jehovah's Witness elders told abused girl's parents not to report sex offender, court told

The judge said he had 'concerns' about what he had heard



By **John Hawkins**

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A Bradford man's sex offence against a little girl was kept quiet for 23 years because elders of the Jehovah's Witnesses church persuaded her parents not to report him, a court was told.

Robert Lee's crime in the **Forest of Dean** was not revealed until the victim had grown up and went to the police, Gloucester Crown Court heard on Friday.

Both the victim's family and Lee were Jehovah's Witnesses at that time, said prosecutor Kerry Barker.

He told the court that having avoided justice, Lee, formerly of Coleford, but now of Alexandra Road, Bradford, went on to commit further child sex **offences** in 2008 and 2016.

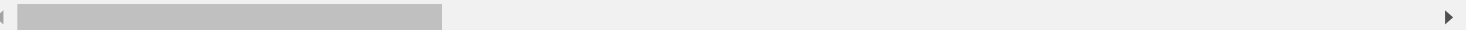

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Lee, who used the surname Howarth at that time, admitted indecent assault of the girl in March 1995 in Coleford when he was aged just 17.

Sentencing Lee to two years jail suspended for two years and ordering him to sign the sex offender register for 10 years Judge Ian Lawrie QC said he was 'concerned' at the Church's advice to the mother not to report him.


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He also placed Lee under a 10 year sexual harm prevention order.

"I've raised concerns about how this came to the attention of your church authorities and was not reported. I hope that has now changed," said Judge Lawrie.

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"That meant it did not come to light for some time."

The prosecutor had told the judge: "When the matter was referred to the Elders in 1995, her mother was invited not to report it to the police and she remained silent."

Mr Barker said the girl told her mother about the incident, who spoke with the church elders, and following that conversation decided to do nothing more.

He said the Howarth family left the area but the victim heard in adulthood that they were returning and that 'caused her fear and panic' which led to her reporting his offence to the police.

"She was not to know that in Essex in 2008 he had been cautioned for possessing indecent images, and then in 2016 he was convicted of making and possessing indecent images of children," said Mr Barker.

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"It demonstrates a long standing and continued interest in sex with children," he said.

He read from the victim's statement in which she said she was 'angry with her mother for being a Jehovah's Witness and not reporting it to the police'.

She said: "Twenty years later I am still trying to come to terms with it.

"I often feel dirty and tainted. I was rebellious as a teenager and dropped out of school.

"I feel robbed of my education. I felt I was to blame, and I self harmed to cope.

"I find it hard to trust members of the opposite sex. It has made my relationship with my husband very difficult and my pregnancy was difficult.

"He took my childhood away from me."

Giles Nelson, representing Lee, accepted that his credit for pleading guilty was minimal because he had not admitted his offence until the morning of a scheduled trial.

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But he reminded the judge that the starting point in the sentencing guidelines for his offence was two years.

"He's been subject to a community order for some time," Mr Nelson continued. "There has been a significant amount of progress.

"He has an array of problems," the barrister said.

The judge interjected: "He's got some rather dark shadows he must deal with."

Mr Nelson agreed: "He does. He has been alcohol dependent, but is now in work with accommodation.

"An immediate custodial sentence would make the work come to an end.

Judge Lawrie asked Mr Nelson what he knew of the Jehovah's Witnesses intervention in the case.

"What I have read concerns me - that in this day and age, that was the approach. That is a matter for the church. That was the advice given at the time?"

"So, I understand," the barrister replied.

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Judge Lawrie told Lee it was clear from this and subsequent offences that he had 'a fixation or interest in children'.

"There are some very dark shadows in your soul. Looking at your history, I think you pose a risk," said Judge Lawrie.

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"I will impose a sexual harm prevention order.

"There must be a balance between punishment, and the prospect of you not committing these sort of offences ever again.

"It is not in the interest of any potential further victims to interrupt the progress you are making on the current order."

Referring to Lee's 'late guilty plea' the judge said to him: "You are a coward. You subjected the victim to the concern she might have to attend court.

"I am taking a slight gamble with you. You have got a lot of work to do. If you fail to comply, I can consider imposing custody."

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