

Jehovah's Witnesses 'ordered destruction' of notes which could have been used during child sexual abuse inquiry

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A former church elder in South Wales has claimed the church has gone against the request made by Judge Lowell Goddard



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Judge Lowell Goddard is leading the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse

The Jehovah's Witnesses have been accused of ordering the destruction of documents in direct contradiction of an order not to do so from a major child sexual abuse inquiry.

Religious organisations, as well as schools, colleges and other institutions, have been told by the **Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse** – led by Judge Lowell Goddard – to keep hold of any documents which could be useful to the investigation.

A request sent out to the bodies last year stated measures should be taken “to ensure that everything of potential relevance to the Inquiry is retained”.

Jehovah's Witness elders hear allegations against members of the congregation and record what is said.

We have seen a copy of an edict distributed to Jehovah's Witnesses congregations around the UK ordering the destruction of “all agendas and minutes of elders' meetings (other than business meeting minutes)”, “all personal notes taken at elders' meetings (except those based on discussions of outlines from ‘the faithful and discreet slave’ and that do not mention any particular individual)” and “any other personal records, notes, or correspondence that refer to particular individuals”.

'Not transparent'

Referring to the congregation file the edict also says all agendas of elders' meetings should be destroyed and that Congregation Service Committees should “make sure all records relating to child molestation are in harmony”.

And one former senior church elder from South Wales, who has been a Jehovah's Witness for more than half a century, said the revelations put the church directly at odds with the request of the independent inquiry.

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He said: “The fact is there are dangers within the Jehovah's Witnesses as there are within other organisations – but whereas I see other organisations taking steps to conform with child safety it seems the Jehovah's Witnesses are going the other way. They are still trying to keep it in-house and not making it transparent.”

He added: "Under the present rules all personal documents, aides-memoire, agendas and notes are to be destroyed. That will mean in future that if they are approached by police Jehovah's Witnesses could say they don't remember anything."





New Zealand High Court judge Justice Lowell Goddard

“This seems a backward step, particularly in the light of Judge Lowell Goddard’s request that, so victims can be helped in bringing justice to abusers, all organisations must keep what they can to assist.

'Ignored' judge's request

“Why, when an organisation says it abhors child abuse, would it go and destroy documents that can assist in bringing a child abuser to justice?

“The evidence I have experienced is a clamming up, a shutting down, and a silence of almost an obstructive nature to police investigations.

“They are saying they send this out regularly but Judge Lowell Goddard has said not to – so why haven’t they instructed the elders and said that although they usually do this but this year we won’t because we want to follow this request?

“They say it’s what they have always done but we have got to change what we have always done.”

Karen Morgan, a victim of sex abuse by church elder Mark Sewell, who was once an elder in the congregation in **Barry, Vale of Glamorgan**, also criticised the move.

Read more: Mark Sewell: Two victims of perverted Jehovah's Witness sex attacker to sue church

She said: “At the time of my case the police were told there was no paperwork relating to my case as it had been destroyed. This paperwork would have contained all documented evidence from the many meetings with elders.

“Despite knowing the importance of these papers the governing body seem to be deliberately instructing their elders not to keep them.

Church 'committed' to helping victims

“This only confirms my view that the governing body are more interested in protecting their image than caring about the victims.”

Disgraced businessman Sewell was **jailed in 2014 after being convicted of a total of eight sex charges.**

A spokesman for the church said: “We are committed to doing all we can to prevent child abuse and to provide spiritual comfort to any who have suffered from this terrible sin and crime.”

Speaking about the leaked edict the spokesman added: “The document... is simply an annual reminder sent to congregation trustees encouraging them to follow standard procedures so as to meet their responsibilities under data protection and other legislation.”

The spokesman also said: “Jehovah’s Witnesses abhor child abuse and view it as a heinous crime and sin. The safety of our children is of the utmost importance.

Read more: 'Jehovah cult kicked me out - but not the man who raped me,' victim claims

“For decades our journals The Watchtower and Awake!, as well as our website jw.org, have featured articles for both Jehovah’s Witnesses and the general public on how to protect children from abuse.

Cover-up claim 'absolutely false'

“We have no paid clergy. Congregation elders comply with child-abuse reporting laws and with the data protection principles contained in the Data Protection Act 1998. (Romans 13:1) They provide abuse victims and their families with spiritual comfort from the Bible. (Isaiah 32:2; 1 Thessalonians 5:14)

“The victim and his or her parents have the absolute right to report the matter to the governmental authorities. (Galatians 6:5) Congregation elders do not shield abusers from the authorities or from the consequences of their actions. (Galatians 6:7)

“Anyone who commits the sin of child abuse faces expulsion from the congregation. If such a person is serving in a position of responsibility he is removed. Any suggestion that Jehovah’s Witnesses cover up child abuse is absolutely false.”

A spokesperson for the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse said: “The chair has stated that the inquiry will investigate abuse in religious settings (including all faiths and religious traditions) and issued a letter giving notice of retention/non-destruction of documents to the leaders of 18 prominent religious organisations.”

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