

Woman sues Jehovah's Witness elders over lack of protection from sex attacker

The woman, in her 20s, was molested by “ministerial servant” Peter Stewart over a five-year period in Loughborough



Receive more news by e-mail



198 Shares



Share

Tweet

+1

Email



High Court, London

A WOMAN who claims Jehovah’s Witness elders failed to protect her from a predatory sex attacker who repeatedly abused her as a child is now battling for £500,000 compensation.

The woman, in her 20s, was molested by “ministerial servant” Peter Stewart over a five-year period in Loughborough, Leicestershire, in the 1980s and 90s, London’s High Court heard.

The trauma she suffered derailed her education and career, and led to harrowing nightmares and recurring thoughts of suicide, her barrister, James Counsell, said.

Matters came to a head after she “passed out on her bed next to a pile of paracetamol” while on holiday with her husband, “having left him a suicide note”, he added.

Soon afterwards, she had a “bad panic attack” - triggered by seeing a collection of Jehovah’s Witness literature.

That led to tense discussions with her husband, and her final decision to take legal action, Mr Counsell told the court.

The woman - who cannot be identified - is suing the Trustees of the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, alleging they are “vicariously liable” for Stewart’s crimes.

Stewart was convicted of entirely separate offences of sexually abusing a schoolgirl and a young boy in 1995, said Mr Counsell.

He died in June 2001, aged 72, “shortly before police arrived at his home to arrest him for sexually abusing the claimant”.

Stewart was an apparently “respected and devout” member of the congregation in Loughborough, the court heard.

However, he repeatedly preyed on the girl between the ages of four and nine, “using his position as a ministerial servant to commit these acts”.

He molested her in a variety of situations - including “both before and after and sometimes during Watchtower study sessions”, Mr Counsell claimed.

His attacks took a catastrophic toll, leaving his victim prone to “vomiting” at the memory, and with complex feelings of guilt and shame.

Stewart forced her to keep silent by telling her that “what she was doing was fornication and that she was sinning”, the barrister explained.

He warned her that “when Armageddon came - a regular topic for general discussion at group and congregation meetings - she would not be saved because of what she was doing”.

“It was precisely because much of the abuse took place at public - and at Jehovah’s Witness events - that she could not always avoid him,” added Mr Counsell.

The woman first “mustered the courage” to disclose her abuse in 2000 - after hearing of Stewart’s imminent release from jail for his offences against the two school children.

Stewart's former Jehovah's Witness congregation "began an investigation" but failed to contact the police, said the barrister, adding that the inquiry "appeared to go nowhere".

That alleged inaction "intensified her feelings of anger" and the woman finally went to the police in May 2001.

"But when the police went to Stewart's home to arrest him they discovered from neighbours that he had died," added Mr Counsell.

The barrister alleged that Jehovah's Witness elders "had known about Stewart's activities with young girls since the very early days of the claimant's abuse and had failed to prevent it continuing".

It was Stewart's authority as a ministerial servant which allowed him to "gain contact and befriend" his victim, said Mr Counsell.

"The abuse was committed while he was performing tasks to further the interests of Jehovah's Witnesses".

Lawyers for the Trustees are defending the case, insisting that proper steps were taken to protect its members and that Stewart was not performing a "pastoral role".

Their counsel, Adam Weitzman, said he "disputed that the elders were negligent" and denied that the Trustees could be held legally responsible.

He pointed out that, from 1991, Stewart and the woman "ceased to be members of the same congregation".

Stewart was never an "employee" of the Jehovah's Witness congregation and the Trustees owed the woman no legal "duty of care", he argued.

Mr Weitzman said: "While it is accepted that, from August 1990, the elders knew (Stewart) had sexually assaulted another child, there was not sufficient proximity between them and the claimant to impose such a duty. Nor would it be fair, just and reasonable to do so."

The High Court hearing continues.

Also on the Echo
