



How child sex abusers get reinstated as Jehovah's Witnesses

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A Jehovah's Witnesses elder in Australia was put behind bars last week for sexually abusing minors, [according to The West Australian \(https://au.news.yahoo.com/thewest/wa/a/30810834/church-elder-is-jailed-over-sex-abuse/\)](https://au.news.yahoo.com/thewest/wa/a/30810834/church-elder-is-jailed-over-sex-abuse/).

Over seven years, David Frank Pople sexually assaulted two teenage boys he met through a congregation near Perth. One of his victims told elders about the abuse in 1997, but no one notified police until one of the victims filed a report in 2014. Pople pleaded guilty and was sentenced to three years in prison.

The details of Pople's story mirror those of other abuse cases involving Jehovah's Witnesses around the world. Elders failed to report child sexual abuse to secular authorities. The perpetrator was kicked out of the organization, only to be reinstated later.

Moreover, the story fits a pattern of Jehovah's Witnesses leaders ejecting members who abuse children, not for the abuse, but for failing to show adequate repentance.

After Pople admitted to elders in 1997 that he had assaulted one of the boys, he was disfellowshipped – the Witnesses' version of excommunication – for being “insufficiently repentant,” according to the newspaper's story. A year later, after Pople requested reinstatement, the congregation welcomed him back.

Last year, Reveal reported the story (<https://www.revealnews.org/article/jehovahs-witnesses-cover-up-child-sex-abuse-and-oust-a-victim/>) of Debbie McDaniel, a former Witness in Oklahoma who said an elder named Ronald Lawrence sexually abused her for five years, starting when she was 8 years old. In the 1990s, McDaniel and two other victims, by then grown, told elders that Lawrence had abused them. The elders did not call police; they eventually disfellowshipped Lawrence, not because he had abused kids, but for denying it. Like Pople, Lawrence was reinstated a year later.

Responsibility for determining how elders handle child abuse rests with officials at the religion's parent corporation, the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society of New York. The Watchtower has instructed elders (<https://www.revealnews.org/article/jehovahs-witnesses-use-1st-amendment-to-hide-child-sex-abuse-claims/>) since 1989 not to report child abuse to secular authorities unless laws in their state require it.

Instead, elders are instructed to form internal judicial committees to deal with child abusers as wayward spirits, not as criminals. Although unrepentant perpetrators are sometimes disfellowshipped, they can be reinstated after a year or so if they apologize.

In Oklahoma, Lawrence was allowed reinstatement after months of denying that he abused children on the condition that he write letters of apology to his victims. When more victims came forward, he was kicked out again – this time for lying about how many children he had abused – only to be reinstated for a second time.

In all instances of disfellowshipping and reinstatement, the Watchtower has final say. In cases of child abuse, the Watchtower reserves the right to decide which abusers are shown the door and which are invited back. Officials say they make those decisions by determining which child abusers are dangerous and which are not.

In response to an [Australian government investigation](https://www.revealnews.org/blog/24232/) (https://www.revealnews.org/blog/24232/) last year that found the Witnesses had failed to report more than 1,000 child abusers to police, Jehovah's Witnesses officials wrote, "The mere presence of an offender within a congregation does not necessarily entail that other children in a congregation or the community are at risk."

The Watchtower made that point even more explicitly three years earlier in a confidential letter to all elders in the United States.

"Not every individual who has sexually abused a child in the past is considered a 'predator,' " the letter said. "The (Watchtower), not the local body of elders, determines whether an individual who has sexually abused children in the past will be considered a 'predator.' "

In Australia, Pople will be eligible for parole in 18 months.

In Oklahoma, after McDaniel reported her abuse to police in 2013, Lawrence avoided prosecution because of the statute of limitations. As of last year, he was still a Jehovah's Witness in good standing.

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