

NEW ZEALAND / IN DEPTH

Former Jehovah's Witnesses welcome inquiry's findings of 'credible evidence' of abuse

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Photo: RNZ

The Jehovah's Witnesses fought hard to avoid the scrutiny of the Royal Commission of Inquiry into Abuse in Care. Now the inquiry report has found 'credible evidence' that child sex abuse occurred within the faith - and no evidence that it was reported.

Victoria waited 50 years to be believed.

The former Jehovah's Witness suffered decades of sexual and physical abuse from her father, a respected Elder in her congregation, that started from childhood through to her teens.

It wasn't until her early 20s that she attempted to tell another Elder about the abuse.

"I wasn't believed. It was because of the two-witness rule. I was asked, 'Where's your other witness?'"

The rule, based on the Jehovah's Witnesses literal translation of their Bible, says there must be two witnesses to a sin before an Elder - equivalent to a minister - can determine if there has been 'wrongdoing'.

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It wasn't until Victoria was 70 and gave evidence to the Royal Commission of Inquiry into Abuse in Care that her story was finally believed.

"I got a lovely letter from the Commission saying, 'We believe you, we accept this happened.'

"That was the first time I'd ever had that experience in my life," she says.

"I saved the letter on my desktop on my computer and look at it whenever I feel discouraged."

The second time she felt vindicated was sitting in the packed-out public gallery of Parliament on Wednesday as **the inquiry's final report was tabled**, laying bare the depth of this country's systemic abuse of children and vulnerable people in state and faith-based care between 1950 and 1999.

"I was shaking the whole time. But it was amazing to listen to the politicians saying, 'We believe you.'"

"Credible evidence of abuse"

The inquiry's final report included a damning 64-page case study into the Jehovah's Witness faith.

It found the two-witness rule and many of the church's policies and practices increased the risk of abuse in care.



Photo: RNZ / Rebekah Parsons-King

There was "credible evidence" that sexual abuse occurred in the care of the faith, and the practice of Elders questioning children or young people who were victims of sexual abuse during investigations was "inappropriate and emotionally or psychologically abusive".

The extent of sexual abuse was hard to quantify, though, due to poor record-keeping by the faith and the barriers that prevented reporting it.

"These barriers included the inferior position of women within the faith, rigid disclosure processes, the fear of being shunned and the relative disconnection from non-Jehovah's Witnesses, all of which likely prevented or delayed victims from disclosing abuse," the report said.

The faith's **practice of shunning** - or being excommunicated - was a "significant factor" for witnesses during the inquiry period, as followers were discouraged to have relationships with anyone outside the faith, making leaving even more difficult.

The inquiry found Elders were not vetted or trained in child protection and abuse prevention and members of the faith were often discouraged from reporting allegations to authorities.

Evidence submitted by the Jehovah's Witnesses showed the "types of attitudes towards female victims" of sexual abuse, the report stated.

"For example, documents refer to 14- and 15-year-old girls developing an 'infatuation' with an abuser.

"In one matter, where an Elder had sexual intercourse with a 15-year-old girl, the Jehovah's Witnesses' summary notes read, "the Elders all felt great shock at the seriousness of the sin, the repercussions to the congregation should the girl become pregnant and the sin thus become known".

The report also noted: "The inquiry has not seen any evidence of the Jehovah's Witnesses referring sexual abuse allegations to police during the inquiry period in Aotearoa New Zealand. This is consistent with inquiry findings in Australia and the United Kingdom."

'Positions of power'

The Jehovah's Witnesses **spent years trying to avoid the inquiry's scrutiny**, arguing it did not have children or vulnerable people in its care.

In April, the Court of Appeal dismissed its claim, and the faith has now applied for leave to appeal to the Supreme Court.

The faith also tried - unsuccessfully - to get a copy of the case study before it was made public, and **earlier this week made an eleventh hour attempt** to stop the publication of it altogether, which was denied.

The inquiry found there was credible evidence the faith did have children and vulnerable people in its care and elders had positions of power and had status and authority conferred on them by the faith.

"The faith assumed responsibility for the care of children and young people placed in the care of Elders for witnessing activities, pastoral support and care, working bees and other organised activities, and investigations and judicial committee processes," it said.

"The faith's assumption of responsibility for those children and young people flowed from its conferral of authority and trusted status on Elders, and the actions of Elders in taking children and young people into their care, unsupervised, in these contexts. In those situations, children and young people were in the care of the faith," the report said.



The inquiry found the faith's 'two-witness' rule, based on a literal interpretation of its Bible, contributed to the risk of abuse. Photo: RNZ / Cole Eastham-Farrelly

Ms SC was 15 when she was molested and raped by an Elder after one-on-one bible studies "that she had no choice but to attend", the report said. The inquiry found she was in the care of the faith at the time, though in submissions to the inquiry the Jehovah's Witnesses denied this was the case.

The inquiry noted: "In addition to this one case, other children and young people were sexually abused within the Jehovah's Witnesses faith, although not clearly in care situations as defined in this Inquiry. Most were abused by male family members who were also members of the faith. One was abused by a man that their family trusted, another witnessed his brother being sexually abused by a man that his family were friends with because they were also Jehovah's Witnesses."

It was not just sexual abuse - there was psychological and emotional abuse too, which survivors said they experienced in the care of the faith while undergoing 'judicial investigation' and committee processes.

As a 12-year-old, Jasmine Grew was questioned by three male elders after she disclosed sexual abuse.

She told the inquiry: "'I went into the back room and the Elders (males) were there. I had no support, no friend, no mother, nothing. My mother did not know, at the time, what was happening. The elders interrogated me. They were asking the worst questions you can imagine, for someone who was just 12 years old. They asked me, 'Was it hard,' referring to my abuser physically. They wanted to know everything. Their questions were inappropriate. At that age it was a terrifying experience for me. It seemed as abusive as the sexual abuse itself."

The Jehovah's Witnesses respond

In a statement, the Sydney-based Australasia Branch of Jehovah's Witnesses said the case study was not a "fair and accurate assessment".

"Jehovah's Witnesses have deep sympathy for all victims of abuse and are committed to providing them with support and comfort.

"The protection of children continues to be of utmost concern and importance to all Jehovah's Witnesses.

"We welcome examination of our child protection policies and have engaged openly with the Inquiry since its inception.

"We are therefore dismayed that the case study does not present an accurate and fair assessment of the beliefs and practices of Jehovah's Witnesses."

However, former Jehovah's Witnesses say the case study is a very accurate portrayal of the faith's practices.

"They are happy that it's finally out there and the report covers all the concerns they've had, though some had found it difficult reading," former Elder turned survivor advocate Shayne Mechen said.

He was disappointed the inquiry was not able to put a number on the number of child sexual abuse allegations there might have been in Aotearoa and questioned why it had not used legal remedies to acquire the information that **he believes the faith holds**.

In 2016, the Australian Royal Commission into Institutional Response to Child Sexual Abuse found there had been allegations, reports or complaints received by the Jehovah's Witnesses relating to at least 1800 alleged victims of child sexual abuse, and 11 percent of the alleged perpetrators were elders or ministerial servants.

The New Zealand inquiry found "inadequate" record keeping hindered its ability to qualify the extent of sexual abuse in this country.

Mechen was not hopeful - along with other former members - of the faith's 'governing body' making a public apology and acknowledgement for the abuse and neglect in the case of Jehovah's Witnesses in New Zealand, as recommended by the Inquiry.

"The governing body has never apologised for any abuse, anywhere in the world," he said. "Australia demanded it as part of its redress scheme, but nope."

Another former elder, Edward Narayan, also believed an apology was unlikely.

"I don't think they'll give an apology unless they're forced to by some government mandate that will take away their charity status or something."

In a further statement to RNZ, the Australasia Branch of Jehovah's Witnesses said it was "currently reviewing the report and the Inquiry's recommendations so it's premature to say" whether there would be an apology.



Edward Narayan is not hopeful of an apology from the Jehovah's Witnesses. Photo: RNZ / Cole Eastham-Farrelly

Another recommendation is for all faith-based institutions providing care directly or indirectly to have mandatory reporting of child sexual abuse allegations, and to have appropriate policies and procedures in place to respond to complaints, disclosures or incidents of abuse.

Sina, who was sexually abused as a child by a family friend in the faith from the age of three until she was 11, would like to see mandatory reporting come into force.

She believes the elders in her congregation must have had suspicions about her abuser but did nothing about it.

"I found out when I was an adult that he abused three other people that I personally know. He was a very well-respected member of the congregation. They must have got an inkling of what was happening," she said.

"The faith needs to be held accountable because it was the rules that they abided by, and the male-dominated organisation where you had no support."

Giving evidence to the inquiry and having her testimony included in the case study published this week has been very healing, Sina said.

"For me, redress is that it's brought into the public. It has helped me get over what happened to me because now I don't have to live in the shadows. There are a lot of survivors out there that this happened to, behind closed doors."

For Victoria, the publicity around her evidence is enough redress for the moment.

"Personally, I never submitted to the Royal Commission with the expectation of anything other than just getting my story out there and being believed, and I was.

"I don't know what will come from the Commission. I hope some good stuff happens for the people who have been abused," she said.

"I hope it makes the organisations and churches stop and think about their policies and procedures before they let it happen to another generation."



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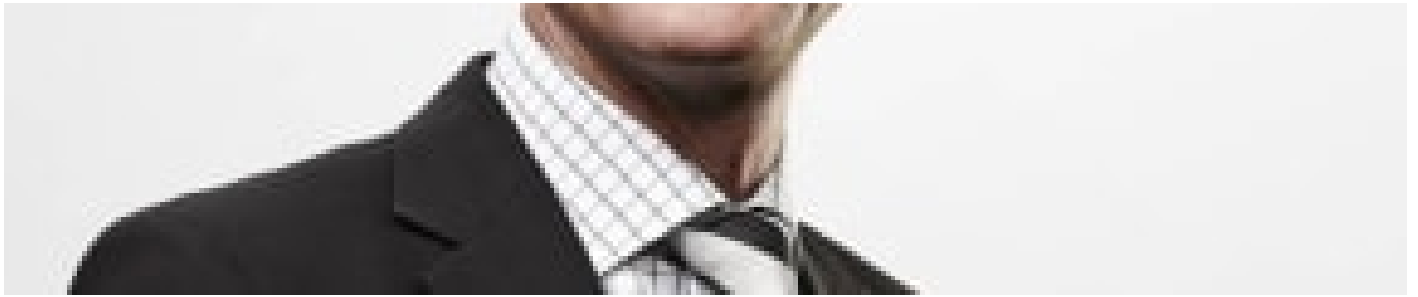
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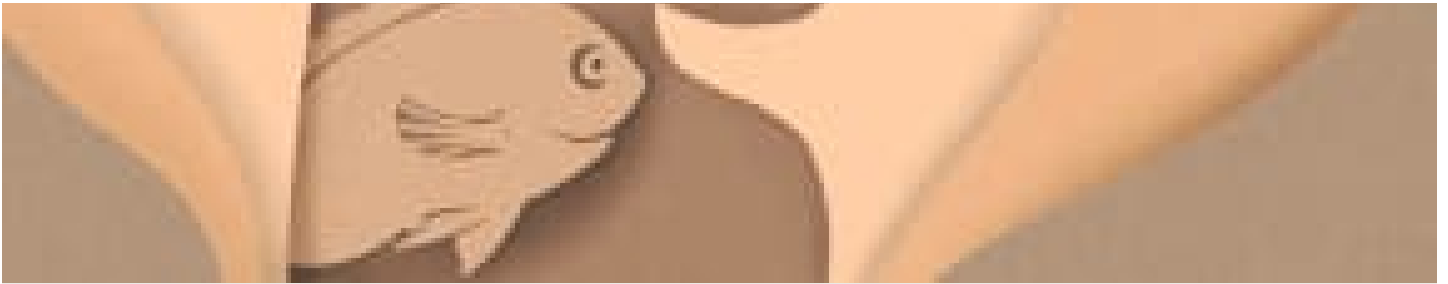


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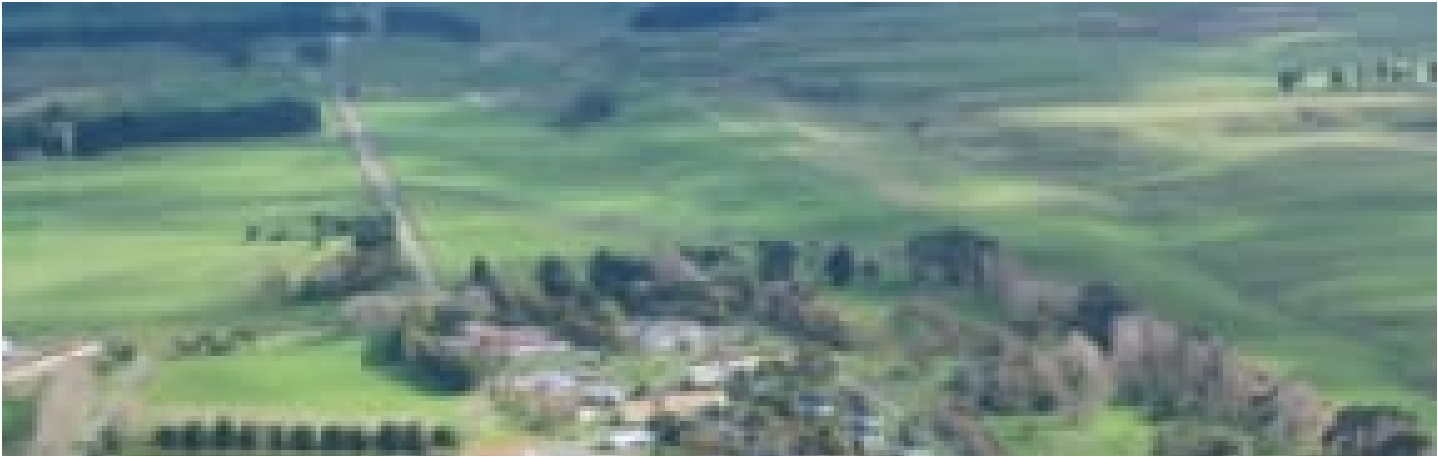
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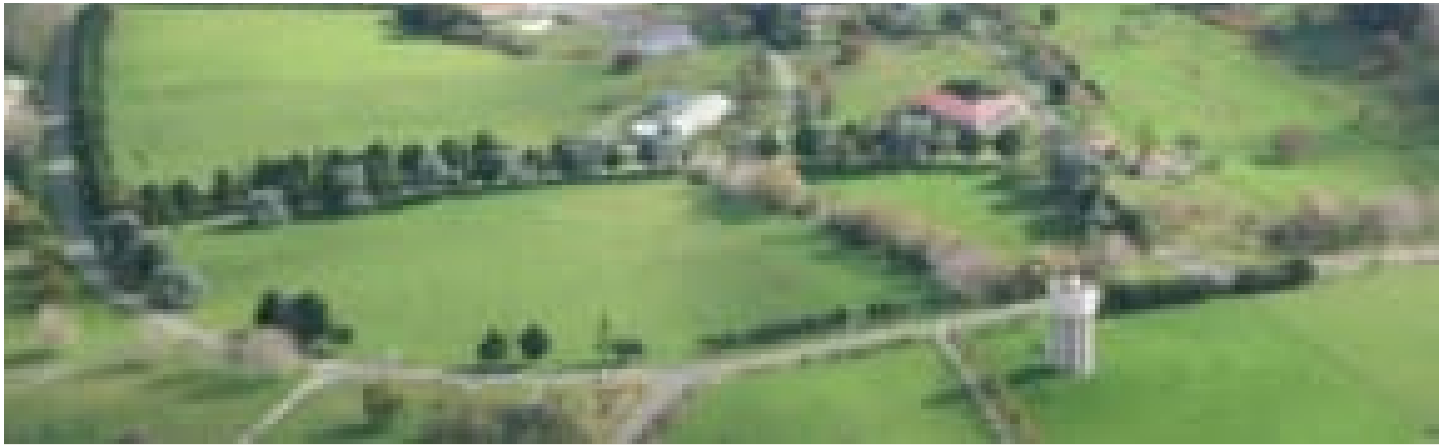


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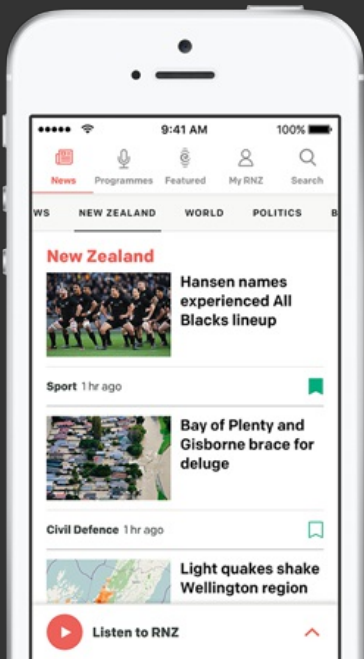
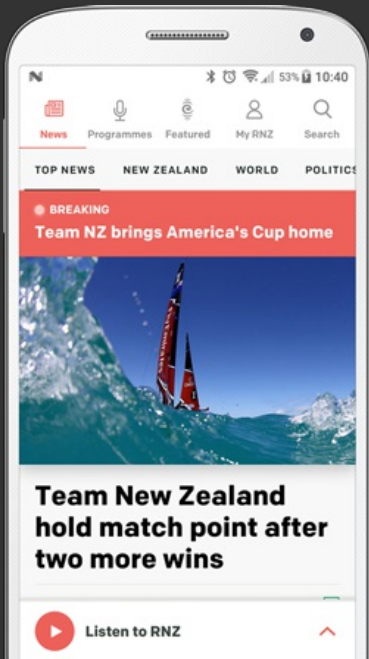


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