

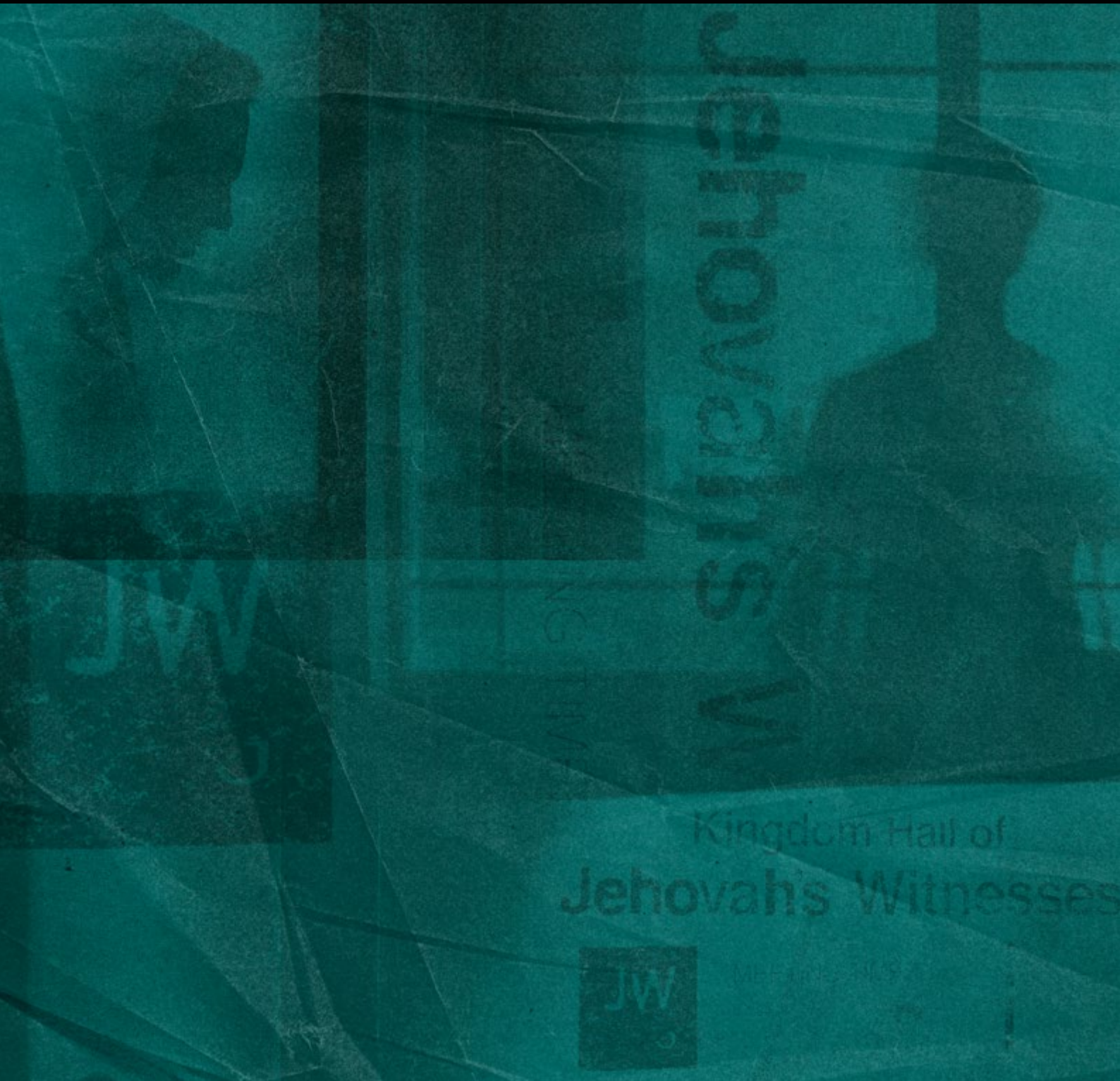
# JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES

Case study

JUNE 2024



Abuse in Care  
Royal Commission of Inquiry



# He karakia

E tāmara mā, koutou te pūtake o ēnei kōwhiringa, kua horaina nei  
E tohe tonu nei i te ara o te tika  
E ngaki tonu ana i te māra tipu  
Anei koutou te whakairihia ki te tihi o Maungārongo, kia tau te mauri.  
Rukuhia te pū o te hinengaro  
kia tāea ko te kukunitanga mai o te whakaaro nui.  
Kia piere ko te ngākau mahora  
kia tūwhera mai he wairua tau.

Koinei ngā pou whakairinga i te tāhuhu  
o te Whare o Tū Te Mauriora.  
Te āhuru mōwai o Te Pae o Rehua,  
kaimuru i te hinapōuri,  
kaitohu i te manawa hā ora,  
kaihohou i te pai.

Nau mai e koutou kua uhia e ngā haukino  
o te wā,  
kua pēhia e ngā whakawai a ngā tipua nei,  
a te Ringatūkinō rāua ko te Kanohihuna.

Koutou i whītiki i te tātua o te toa,  
i kākahu i te korowai o te pono,  
i whakamau i te tīpare o tō mana motuhake,  
toko ake ki te pūaotanga o te āpōpō e tatari  
mai nei i tua o te pae,  
nōu te ao e whakaata mai nei.

Kāti rā, ā te tākiritanga mai o te ata,  
ā te huanga ake o te awatea,  
kia tau he māramatanga,  
kia ū ko te pai, kia mau ko te tika.

Koinei ko te tangi a te ngākau e Rongo,  
tūturu ōwhiti whakamaua  
kia tina, tina!  
Hui e, tāiki e!

– *Waihoroi Paraone Hōterene*

To you upon whom this inquiry has been centered  
Resolute in your pursuit of justice  
Relentless in your belief for life  
You have only our highest regard and respect,  
may your peace of mind be assured.

Look into the deepest recesses of your being  
and discover the seeds of new hope,  
where the temperate heart might find solace,  
and the blithe spirit might rise again.

Let these be the pillars on which the House of Self,  
reconciliation can stand.

Safe haven of Rehua,  
dispatcher of sorrow,  
restorer of the breath of life,  
purveyor of kindness.

Those of you who have faced the ill winds of time and made to suffer,  
at the hands of abusers and the hidden  
faces of persecutors, draw near.

You who found courage,  
cloaked yourselves with your truth,  
who crowned yourself with dignity,  
a new tomorrow awaits beyond the horizon,  
your future beckons.

And so, as dawn rises, and a new day begins,  
let clarity and understanding reign,  
goodness surrounds you and  
justice prevails.

Rongo god of peace, this the heart desires,  
we beseech you,  
let it be,  
it is done.

– *Waihoroi Paraone Hōterene*







### **Pānui whakatūpato**

Ka nui tā mātou tiaki me te hāpai ake I te mana o ngā purapura ora I māia rawa atua nei ki te whāriki I ā rātou kōrero ki konei. Kei te mōhio mātopu ka oho pea te mauri ētahi wāhanga o ngā kōrero nei e pā ana ki te tūkino, te whakatūroro me te pāmamae, ā, tērā pea ka tākirihia ngā tauwharewarenga o te ngākau tangata I te kaha o te tumeke. Ahakoa kāore pea tēnei urupare e tau pai ki te wairua o te tangata, e pai ana te rongō I te pouri. Heoi, mehemea ka whakataumaha tēnei i ētahi o tō whānau, me whakapā atu ki tō tākuta, ki tō ratongo Hauora rānei. Whakatetia ngā kōrero a ētahi, kia tau te mauri, tiakina te wairua, ā, kia māmā te ngākau.



### **Distressing content warning**

We honour and uphold the dignity of survivors who have so bravely shared their stories here. We acknowledge that some content contains explicit descriptions of tūkino – abuse, harm and trauma – and may evoke strong negative, emotional responses for readers. Although this response may be unpleasant and difficult to tolerate, it is also appropriate to feel upset. However, if you or someone in your close circle needs support, please contact your GP or healthcare provider. Respect others' truths, breathe deeply, take care of your spirit and be gentle with your heart.





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# Executive Summary

1. The Jehovah's Witnesses have been active in Aotearoa New Zealand for over 100 years, with the movement growing significantly just prior to the Inquiry period. The Christian faith takes a literal interpretation of the Bible and relies on first century principles to set practice, policy and procedure.
2. Like many faiths there is a leadership hierarchy, with the Jehovah's Witnesses being globally led by a governing body, which provides direction and guidance to all congregations. The governing body is currently comprised of eight men in New York. Within congregations, power and authority sit with male Elders whose attributes for appointment are biblically based. During the Inquiry period, the faith exercised an elevated degree of influence over the daily lives of members, including how they spent significant portions of their time, the level of education they attained, their relationships and access to certain medical treatments. Two witnesses described themselves as being under the 'control' of the faith, a description the faith disputed.
3. Children and young people were in the care of the Jehovah's Witnesses during faith activities including door to door preaching or witnessing, pastoral support, working bees and other organised activities, and investigation and judicial committee processes. The faith contested whether these situations fell within the Inquiry's Terms of Reference, but the Inquiry is satisfied that children and young people were in the care of the faith in these situations for the reasons set out below.
4. Several factors within the faith increased the risk of abuse occurring during the Inquiry period, including the status of Elders and the power and influence they exercised, particularly over children and young people. The faith had high barriers to the disclosure of abuse, making it more difficult for individuals to disclose any abuse either to others within the faith or to secular authorities. 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. There was also inadequate vetting of Elders and insufficient training in preventing or responding to abuse.
5. The faith's approach to record-keeping did not provide an adequate basis for well-informed risk-based decision making to ensure the safety of children and young people in the care of the faith. The lack of detail in records retained by the faith also inhibited the Inquiry's ability to assess the extent of abuse in the care of the faith because of the lack of detail about the nature of the relationships between Elders and abused children and young people.

6. Despite the high barriers to disclosure and the faith's inadequate approach to record-keeping, the Inquiry heard from one person who was sexually abused in the care of the faith during the Inquiry period, with others experiencing psychological and emotional abuse during investigations and judicial committee processes.
7. The Inquiry concludes that the Jehovah's Witnesses took inadequate steps to prevent and respond to abuse in care during the Inquiry period. The policies, rules and standards relevant to child sexual abuse more broadly were primarily based on passages from the Bible and located across many different Jehovah's Witness publications. Processes for handling and responding to disclosures of abuse of any kind were outdated and ineffective, such as the requirement for two witnesses to child abuse. There was a lack of reporting to external authorities and inadequate consequences for abusers within the faith. These factors applied equally to abuse in care.
8. The Jehovah's Witnesses' approach to this Inquiry and to its activities was premised on the basis that no children or young people were ever in its care. The ongoing failure of the faith to recognise that children and young people were in its care gives the Inquiry concern about the faith's overall approach to the safety of children and young people in its care during the Inquiry period.

# Chapter 1: Purpose

9. This case study considers the New Zealand Christian Congregation of Jehovah's Witnesses Australasia (at times referred to in this case study as "the faith" or the "Jehovah's Witnesses"), including:
  - > care provided by the faith
  - > alleged abuse in the care of the faith
  - > factors increasing the risk of abuse in care during the Inquiry period
  - > the steps the faith took to prevent and respond to the risk of abuse in care
  - > barriers to disclosure that may have prevented disclosures of abuse and inhibited the Inquiry's ability to understand the nature and extent of abuse in care during the Inquiry period.



## Chapter 2: Context

10. A small group of Bible students led by Charles Taze Russell founded the Jehovah's Witnesses organisation in Pennsylvania in the late 19th century.<sup>1</sup> Mr Russell had become disillusioned with mainstream Christianity, which he argued had strayed from the first century vision of Christianity described in the Bible. By 1884, Mr Russell's group had become the Zion's Watch Tower Tract Society. The society was incorporated and carried on the business of publishing and disseminating millenarian literature – that is, literature based on the belief that the end of the world is imminent.<sup>2</sup>
11. Internationally, the primary legal entity used by the Jehovah's Witness organisation is the Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania.<sup>3</sup> The headquarters of this organisation is in Warwick, New York, and is known as 'Bethel', meaning 'House of God'.<sup>4</sup>
12. The governing body of eight Elders in New York provides directions to all congregations internationally, creating a uniformity of doctrine and conduct across all jurisdictions in which the faith operates. Spiritual elements are consistent worldwide, and whether a faith meeting is held in London or Auckland, the content is the same, and often given at the same time across the world.<sup>5</sup>
13. The movement grew significantly in Aotearoa New Zealand after 1945,<sup>6</sup> and Kingdom Halls (the place of worship for Jehovah's Witnesses) are now found in most cities in Aotearoa New Zealand.<sup>7</sup>

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1 Australian Child Sexual Abuse Royal Commission into Institutional responses to Child Sexual Abuse, Report of Case study no 29 (Commonwealth of Australia, 2016, page 13, section 1.1).

2 Australian Child Sexual Abuse Royal Commission into Institutional responses to Child Sexual Abuse, Report of Case study no 29 (Commonwealth of Australia, 2016, page 13, section 1.1).

3 Australian Child Sexual Abuse Royal Commission into Institutional responses to Child Sexual Abuse, Report of Case study no 29 (Commonwealth of Australia, 2016, page 14).

4 Australian Child Sexual Abuse Royal Commission into Institutional responses to Child Sexual Abuse, Report of Case study no 29 (Commonwealth of Australia, 2016, page 14).

5 Jehovah's Witnesses interview transcript with the Royal Commission of Inquiry into Abuse in Care (8 March 2023, pages 18–19).

6 Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania, Seventy-Five years of "legally establishing" the Good News in New Zealand (7 March 2022).

7 This case study refers to the current position for the Jehovah's Witnesses in New Zealand by way of context, and for the purpose of informing the Inquiry's recommendations. Many of the Inquiry's recommendations apply to all faiths, including the Jehovah's Witnesses, and the contextual information about the modern position of the Jehovah's Witnesses has been considered in informing these broader recommendations. The Inquiry has not examined or made findings about the current position in the Jehovah's Witnesses in New Zealand, in accordance with clause 15D of the Inquiry's Terms of Reference.

## The role of Elders within the faith

14. Congregational responsibilities sit with Elders and ministerial servants. The Jehovah's Witnesses told the Inquiry that in 2023 there were around 1,576 Elders in Aotearoa New Zealand.<sup>8</sup>
15. The Elders "shepherd" the congregation and oversee spiritual matters. Their primary responsibilities also include organising field work (door-to-door preaching or "witnessing"), running congregational judicial committees, leading religious services, bible studies, and pastoral care of the congregation.<sup>9</sup> Elders decide how each congregation operates based on the procedures and policies set out for this purpose in the handbook Shepherd the Flock of God, communications from the local branch office, and other printed publications of the Jehovah's Witnesses such as Watchtower.<sup>10</sup>
16. Former Elders who provided evidence to the Inquiry noted that Jehovah's Witnesses are taught to believe that Elders are appointed by the holy spirit,<sup>11</sup> and are strongly encouraged to cooperate with what they say.<sup>12</sup> The faith says the requirements for being appointed to be an Elder are set forth in the Bible, inspired by the holy spirit. Elders are said to have "been appointed by holy spirit as the qualification for appointment is the manifestation of spiritual qualities which evidence that holy spirit is operating in their lives" such as being irreprehensible, moderate in habits, sound in mind, orderly, hospitable, qualified, balanced in the use of alcohol, and not lovers of money.<sup>13</sup> Congregation members are taught to seek Elders out for advice and to confess serious sins.<sup>14</sup>
17. Groups of Elders sit as judicial committees, described further below, which determine a wrongdoer's standing in the faith,<sup>15</sup> whether he or she can be found to be scripturally repentant based on Biblical standards, and if the wrongdoer should be reprovved (reprimanded or punished). If the wrongdoer is not repentant, they will be disfellowshipped or removed from the congregation.<sup>16</sup>

8 Jehovah's Witnesses interview transcript with the Royal Commission of Inquiry into Abuse in Care (8 March 2023, pages 20–21).

9 Australian Child Sexual Abuse Royal Commission into Institutional responses to Child Sexual Abuse, Report of Case study no 29 (Commonwealth of Australia, 2016, page 15).

10 Witness statement of Edward Narayan (5 September 2022, pages 4–5).

11 Witness statements of Robert Ker (6 April 2023, para 14) and Shayne Mechen (21 June 2023, para 4).

12 Witness statements of Robert Ker (6 April 2023, pages 2–7) and Shane McNeil, Australia, (20 June 2023, para 90).

13 Christian Congregation of Jehovah's Witnesses (Australasia) Submissions (24 November 2023, para 90).

14 Witness statement of Edward Narayan (5 September 2022, page 4).

15 Christian Congregation of Jehovah's Witnesses (Australasia), Jehovah's Witnesses' scripturally based position on child protection (undated, para 10).

16 Christian Congregation of Jehovah's Witnesses (Australasia) Response to Royal Commission of Inquiry into Abuse in Care Notice to Produce 1: "Shepherd the Flock of God" Chapters 12, 14, 16 and 22 (April 2021, page 20).

18. Former Jehovah's Witness Jasmine Grew described a patriarchal hierarchy in the Jehovah's Witness leadership. She said that in the community, male members strive to become Elders, which "means respect and authority".<sup>17</sup> Once a member becomes an Elder, Ms Grew said: "They rule the place. Everything goes through them."<sup>18</sup> One Jehovah's Witness stated that her mother trusted all Elders implicitly.<sup>19</sup>
19. The faith's doctrine reflects the role of Elders, referring to them acting to deliver Jesus' message and direction. The 2010 version of the handbook *Shepherd the Flock of God* states, quoting scripture:
- "Jehovah has appointed Jesus Christ as Head of the Christian congregation. (Eph 1:22, 23) Revelation 1:20 depicts Jesus as holding the anointed elders in his right hand, thus, by extension, indicating that he controls all bodies of elders for the purpose of accomplishing Jehovah's will."***<sup>20</sup>
20. Similarly, Watchtower (February 2022) refers to the governing body as the "faithful and discreet slave" giving direction to the Elders, and says that congregants show they trust Jehovah (God) by following the Elders' directions:
- "Today Jehovah leads the earthly part of his organization by means of the 'faithful and discreet slave.' (Matt. 24:45) Like the first-century governing body, this slave oversees God's people worldwide and gives direction to congregation elders. (Read Acts 16:4, 5.) The elders, in turn, implement the direction in the congregations. We show that we trust in Jehovah's way of doing things by heeding the direction we receive from the organization and the elders."***<sup>21</sup>
21. Elders are assisted by ministerial servants, who mainly help with routine organisational tasks. These include assisting with the maintenance of the Kingdom Hall and ensuring there are sufficient stocks of bibles and religious literature. The assistance provided by ministerial servants enables Elders to focus on their shepherding and teaching responsibilities.<sup>22</sup> There are no females appointed to this role.<sup>23</sup>

17 Witness statement of Jasmine Grew (1 June 2022, page 9).

18 Witness statement of Jasmine Grew (1 June 2022, page 9).

19 Witness statement of Ms SC (1 March 2024, page 5).

20 Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania, "Shepherd the Flock of God" (2010, page 11).

21 Watchtower February 2022 (page 4, para 8) as quoted in the witness statement of Edward Narayan (5 September 2022, page 20).

22 Summary of Jehovah's Witnesses' Relevant Religious Beliefs and Practices (provided to the Inquiry on 1 December 2021, page 4).

23 Witness statement of Edward Narayan (5 September 2022, page 5).



## Relevant features of the faith

22. Being a Jehovah's Witness is typically a way of life for members. Baptised Jehovah's Witnesses are expected to adhere to all religious doctrines that the governing body establishes through its interpretation of the Bible.<sup>24</sup>
23. Members of the Jehovah's Witnesses are taught to be obedient and submissive to those in positions of authority in the organisation, including Elders.<sup>25</sup> Other beliefs of the faith relevant to this case study include:<sup>26</sup>
  - a. strict interpretation of the Bible and reliance on first century principles to set practice, policy and procedure
  - b. a belief that the end of the world is imminent
  - c. 'male headship', or the belief in a strict patriarchal authority structure involving obedience and submission in both the organisation and the family
  - d. maintaining a separateness from, and exercising caution in associating with, those who are not members of the organisation
  - e. the importance of door-to-door preaching, or evangelising.
24. The Jehovah's Witness faith is not merely an association based on friendship, common interests, work or a home. Being part of the faith is considered a pathway to salvation and to escape the perils of an imminent Armageddon (a conflict that signals the end of Earth's history). Jehovah's Witnesses consider themselves a unified spiritual family. They see and refer to each other as spiritual brothers and sisters.<sup>27</sup>
25. Jehovah's Witnesses require members who commit "gross sins" (such as child sexual abuse) to be reported to the Elders. These sins are investigated by what the faith describes as an ecclesiastical judicial committee to determine whether a person should be "disfellowshipped" (rejected from the faith), a sanction imposed by Elders.<sup>28</sup> Many Jehovah's Witnesses are expelled from the faith by disfellowshipping.<sup>29</sup>
26. The purpose of disfellowshipping is said to stem from the need to protect the group from harmful behaviour.<sup>30</sup> The practice is defined by the faith as an expression of love, with the aim of helping the individual to the desired path and a way to protect the congregation.<sup>31</sup>

24 Australian Child Sexual Abuse Royal Commission into Institutional responses to Child Sexual Abuse, Report of Case Study no 29 (Commonwealth of Australia, 2016, page 18).

25 Australian Child Sexual Abuse Royal Commission into Institutional responses to Child Sexual Abuse, Report of Case study no 29 (Commonwealth of Australia, 2016, page 18).

26 Australian Child Sexual Abuse Royal Commission into Institutional responses to Child Sexual Abuse, Report of Case study no 29 (Commonwealth of Australia, 2016, page 10).

27 The Trustees of the Barry Congregation of Jehovah's Witnesses v BXB [2021] EWCA (Civ) 356 (para 22).

28 Christian Congregation of Jehovah's Witnesses (Australasia), Response to Royal Commission of Inquiry into Abuse in Care Notice to Produce 1 (1 December 2021, Annexure – M. Expert opinion of Professor Patrick Parkinson, para 36); Letter from the Christian Congregation of Jehovah's Witnesses (Australasia) to the Royal Commission of Inquiry into Abuse in Care (28 April 2023, para 69).

29 Christian Congregation of Jehovah's Witnesses (Australasia), Response to Royal Commission of Inquiry into Abuse in Care Notice to Produce 1 (1 December 2021, Annexure – M. Expert opinion of Professor Patrick Parkinson, para 36); Witness statement of Shayne Mechen (8 September 2022, page 2).

30 Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society Pennsylvania, Keep yourself in God's Love (2016, pages 35 and 207).

31 Watchtower magazine, Study article 39: When a Loved one Leaves Jehovah (September 2021, page 26).

27. A Jehovah's Witness can also voluntarily seek "disassociation".<sup>32</sup> Members who leave by either disassociation or disfellowshipping are usually excluded from social contact with remaining members of the community, including their families. Disassociation and disfellowshipping are referred to in international research as exclusion practices as those members are consequently shunned by remaining members of the faith. When shunned, members can lose their families, their friends, and their social network, without anything outside of the congregation to fall back on.<sup>33</sup>
28. An American investigation into the impact of shunning by Jehovah's Witnesses found that the willingness of family and friends to participate in shunning occurs within the context of the broader strictures of the faith. For example, members of the faith are required to attend regular meetings, usually twice a week or more, as well as participating in monthly witnessing or preaching work. The investigation found that "those who do not participate in the preaching work are considered to be 'blood guilty'. Due to the belief in Armageddon, those who do not preach are seen as withholding lifesaving information from their fellow humans."<sup>34</sup> The study concluded that shunning threatens four basic social needs: belonging, self-esteem, control, and meaningful existence. It removes a person from their identified group, threatening belonging, and creates feelings of inadequacy and self-doubt, threatening self-esteem.<sup>35</sup>
29. Disfellowshipping and the consequent shunning can have severe and long-lasting consequences for the individual. If an individual is disfellowshipped, an announcement is read aloud in the presence of the congregation stating that the individual is no longer a member of the congregation.<sup>36</sup> Those who experienced shunning told the Inquiry it had a severe emotional or psychological impact on them and others they observed in the same position.<sup>37</sup> One said the fear of being excommunicated was emotional and psychological abuse.<sup>38</sup> Former Elder Shayne Mechen told the Inquiry, "when young people are disfellowshipped or shunned, their whole support system is taken away ... Some leavers are so impacted by being separated from everything they know that they become suicidal."<sup>39</sup>

<sup>32</sup> Witness statements of Shayne Mechen (8 September 2022, page 15) and Edward Narayan (5 September 2022, page 19).

<sup>33</sup> Luther, R, What Happens to Those Who Exit Jehovah's Witnesses: An Investigation of the Impact of Shunning, *Pastoral Psychology*, 2023; 72(1) (page 108).

<sup>34</sup> Luther, R, What Happens to Those Who Exit Jehovah's Witnesses: An Investigation of the Impact of Shunning, *Pastoral Psychology*, 2023; 72(1) (page 108). Also see, Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society Pennsylvania, The Watchtower, "Imitate Jehovah's justice and mercy" (November 2017, pages 15– 20), <https://wol.jw.org/en/wol/d/r1/lp-e/402017643>.

<sup>35</sup> Luther, R, What Happens to Those Who Exit Jehovah's Witnesses: An Investigation of the Impact of Shunning, *Pastoral Psychology*, 2023; 72(1) (page 108).

<sup>36</sup> Grendele, W., Flax, M., Bapir-Tardy, S., Shunning from the Jehovah's Witness Community: Is It Legal? *Journal of Law and Religion* (2023), 38: 2 (Cambridge University Press, page 293).

<sup>37</sup> Witness statements of Shayne Mechen (8 September 2022, para 4.14 – 4.15) and Elise Neame (11 July 2022, para 9.5).

<sup>38</sup> Witness statement of Sina Dubbelman (8 September 2022, paras 9.9).

<sup>39</sup> Witness statement of Shayne Mechen (8 September 2022, para 4.14).

## Becoming a Jehovah's Witness

30. As with any faith, Jehovah's Witnesses were either born into a family who were members of the faith or chose to join. Some members the Inquiry heard from joined the faith during particularly vulnerable periods in their lives, for example when they had been recently widowed,<sup>40</sup> or were in financial difficulty.<sup>41</sup>

31. Jasmine Grew described her family's pathway into the faith:

*"When I was two years old, my mother and father were cannabis-smoking hippies when Jehovah's Witnesses knocked on their door ... My mother was only 24, and a very vulnerable solo mum. It seemed inevitable that she would split up with my father, anyway. She was not working. Both my parents were susceptible to a convincing approach by a religious faith. The Jehovah's Witnesses prey on people who are most vulnerable. They give false hope. They provide the vulnerable with a community and a family and a sense of belonging ... They work their way into your life, so the relationship becomes very tight. They also instill [sic] in you fear of the outside world. So, in anticipating becoming a solo parent, my mother knew she had children to protect. My father decided against becoming too involved in the religion and my mum said, 'Well I'm going,' and they split up over it. Our congregation was Gloucester Street from then on. My father took a different direction and I did not see him again until I was 14 years old."*<sup>42</sup>

32. Recent data suggests that a disproportionate number of members of the faith in Aotearoa New Zealand are Māori (30 percent) and Pacific (16 percent),<sup>43</sup> however, the Inquiry does not have any data on the ethnicity of members during the Inquiry period.

40 Witness statement of Deborah Oakley (31 May 2022, page 1).

41 Witness statement of Mr UF (14 May 2023, page 1).

42 Witness statement of Jasmine Grew (1 June 2022, page 3).

43 Expert Opinion of Peter Lineham (4 April 2024, page 27).



# Chapter 3: Care provided by the Jehovah's Witnesses in Aotearoa New Zealand during the Inquiry period

## Introduction

33. Unlike most other faith-based organisations the Inquiry investigated, the Jehovah's Witnesses did not provide faith-based schools, children's homes, or foster care services during the Inquiry period. However, the faith did provide pastoral care and other informal forms of care.<sup>44</sup> Pastoral care includes spiritual, social, emotional and material support or guidance for individuals or communities. It can also include visiting, counselling, religious counselling (including Bible studies or other faith activities), or otherwise helping people in the congregation. The faith also assumed the responsibility for the care of children and young people in other situations, such as "witnessing" (door-to-door preaching).

## The scope of "care" in this Inquiry

34. The definition of "care" in this Inquiry incorporates a broader range of care relationships than, for example, care provided under formal court orders or residential programmes in institutions. The Inquiry's Terms of Reference, as amended in September 2023, state that the phrase "in the care of faith-based institutions" means where a faith-based institution assumed responsibility for the care of an individual and:

*"...for the avoidance of doubt a faith-based institution may assume responsibility for the care of an individual through an informal or pastoral care relationship. An informal or pastoral care relationship includes a trust-based relationship between an individual and a person with power or authority conferred by the faith-based institution, where such a relationship is related to the institution's work or is enabled by the institution's conferral of authority or power on the person".<sup>45</sup>*

<sup>44</sup> Christian Congregation of Jehovah's Witnesses (Australasia), Response to Royal Commission of Inquiry into Abuse in Care Notice to Produce 1, (1 December 2021, paras 11–13).

<sup>45</sup> The Inquiry's Terms of reference, clause. 17.4 (ba). (Emphasis added)

35. The September 2023 amendment codified the interpretation the Inquiry had adopted from an early stage, without disagreement from any of the faiths.<sup>46</sup> In litigation in 2023 and 2024, the Jehovah's Witnesses challenged the Inquiry's interpretation of the phrase "where a faith-based institution assumed responsibility for the care of an individual" as well as the amendment to the Terms of Reference. The High Court and Court of Appeal dismissed those challenges, and at the time of writing the Jehovah's Witnesses had sought leave to appeal to the Supreme Court. The Jehovah's Witnesses also filed a judicial review application in late June 2024 and sought access to this case study before it was presented to the Governor-General. The High Court dismissed the application for access to the case study in advance of its presentation to the Governor-General.

### **Care provided by the Jehovah's Witnesses during the Inquiry period**

36. In this case study, the Inquiry focuses on situations where the Jehovah's Witnesses assumed responsibility for the care of individuals in the context of witnessing, pastoral care, judicial committees, working bees and other faith activities outside the home.

#### **Witnessing activities**

37. Members of the Jehovah's Witnesses convert or seek to convert to glorify God and are instructed to go and make disciples of people.<sup>47</sup> This is often referred to as "door knocking", "witnessing", "field service" or "preaching". The faith explained that a Jehovah's Witness considers it a personal choice to deliver the Bible's positive message to all people, while respecting every person's right to believe what they choose.<sup>48</sup>

38. The faith has said it was common practice for children to accompany their own parents when going witnessing. The evidence before the Inquiry shows that at times when witnessing, children and young people also accompanied Elders who were not from their family.

<sup>46</sup> The Inquiry's Minute 16, Faith-based Care.

<sup>47</sup> Australian Child Sexual Abuse Royal Commission into Institutional responses to Child Sexual Abuse, Report of Case study no 29 (Commonwealth of Australia, 2016, page 19).

<sup>48</sup> Christian Congregation of Jehovah's Witnesses (Australasia) Submissions (24 November 2023, page 5).

39. Two former Elders said that during weekly witnessing activities, Jehovah's Witness children were paired up with Elders and other adult members from outside their family.<sup>49</sup> One said this happened to him when he was a child, and when he was appointed an Elder (after 1999) it became his job to organise the groups and the street assignments for witnesses. The other former Elder described taking five children for a day of witnessing, with no other adults present.<sup>50</sup> Two former members recalled being placed as children with other adult members during an entire day of witnessing, with one recalling that this started as young as toddlers and with packed lunches in anticipation of a full day away from their parents or caregivers.<sup>51</sup>

40. Jasmine Grew, like other children within the Jehovah's Witnesses, was required to actively participate in witnessing:

*"Saturday morning is when the 'witnessing' happens. 'Witnessing' is when members knock on people's doors and attempt to convert them to the faith ... For me knocking on doors as a child, with other JW adults, and later, as a teenager, was horrible. I was so embarrassed and used to pray that I would not see my friends from school ... As little kids you have a little picnic lunch and children are always with an older member. Children start doing this when they are just toddlers. Jehovah's Witnesses use their children to win people over, so they can extend the conversation at the door. Children must say something during the witnessing procedure."<sup>52</sup>*

41. Witnessing was integral to furthering of the faith and the aims of the organisation. The Jehovah's Witnesses explained to the Inquiry that "participating in witnessing activities is required for all who desire to obey Jesus' direction to [quoting scripture] 'Go, therefore, and make disciples of people of all the nations' (Matthew 28:19)."<sup>53</sup>

42. Former elder Shayne Mechen told the Inquiry "my weekends were consumed doing JW activities. There was no time for playing sports; no spending time with friends or going to barbecues, other than at JW events."<sup>54</sup> Similarly, Sina Dubbelman explained how, as a child she went out witnessing most Saturdays, she was not allowed to play sports on the weekends, as extracurricular activities were frowned upon and that there were missed opportunities brought on by being a child in the Jehovah's Witness organisation.<sup>55</sup> These examples reflect the regular, scheduled and structured nature of witnessing, and the commitment to it by members, sometimes at the expense of other activities or hobbies.

49 Witness statements of Shane McNeil, Australia (20 June 2023, paras 84–86) and Shayne Mechen (8 September 2022, para 2.52 and 21 June 2023, paras 5–10).

50 Supplementary witness statement of Shayne Mechen (21 June 2023, para 8).

51 Witness statements of Jasmine Grew (1 June 2022, para 4.19) and Deborah Oakley (31 May 2022, para 4.11).

52 Witness statement of Jasmine Grew (1 June 2022, paras 4.15, 4.17, 4.19).

53 Christian Congregation of Jehovah's Witnesses (Australasia) Submissions (24 November 2023, para 17).

54 Witness statement of Shayne Mechen (8 September 2022, para 2.5).

55 Witness statement of Sina Dubbelman (8 September 2022, paras 3.7 and 4.2).

43. The faith told the Inquiry that witnessing is not always scheduled or arranged, and therefore is not a "structured activity", and that members have the right to decide how much, when, and how they participate in witnessing based on their personal circumstances.<sup>56</sup> The faith provided members' testimony that their activity as Jehovah's Witnesses is voluntary and in accordance with their own circumstances, preference and enjoyment.<sup>57</sup>
44. The faith submitted that it did not assume responsibility for the care of children during witnessing activities. It says the only people responsible for the care of those children are their parents and the decision whether a child should participate in witnessing activities is made by their parent(s). The faith said there was no system or policy in place, whereby the Jehovah's Witness religion gives an Elder authority or responsibility to control an individual's or family's witnessing activities. If an Elder who happens to be present suggests to a parent that their child could accompany another family witnessing, then that suggestion:
- a. is not part of the policy or practice of the faith
  - b. is not an example of the faith-based institution assuming responsibility for the care of the child, as the child in this scenario is with another family as a result of the decision and consent of their parents
  - c. means no more than that the child is with another family, with the consent of the child's parents, and the child is not at that time "also in the care of a faith-based institution".

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<sup>56</sup> Christian Congregation of Jehovah's Witnesses (Australasia) Submissions (24 November 2023, page 5).

<sup>57</sup> Christian Congregation of Jehovah's Witnesses (Australasia) Submissions (24 November 2023, pages 6–8).

45. The faith provided statements from current members who had been raised by parents who were Jehovah's Witnesses, testifying that the "very common" practice of the faith in Aotearoa New Zealand is for parents to supervise their own children in witnessing activities. The following are extracts from those statements:<sup>58</sup>

*"Usually Saturday morning we would meet with a group of others and go preaching for a couple of hours. I was usually with Dad, and the girls with Mum. But we would swap around between Mum and Dad."*<sup>59</sup>

*"Most weekends we would work along with them [their parents] in the door to door activity. As we progressed, they would train us to have a part in sharing our faith with others."*<sup>60</sup>

*"I used to accompany my Mum during the week in the preaching activity right from very young and observe how we could help other people to learn about Bible [sic], understand it, and make application of it in their lives."*<sup>61</sup>

*"When I was a little older my father trained me to go door to door witnessing on Saturday mornings. Honestly, most occasions I would have rather stayed at home watching television and occasionally my father would relent, but more often than not, my brother and I would alternate and accompany him in the ministry."*<sup>62</sup>

*"We also accompanied our parents and my maternal grandmother in the door-to-door preaching. We were always well supervised during preaching."*<sup>63</sup>

*"Every Saturday the four oldest of us children hopped into the family's Volkswagen Kombi, and we drove all over the countryside calling on our neighbours to help them to learn these precious Bible truths...Dad was training us to be confident in the ministry."*<sup>64</sup>

*"I have many fond memories of my mother training my brother and I in the door to door preaching activity."*<sup>65</sup>

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58 Christian Congregation of Jehovah's Witnesses (Australasia) Submissions (24 November 2023, pages 13–14).

59 Statement of Claude Gibbs (para 7) as quoted in Christian Congregation of Jehovah's Witnesses (Australasia) Submissions (24 November 2023, para 27.1).

60 Statement of Darren Wallace (para 8) as quoted in Christian Congregation of Jehovah's Witnesses (Australasia) Submissions (24 November 2023, para 27.2).

61 Statement of Vernita Green (para 10) as quoted in Christian Congregation of Jehovah's Witnesses (Australasia) Submissions (24 November 2023, para 27.3).

62 Statement of Mark Adamson (para 4) as quoted in Christian Congregation of Jehovah's Witnesses (Australasia) Submissions (24 November 2023, para 27.4).

63 Statement of Bernice Burns (para 13) as quoted in Christian Congregation of Jehovah's Witnesses (Australasia) Submissions (24 November 2023, para 27.5).

64 Statement of Judith Cserney (para 6) as quoted in Christian Congregation of Jehovah's Witnesses (Australasia) Submissions (24 November 2023, para 27.6).

65 Statement of Rochelle Swan (para 7) as quoted in Christian Congregation of Jehovah's Witnesses (Australasia) Submissions (24 November 2023, para 27.7).

46. Taking into account all the available evidence, the Inquiry finds that during the Inquiry period, the Jehovah's Witnesses assumed the responsibility for children and young people placed in the care of Elders other than their parents for witnessing activities. The faith's assumption of responsibility for those children and young people arose through its conferral of authority and trusted status on Elders, and the routine and regular actions of Elders and other adults in taking children and young people into their care, unsupervised, for witnessing. Children and young people were therefore within the care of the faith in those circumstances, within the meaning in the Terms of Reference.
47. The Inquiry is not persuaded that the absence of formal or documented policies in support of this practice, or the other evidence supplied by the faith, alters the reality that the faith assumed responsibility for the care of those children and young people in those situations.

### **Pastoral support and care**

48. During the Inquiry period, Jehovah's Witness Elders provided pastoral support to congregants.<sup>66</sup> As part of the pastoral support role, Elders visited homes for matters such as Bible studies, pastoral oversight before a baptism, and pastoral support or care outside of the Kingdom Hall environment in their capacity as Elders.<sup>67</sup>
49. There is credible evidence that children and young people receiving pastoral care were at times alone in the care of Elders during pastoral care situations of this nature. Former Elder Shayne Mechen, described studying with children without their parents being present, at the request of the parents who believed he was the "best one to do it".<sup>68</sup> He also described pastoral care including visiting members of the congregation in their homes to assist them or go over encouraging articles from Watchtower.<sup>69</sup> Where families were considered fatherless, Elders were primarily responsible for making sure that women and their children were taken care of.<sup>70</sup> For example, a former Elder described how, when he was a child [in Australia] because he was fatherless, an Elder was assigned to go to his house and lead Bible studies. The Elder studied with him alone; one-on-one and without the presence of another adult.<sup>71</sup>

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66 Christian Congregation of Jehovah's Witnesses (Australasia), Response to Royal Commission of Inquiry into Abuse in Care Notice to Produce 1 (1 December 2021, para 13).

67 Witness statements of Shayne Mechen (8 September 2022, para 3.1 and 21 June 2023, paras 11–12), Shane McNeil, Australia (20 June 2023, para 87), Deborah Oakley (31 May 2022, para 6.2) and Jasmine Grew (1 June 2022, paras 4.7).

68 Supplementary witness statement of Shayne Mechen (21 June 2023, para 11).

69 Witness statement of Shayne Mechen (8 September 2022, para 3.1).

70 Witness statement of Ms SC (1 March 2024, para 27).

71 Witness statement of Shane McNeil, Australia (20 June 2023, paras 87–88).



50. Evidence and records provided by the faith show that there were instances where Elders were alone with children and young people for study. For example, a summary document prepared by Elders from a judicial committee refers to the questioning of an abuser who was an Elder. When questioned, this Elder said "it wasn't unusual for them [him and the victim] to be alone as he had studied with her. Most of the time the mother was there but not always."<sup>72</sup>
51. Ms SC received Bible tutoring by the wife of an Elder. She said "I would often be at their place after school or to go on outings. In addition to one-on-one bible studies with the Elder's wife, I would join their family regularly for their family bible study."<sup>73</sup>
52. The faith submitted that all teachings and practices required that Elders should not be alone with children. It says that any decision for an Elder or congregant to assist a family with Bible studies is made by the family, and families are actively encouraged not to leave their children alone with another.<sup>74</sup>
53. The Jehovah's Witnesses also submitted that congregants were not taught they should place "complete trust in Elders, nor that Elders can be trusted with children, nor that it would be appropriate for them to authorise an Elder to make arrangements for their children".<sup>75</sup> The faith submitted it has never assumed responsibility for the care of children in their homes nor condoned or had any policy to support an Elder being alone in a child's home with them.<sup>76</sup>
54. Based on the evidence received, the Inquiry finds that during the Inquiry period the faith assumed the care of children and young people placed in the care of Elders for pastoral care, preparation for baptism and other similar activities. There is no doubt the faith created and encouraged deep faith in Elders, and expected members to seek out Elders for spiritual guidance or to confess sins.<sup>77</sup> The faith's assumption of responsibility for children and young people entrusted to Elders flowed from its conferral of authority and trusted status on Elders, and the regular actions of Elders who in this context took children and young people into their care unsupervised – enabled by the reliance of parents on the status of Elders. Children and young people in those situations were within the care of the faith. Again, the absence of specific authorising documents does not alter this conclusion.

<sup>72</sup> Christian Congregation of Jehovah's Witnesses (Australasia), Response to Royal Commission of Inquiry into Abuse in Care Notice to Produce 1 (1 December 2021, Annexure - D. Records, Summary, page 8).

<sup>73</sup> Witness statement of Ms SC (1 March 2024, page 4).

<sup>74</sup> Christian Congregation of Jehovah's Witnesses (Australasia) Submissions (24 November 2023, pages 19–20).

<sup>75</sup> Christian Congregation of Jehovah's Witnesses (Australasia) Submissions (24 November 2023, para 29).

<sup>76</sup> Letter from the Christian Congregation of Jehovah's Witnesses (Australasia) to the Royal Commission of Inquiry into Abuse in Care (28 April 2023, para 41); Christian Congregation of Jehovah's Witnesses (Australasia) Submissions (29 September 2023, paras 178, 181 and 201).

<sup>77</sup> As discussed above in Chapter 2.

## **Working bees and other organised activities**

55. Children and young people in the faith were also placed with Elders, ministerial servants or other adults in group activities described by a former Elder as 'working bees' (for example cleaning and maintaining the Kingdom Hall), organised sports or outings for 'fatherless children'.
56. Former Elder Shayne Mechen said that during these working bees, children were told to go with others who were not family members.<sup>78</sup> There would also be working bees that involved only one Elder working with a group of children and on some occasions, with other adults.<sup>79</sup> These activities appear to have been commonplace and occurred with a degree of regularity.
57. Mr Mechen explained that if there was a widow with children, an Elder would take the children on outings, or for a meal, to be a role model for them, and that this would be unsupervised by the mother.<sup>80</sup> He referred to the Jehovah's Witnesses magazine *Awake!* of February 8, 2000, as saying "Christian men can often 'rescue the fatherless boy' by taking a sincere and healthy interest in him."<sup>81</sup>
58. Mr Mechen also told the Inquiry that Elders and ministerial servants were alone with groups of children for sports. Mr Mechen recalls as an Elder organising 'a lot' of that for children.<sup>82</sup>
59. The faith submitted that parents are strongly encouraged to train, accompany, and supervise their children, and that there is no publication, policy, or practice that suggests minors should engage in these types of activities without their parents or with other people who are not family members.<sup>83</sup> It says it is a normal aspect of child-rearing that parents at times consent to their children being looked after by other adults and this is an exercise of parental authority and responsibility. It provided evidence from current members that suggest activities, such as Kingdom Hall cleaning, were always done with parents and other family members.<sup>84</sup> For example, current member Bernice Burns explained: "Helping to clean and maintain the Kingdom Hall was also a regular activity. This was always done in groups with our parents."<sup>85</sup>

78 Witness statement of Shayne Mechen (8 September 2022, para 2.52).

79 Supplementary witness statement of Shayne Mechen (21 June 2023, para 14).

80 Supplementary witness statement of Shayne Mechen (21 June 2023, para 15).

81 Supplementary witness statement of Shayne Mechen (21 June 2023, para 15).

82 Supplementary witness statement of Shayne Mechen (21 June 2023, para 17).

83 Christian Congregation of Jehovah's Witnesses (Australasia) Submissions (24 November 2023, para 60).

84 Christian Congregation of Jehovah's Witnesses (Australasia) Submissions (24 November 2023, page 23).

85 Witness statement of Bernice Burns (23 November 2023, para 15).

60. As with witnessing, the faith submitted that during working bees or other faith activities where children were in the care of other adults, this had been a matter for the discretion of the families and the faith had not assumed responsibility for their care. The Inquiry accepts that parents gave consent for their children to be in the unsupervised care of Elders in this context, which is unsurprising given the power and authority the faith conferred on Elders.
61. The Inquiry concludes that during the Inquiry period, the Jehovah's Witnesses assumed responsibility for the care of children and young people when they were in the care of Elders during working bees or other faith activities.

### **Investigations and judicial committees**

62. All baptised members are considered accountable to the faith and can face formal judicial action for any wrongdoing. The age for baptism varies but it is an option from about the age of 10.<sup>86</sup>
63. The Jehovah's Witnesses require that every allegation of sexual abuse must be initially investigated by two Elders to establish the facts. Investigating Elders may take further action only if the truth of an allegation can be established according to the scriptural standards of proof. For those standards to be met, the Elders must usually receive either a confession by the accused, or the testimony of two or three 'credible' eyewitnesses.<sup>87</sup> A judicial committee is formed after it has been established that a serious sin occurred.
64. During these initial investigations and subsequent judicial committees, the Elders were sometimes alone with children or young people, questioning them as part of their investigation or committee. Parents were often not present during these investigations or committee processes.
65. Jasmine Grew told the Inquiry that she had disclosed abuse to her mother in 1989, when she was 12 years old. Her mother told the Elders of her congregation "as she was expected" to do.<sup>88</sup> Soon after at a faith meeting, an Elder came up to Jasmine and said "we'd like to speak to you in the back room":

*"I went back into the back room and the elders (male) were there. I had no support, no friend, no mother, nothing. My mother did not know, at the time, what was happening."<sup>89</sup>*

<sup>86</sup> Witness statement of Shane McNeil, Australia (20 June 2023, page 4).

<sup>87</sup> Australian Child Sexual Abuse Royal Commission into Institutional responses to Child Sexual Abuse, Report of Case study no 29 (Commonwealth of Australia, 2016, page 10).

<sup>88</sup> Witness statement of Jasmine Grew (1 June 2022, para 6.4).

<sup>89</sup> Witness statement of Jasmine Grew (1 June 2022, paras 6.6–6.7).

66. When Debbie Oakley was 16, she met with three Elders, together with her sister where Debbie and her sister disclosed abuse by her step-father. The meeting took place in a car: two Elders were in the front seat, and Debbie and her sister and the third Elder were in the back seat.<sup>90</sup> Their mother was not present.
67. Sina Dubbelman described appearing alone before a judicial committee to discuss alleged sexual matters when she was under age 18. She said that you were not allowed to take a support or witness with you into a judicial committee meeting with the Elders, "you sit with three elders in front of you."<sup>91</sup>
68. The Jehovah's Witnesses told the Inquiry that where there is a serious allegation, Elders never interview children, and do not take children into back rooms to cross examine them, and that there has always been a policy to that effect. The faith said that judicial committees only interview parents.<sup>92</sup>
69. The Inquiry has not been directed to any specific policy relating to investigations or judicial committees during the Inquiry period.
70. The Inquiry concludes based on the evidence described above that during the Inquiry period the Jehovah's Witnesses did assume the responsibility for the care of children and young people who were interviewed by Elders during judicial investigations or committee processes without their parents present. Children and young people in these situations were within the care of the faith. The faith's submission that investigations or judicial committees never interviewed children alone is not supported by the evidence.

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<sup>90</sup> Witness statement of Deborah Oakley (31 May 2022, para 6.4).

<sup>91</sup> Witness statement of Sina Dubbelman (8 September 2022, para 6.6).

<sup>92</sup> Jehovah's Witnesses interview transcript with the Royal Commission of Inquiry into Abuse in Care (8 March 2023, page 45).

# Chapter 4: Risk factors and allegations of abuse in the care of the Jehovah's Witnesses in Aotearoa New Zealand

## Introduction

71. Instances of child abuse within the Jehovah's Witnesses faith around the world are well-documented.<sup>93</sup> This Inquiry received allegations of abuse in the care of the faith, although not in large numbers. The low number of allegations to this Inquiry should be assessed in light of the barriers to disclosure discussed below, and the fact that the scope of this Inquiry is limited to abuse in care rather than any abuse within the faith.
72. This chapter focuses on the factors that increased the risk of abuse in the care of the Jehovah's Witnesses, together with the allegations of abuse during the Inquiry period.
73. Several features gave rise to an increased risk of abuse in the care of the Jehovah's Witnesses during the relevant period. They include:
  - > the status of leaders and the power imbalance between them and members of the faith in the context of elevated level of influence within the faith,
  - > the barriers to the disclosure of abuse, including the place of females in the faith, the fear of exclusion and relative disconnection from the secular world;
  - > inadequate vetting and training in abuse prevention for Elders.

## Status of leaders, power imbalance and elevated levels of influence

74. Religious leaders in all faiths have significant power.<sup>94</sup> Within the Jehovah's Witnesses, Elders during the Inquiry period held significant status and power over members.
75. The 1980s Watchtower guidance ("Be Obedient to Those Taking the Lead"), relied on scriptures directing that members should be obedient and submissive. The guidance also suggested that if members had any doubts about the abilities of their leaders, they should self-reflect that they may be "overemphasising [the leaders'] imperfections".<sup>95</sup>
76. In the Inquiry's view, the power imbalance between male Elders and children or young people in their care, particularly females, heightened the risk of abuse in care.

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93 Jehovah's Witnesses interview transcript with the Royal Commission of Inquiry into Abuse in Care (8 March 2023, page 16); Watchtower Tract and Bible Society Pennsylvania, Watchtower magazine (May 2019, page 8).

94 The United Kingdom Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse (IICSA), Child protection in religious organisations and settings Investigation report, section C.5: Abuse of Power by religious leaders (September 2021, pages 26–29).

95 Watchtower Tract and Bible Society Pennsylvania, The Watchtower magazine, "Be Obedient to Those taking the Lead" (15 September 1989, pages 20–25).

77. That power imbalance existed within the context of the faith's elevated level of influence over the lives of its members, as described by many witnesses to this Inquiry. Some former members said that they rarely socialised with people outside of the faith. One former member described the integration of faith and life:

*"Limits were placed on who we associated with, what we wore, what we watched, what we read, how much education we received and our recreational activities. The JW church was not just a place of worship, it reached into the core of almost every aspect of our lives."*<sup>96</sup>

78. Jehovah's Witnesses' children attended State schools, but Elise Neame told the Inquiry they could not participate in Christmas, birthdays, and other holidays, as their mother told them they were to be "no part of the world".<sup>97</sup> Other former Jehovah's Witnesses' members said they were usually prohibited from socialising with non-Jehovah's Witness children both in school and after school.<sup>98</sup> Two former members told the Inquiry their parents instructed schools to remove them from certain activities. Naomi Burnett said: "I remember that when I went to school, my parents took me there and always reminded me what my religion did not allow me to do at school ... for example: Easter celebrations and traditions, Christmas decorations, no standing up for the national anthem."<sup>99</sup> Jasmine Grew said: "At school assemblies I was not allowed to be present to sing the Christmas carols. I was taken out to sit in a back room."<sup>100</sup> Ms Grew also told the Inquiry she was taken out of sex education classes.<sup>101</sup> The faith submits that the scriptural teaching to be "no part of the world" does not mean that Christians must isolate themselves from the world: rather, they must not participate in practices that one may find in society such as crime, cruelty, oppression, and dishonesty,<sup>102</sup> and that it is appropriate to be politically neutral.<sup>103</sup>

79. As mentioned above, Jehovah's Witnesses believe that in the very near future, in a worldwide event called Armageddon, Jehovah will destroy the wicked elements of human society.<sup>104</sup> After Armageddon, Jehovah's Witnesses will live in a paradise on earth. Ms Grew told the Inquiry that this belief was "ingrained in you from birth"<sup>105</sup> and that "fear is instilled in members from day one."<sup>106</sup> The only way to avoid being killed in the godly retribution of Armageddon is to follow the guideline of the Bible in thought and actions as prescribed by the leaders of the Watchtower organisation.<sup>107</sup>

96 Witness statement of Ms IU (16 October 2022, para 4.2.1).

97 Witness statement of Elise Neame (11 July 2022, para 4.2).

98 Witness statements of Deborah Oakley (31 May 2022, pages 4–5) and Mr UF (14 May 2023, pages 2–3).

99 Witness statement of Naomi Burnett (26 April 2022, para 4.5).

100 Witness statement of Jasmine Grew (1 June 2022, para 4.42).

101 Witness statement of Jasmine Grew (1 June 2022, para 4.52).

102 Christian Neutrals in the Last Days <https://wol.jw.org/en/wol/d/r1/lp-e/2002804>.

103 Why Do Jehovah's Witnesses Maintain Political Neutrality? <https://www.jw.org/en/jehovahs-witnesses/faq/political-neutrality/>.

104 The December 1, 2005 Watchtower states, "The war of Armageddon will cleanse the earth of all corruption and wickedness and open the way for a righteous new system of things under the rule of God's Messianic Kingdom. (Isaiah 11:4, 5) Instead of being a frightening cataclysmic end, Armageddon will signal a happy beginning for righteous individuals, who will live forever on a paradise earth.—Psalm 37:29"

105 Witness statement of Jasmine Grew (1 June 2022, para 4.34).

106 Witness statement of Jasmine Grew (1 June 2022, paras 4.1–4.2).

107 Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society Pennsylvania, Keep yourself in God's Love (2016, pages 60–67).



80. One witness said that they "believed that Armageddon was going to happen shortly, and [they] would die along with humans apart from faithful JWs."<sup>108</sup> Ms Grew said that she felt "the fear of being destroyed in Armageddon ensures people remain faithful to the religion".<sup>109</sup> An anonymous witness said:

***"I was taught that if I did not uphold the beliefs of the JW Church and adhere to its practices, I would almost certainly die at Armageddon ... I was taught that the world was ending and that if I upheld the tenets of the JW religion, then I would not be likely to die but would live forever, however this was not guaranteed either. Essentially I was indoctrinated from an early age ... based on fear and coercion."***<sup>110</sup>

81. Debbie Oakley told the Inquiry that members were encouraged not only to report their own sins to Elders, but also the sins of other members. Explaining that: "Even at primary school age, you are expected to report on other JWs. And it's better to tell on others, because you get into worse trouble if you don't tell in the first place."<sup>111</sup> Members were sometimes disciplined for things that would be considered normal for people of their age. For example, Elise Neame was disciplined for having a boyfriend at 17 years old and for "partying and drinking a little".<sup>112</sup>

82. Witnesses described education and future employment options as limited, with a general disdain for higher education within the faith.<sup>113</sup> An anonymous witness described how he left school at the age of 14. He was a bright student, but he was strongly discouraged from continuing his education due to the church needing him to do its work.<sup>114</sup>

83. Witnesses told the Inquiry they were not allowed to pursue further education.<sup>115</sup> Ms Oakley said:

***"For JWs, secular education is dangerous because it makes you think. University education is even more dangerous from the elders' point of view. JWs consider that jobs and education get in the way of JW meetings and other JW activities."***<sup>116</sup>

108 Written account of a survivor who wishes to remain anonymous (28 March 2021, page 12).

109 Witness statement of Jasmine Grew (1 June 2022, para 4.34).

110 Witness statement of Mr UF (14 May 2023, page 2).

111 Witness statement of Deborah Oakley (31 May 2022, para 4.13).

112 Witness statement of Elise Neame (11 July 2022, para 6).

113 Witness statement of Edward Narayan (5 September 2022, page 10); Private session transcript of a survivor who wishes to remain anonymous (17 May 2022, pages 7–8).

114 Witness statement of Mr UF (14 May 2023, page 5).

115 Written account of a survivor who wishes to remain anonymous (28 March 2021, page 13); Witness statement of Deborah Oakley (31 May 2022, page 5); Notes accompanying private session of a survivor who wishes to remain anonymous (1 October 2020, page 5).

116 Witness statement of Deborah Oakley (31 May 2022, page 5).

84. Ms Oakley also explained how Jehovah's Witnesses had limited access to information, that she wasn't allowed to use the library and only had old encyclopaedias, and that all the other reading material was "JWs' publications".<sup>117</sup> She said she was only allowed to watch Sunday Disney movies on TV, and not the programmes that her classmates watched.<sup>118</sup>
85. Jasmine Grew said that Elders "strongly advise against reading Internet content" and told members that they were "to avoid the dishonest content of the news".<sup>119</sup>
86. The faith sometimes gave Bible-based advice on personal decisions such as relationships and marriage. Former member, Ms IU told the Inquiry how in the faith, dating was only allowable for those on a path to marriage and then it must be chaste, chaperoned, and heterosexual.<sup>120</sup> She explained that engagements were to be short, marriages were at a young age, and the faith did not condone separation or divorce.<sup>121</sup> Ms IU explained how these beliefs, in addition to the prohibitions on associating with anyone outside the faith, took away further opportunities she could have had for support and left her feeling isolated.<sup>122</sup>
87. The faith did not require tithing, but former Elder Robert (Bob) Ker said that he "poured a lot of my physical and monetary resources into the Jehovah's Witnesses."<sup>123</sup>

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117 Witness statement of Deborah Oakley (31 May 2022, page 5).

118 Witness statement of Deborah Oakley (31 May 2022, page 5).

119 Witness statement of Jasmine Grew (1 June 2022, para 4.12).

120 Witness statement of Ms IU (16 October 2022, para 4.2.8).

121 Witness statement of Ms IU (16 October 2022, para 4.2.8).

122 Witness statement of Ms IU (16 October 2022, para 4.2.8).

123 Witness statement of Robert Ker (6 April 2023, para 11).

88. At the Inquiry's Takatāpui Rainbow wānanga, one witness explained their experience of the faith's approach to healthcare:

*"Jehovah's Witnesses have a strict doctrine of not allowing blood transfusions, even if not accepting it would result in death. This also applies to very young children. When I was one year old I had to have a kidney surgery to save my life. I know my parents were prepared to let me die rather than let Doctors give me blood should the need arise. When I was 18 and was mentally ill and couldn't move out of home, my parents with the support of church elders and wider church community coerced me into signing an advance medical healthcare directive stating that I would not accept a blood transfusion even if it was to save my life. I didn't want to sign this. When discussing it with my parents I was in tears. They still made me sign it and they got two witnesses from the church to act as witnesses to say that I had signed it without duress or coercion. They tried to make me carry it around all the time, so that if I had an accident it would be found. I destroyed it as soon as I could. I did not feel I had a choice in signing the document: I felt that if I disobeyed, I would be made homeless and at the time I did not feel that I had the means to survive on my own."<sup>124</sup>*

89. Another witness who spoke at the Takatāpui Rainbow wānanga, described the impact of his sexuality on his whānau:

*"One of the Elders ... told my Mum 'I think your son has the demon of homosexuality and needs to be exorcised' – so it was instilled in me from very young that it was a disease that required treatment – but you believe it, right, cause you're a child – you say 'OK what do I need to do?' They did all these things, not speaking in tongues, but some kind of ritual ... but I still liked boys after that. Eventually my Mum disassociated from the church in support for her queer son. That was a very courageous step for my Mum because overnight she lost all her friends and whānau ... and I saw that grief and loss."<sup>125</sup>*

90. Debbie Oakley said: "There is a lot of fear and obligational guilt – you're never doing enough. Jehovah is always watching you, he knows what is in your heart, what is in your mind."<sup>126</sup> She said that members expected Armageddon to arrive imminently and that because of that, nothing except Jehovah's Witnesses meetings was considered important.<sup>127</sup>

<sup>124</sup> Transcript of Takatāpui Rainbow wānanga (23 May 2023, page 3).

<sup>125</sup> Transcript of Takatāpui Rainbow wānanga (23 May 2023, pages 5–6).

<sup>126</sup> Witness statement of Deborah Oakley (31 May 2022, page 7).

<sup>127</sup> Witness statement of Deborah Oakley (31 May 2022, page 7).

91. The level of influence the faith exercised over members in the Inquiry's view increased the risk of abuse in care during the Inquiry period. Power imbalance and status, together with elevated levels of influence, created a greater risk that abusers could misuse their power to perpetrate abuse and silence those they abused.

### **Barriers to the disclosure of abuse**

92. The power imbalances and high levels of influence described above were among the barriers to the disclosure of abuse during the Inquiry period. Further barriers to disclosure included inflexible disclosure processes, fear of exclusion or shunning, and the relative disconnection from non-Jehovah's Witnesses that many experienced. These barriers are further discussed below.

### **The position of females within the faith and rigid disclosure processes**

93. There are no women Elders or ministerial servants in the Jehovah's Witnesses. One article commenting on the Australian Child Sexual Abuse Royal Commission case study on the Catholic Church highlighted how the roles and the absolute authority of male clergy within the Catholic Church contributed to abuse occurring and the failure to respond to it.<sup>128</sup> An obvious analogy exists with the Jehovah's Witnesses: with only men as Elders, it was less likely that women could feel able to disclose to an Elder.<sup>129</sup>
94. Patriarchal leadership structures result in what has been described (in relation to the Catholic Church) as "unchecked, divinely sanctioned patriarchal power".<sup>130</sup> One academic has found patriarchal hierarchies within faith-based institutions contribute to a culture where disclosing abuse is discouraged, and victims are unsupported.<sup>131</sup>
95. A former female member of the Jehovah's Witnesses told the Inquiry:
- "The effect of being brought up as a JW was that as a young adult and older, I believed I was secondary to men and boys and that I had to do what they said, especially older men, especially white men. I believed I was not good for anything and I was not a good JW!"<sup>132</sup>*

128 McPhillips, K, "Soul Murder": Investigating Spiritual Trauma at the Royal Commission", *Journal of Australian Studies*, (2018) 42(2) (pages 235–236); Doyle, T, Sipe, A and Wall, P, "Sex, Priests and secret codes: The Catholic Church's 2000-year paper trail of sexual abuse" (Los Angeles: Volt Press, 2006) as cited in Cullington, E, "Evil, Sin, or Doubt?: The Dramas of Clerical Child Abuse", *Theatre Journal* (2010) 62(2) (page 245).

129 The United Kingdom Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse (IICSA), *Child protection in religious organisations and settings Investigation report* (2021, page 30).

130 Ross, S. A, "Feminist Theology and the Clergy Sexual Abuse Crisis", *Theological Studies*(2019) 80(3) (page 632).

131 Irenyi, M., Bromfield, L., Beyer, L., & Higgins, D. (2006). *Child maltreatment in organisations: Risk factors and strategies for prevention* (Vol. 25). Melbourne, Australia: Australian Institute of Family Studies (page 14).

132 Written account of a survivor who wishes to remain anonymous (28 March 2021, page 12).

96. Another former member described the impact of all positions of authority being held by men:

*“The leadership structure in the JW church does not lend itself to the identification or elimination of abuse. In particular the church does not encourage or reward education so most of those in positions of authority have only a basic school education and no particular skills in detecting or discouraging abuse ... Further all of the positions of authority ... are held by men ... Many female survivors of sexual abuse will feel too uncomfortable to disclose the fact of their abuse to a man and therefore this leadership structure operates as a further form of suppression.”<sup>133</sup>*

97. Witnesses described being unable to say no to sex because of the teaching that women are inferior to men and cannot speak back to them.<sup>134</sup> One former member said that sexual abuse was not a topic spoken of in the Jehovah’s Witnesses and that survivors were isolated by the feeling there were no other victims and so it must be their fault.<sup>135</sup> They described not learning that there were other survivors of sexual abuse in the Jehovah’s Witnesses until after they left.<sup>136</sup> The Inquiry heard evidence of female survivors of abuse being led to believe that the sexual abuse was their fault, or that they were complicit in it.<sup>137</sup>

98. Jasmine Grew said, “They put the blame on me. They said I was wearing seductive clothing. I was aged from five to eight years old at the time [he] was sexually abusing me.”<sup>138</sup> Another witness, Naomi Burnett, said:

*“Although he admitted to the abuse, he tried to shift the blame onto myself, saying that I looked and acted older than I was. He suggested that I might have liked what he had done to me. There could not have been anything that I put out there as a 10 year old girl, to sexually entice him, but, in the judicial meeting, he made me feel like I had asked for it.”<sup>139</sup>*

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133 Witness statement of Ms IU (16 October 2022, para 4.2.11).

134 Notes accompanying private session of a survivor who wishes to remain anonymous (1 October 2020, page 6); Written account of a survivor who wishes to remain anonymous (28 March 2021, page 12).

135 Witness statement of Ms IU (16 October 2022, para 4.2.9.4).

136 Witness statement of Ms IU (16 October 2022, para 4.2.9.4).

137 Witness statements of Naomi Burnett (26 April 2022, page 7) and Sina Dubbelman (8 September 2022, para 9.1).

138 Witness statement of Jasmine Grew (1 June 2022, paras 6.12–6.13).

139 Witness statement of Naomi Burnett (26 April 2022, paras 8.8–8.9).

99. Documents the faith provided to the Inquiry show the types of attitudes towards female victims in situations of sexual abuse. For example, documents refer to 14 and 15 year old girls developing an “infatuation” with an abuser.<sup>140</sup> 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”.<sup>141</sup>
100. All decision-making in a congregation was by Elders and so women could not be part of any process that would require a decision to be made. Overseas inquiries have found that female and male abuse survivors will not always be comfortable disclosing abuse or speaking with a male about abuse.<sup>142</sup> Failure to accommodate a survivor’s preference can further traumatise them or prevent disclosure.<sup>143</sup>
101. The Inquiry’s redress report He Purapura Ora, he Māra Tipu: From Redress to Puretumu Torowhānui found that disclosure processes need to be flexible, trauma-informed and survivor focused which requires flexibility about how victims of sexual abuse disclose abuse, and to whom.<sup>144</sup> That was not the case for the processes in the Jehovah’s Witnesses during the Inquiry period, which in the Inquiry’s view contributed to the risk of abuse in care.

### **Fear of exclusion practices (shunning)**

102. As noted earlier in this report, the fear of being shunned was a significant factor for witnesses during the Inquiry period. Jasmine Grew said:

*“When you are a Jehovah’s Witness you only know the ways of the Witnesses. They are your friends and family. A lot of people within the religion work for each other ... To break away, and start a life outside the religion, after being under its control, is extremely difficult ... This fear prevents people from leaving the Jehovah’s Witnesses.”<sup>145</sup>*

<sup>140</sup> Christian Congregation of Jehovah’s Witnesses (Australasia), Response to Royal Commission of Inquiry into Abuse in Care Notice to Produce 1 (1 December 2021, Annexure - D. Records, Summary, page 7); Christian Congregation of Jehovah’s Witnesses (Australasia), Response to Royal Commission of Inquiry into Abuse in Care Notice to Produce 1 (1 December 2021, Annexure - B. Records, Summary, page 2).

<sup>141</sup> Christian Congregation of Jehovah’s Witnesses (Australasia), Response to Royal Commission of Inquiry into Abuse in Care Notice to Produce 1 (1 December 2021, Annexure - D. Records, Summary, page 98).

<sup>142</sup> Australian Child Sexual Abuse Royal Commission into Institutional responses to Child Sexual Abuse, Report of Case study no 29 (Commonwealth of Australia, October 2016, page 67); The United Kingdom Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse (IICSA), Child protection in religious organisations and settings Investigation report (September 2021, pages 29–30).

<sup>143</sup> Australian Child Sexual Abuse Royal Commission into Institutional responses to Child Sexual Abuse, Report of Case study no 29 (Commonwealth of Australia, 2016, page 67).

<sup>144</sup> Royal Commission of Inquiry into Abuse in Care, He Purapura Ora, he Māra Tipu: From Redress to Puretumu Torowhānui, Volume 1 (2021, page 68); The United Kingdom Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse (IICSA), Child protection in religious organisations and settings Investigation report (2021, page 112).

<sup>145</sup> Witness statement of Jasmine Grew (1 June 2022, page 10).



103. Elise Neame described the fear of being disfellowshipped and shunned as follows:

*"I wanted to avoid being disfellowshipped because I knew the serious repercussions, which would include losing my family. This was a fear that stayed with me for a long time ... [The Jehovah's Witnesses] torture members with fear of the end of the world and the fear of what will happen if you break their rules – the fear of being disfellowshipped (excommunicated) and losing family and friends."*<sup>146</sup>

104. At the Inquiry's Takatāpui Rainbow wānanga, a witness described having to decide whether to stay and hide his sexuality or to come out and be shunned:

*"For a long time I was completely feeling alone. If I came out I would be having to choose between my family and my life – being able to continue to live. Or being able to live but not have family support."*<sup>147</sup>

105. The fear of shunning would inevitably have been felt strongly by Māori because of the importance of connections to whānau, hapū and iwi, and similarly for Pacific Peoples and other minorities with strong ties to family and their broader communities.

106. The fear of shunning was a barrier to the disclosure of abuse because any such disclosure risked the loss of connection to family, friends and community. Ms SC, who was sexually abused in the care of the faith, was unable to disclose her identity publicly for this reason. She said, "my identity can never be known – I would lose everything". She explained that others shared the same fear:

*"I belong to a few survivor groups within [Jehovah's Witnesses] and I know there are just so many of us out there who have similar experiences. I would say we sit on the periphery because the threat of loss is so great ... there's a lot of people that sit in the same boat and the people that I've talked with and there are a lot of them who still see their abusers daily. They go to a meeting on a Sunday and their abuser is also there."*<sup>148</sup>

107. Witnesses explained the deep impact of shunning, which inevitably fed into the fear that prevented the disclosure of abuse. Former Elder Shayne Mechen talked about the impact leaving the Jehovah's Witnesses had on young people:

*"When young people are disfellowshipped or shunned, their whole support system is taken away ... Some [Jehovah's Witness] leavers are so impacted by being separated from everything they know that they become suicidal."*<sup>149</sup>

<sup>146</sup> Witness statement of Elise Neame (11 July 2022, paras 8.1 and 14.3).

<sup>147</sup> Transcript of Takatāpui Rainbow wānanga (23 May 2023, page 4).

<sup>148</sup> Witness statement of Ms SC (1 March 2024, page 6).

<sup>149</sup> Witness statement of Shayne Mechen (8 September 2022, page 16).

108. Elise Neame explained that through her research and finding a Facebook group of former Jehovah's Witnesses, she had learned of many people who had taken their lives because of Jehovah's Witnesses' families shunning them after they had been disfellowshipped.<sup>150</sup> She also described her own experience of the impacts of leaving the faith and being shunned as follows:

*"I would be at the supermarket and see my auntie or a long-time childhood friend and they would see me, only to completely ignore me or walk the other way. I ... saw my mother doing street preaching and she looked the other way. Family would have gatherings, wedding events, and celebrations, and completely shun me. I would find out about new additions to the family through others. ...I went four years without seeing or speaking to my mother or any of my [Jehovah's Witness] family. I spent four years in a deep depression; I was suicidal, and completely lost. I have seen many therapists and counsellors, and no one can ever understand the terrible damage that this religion's shunning of people causes".*

*"I now have nothing to lose. There is nothing more that the Jehovah's Witnesses can take away from me. This religion has destroyed my life and if I had not been a stronger person, I would have taken my own life a long time ago. I often daydream of what it is like to be part of a normal family, what it is like to have a support system."<sup>151</sup>*

109. Another witness described the impact of being shunned by their whānau, feeling as if their world crumbled, losing everybody including their hero, and it destroying them.<sup>152</sup> The witness also talked about her own children craving to see their grandparents, and the difficulty of them not being able to do so.<sup>153</sup>
110. The Royal Commission into Institutional Responses into Child Sexual Abuse in Australia found that the Jehovah's Witnesses' practice of shunning members who disassociate from the organisation had the very real potential of putting an abuse survivor in the untenable position of having to choose between the retraumatisation of having to share a community with their abuser, or losing that community altogether.<sup>154</sup>
111. In short, the Inquiry has no doubt that the fear of being shunned was a barrier to the disclosure of abuse in care and increased the risk of abuse occurring in the care of the faith during the relevant period.

<sup>150</sup> Witness statement of Elise Neame (11 July 2022, para 9.5).

<sup>151</sup> Witness statement of Elise Neame (11 July 2022, paras 9.13, 9.15 and 13.5–13.7).

<sup>152</sup> Private session transcript of a survivor who wishes to remain anonymous (29 September 2022, pages 7–8).

<sup>153</sup> Private session transcript of a survivor who wishes to remain anonymous (29 September 2022, page 13).

<sup>154</sup> Australian Child Sexual Abuse Royal Commission into Institutional responses to Child Sexual Abuse, Report of Case study no 29. (Commonwealth of Australia, 2016, page 71).

## **Relative disconnection from people outside the faith and from secular authorities**

112. The relative insularity of the Jehovah's Witnesses and their distrust of government agencies meant that issues were commonly dealt with internally. Naomi Burnett told the Inquiry that "[m]embers are discouraged from reporting matters to the Police" and "elders within the faith hold their own processes for dealing with issues that arise". She also explained how the faith views things differently from the secular world. For example, "[t]hey consider child abuse within the faith as a 'sin' rather than a 'crime' and they have a 'two witness' rule when it comes to establishing guilt".<sup>155</sup> Elise Neame echoed this point, noting that "[c]rimes like child abuse are not reported to Police, instead, those affected must report such matters to the church elders".<sup>156</sup> Ms Neame also explained how Jehovah's Witness members could not look into issues on their own accord:

*"Under no circumstances are JW members allowed to conduct online research. Jehovah's Witnesses forbid members from accessing information other than what is published on their own website. They misrepresent that anything else on the internet is a lie, and if members are caught researching you are labelled an apostate".<sup>157</sup>*

113. An anonymous witness described his childhood as "characterised by social isolation and religious fear."<sup>158</sup> Some former members said being in the Jehovah's Witnesses taught them to distrust government agencies, including police.<sup>159</sup> Debbie Oakley said, "We were taught that those outside our JW religion were bad people, including the government."<sup>160</sup>

114. Jehovah's Witnesses were taught not to associate with "worldly" people (people outside the faith),<sup>161</sup> and that those people were part of "Satan's world".<sup>162</sup> Former members described how they did not often see their wider family who were outside the faith.<sup>163</sup> They said that while the faith did not completely cut off all contact with people outside the faith, they were not allowed to have friends or relationships outside the Jehovah's Witnesses,<sup>164</sup> and were "discouraged from forming any bonds with non-faithful."<sup>165</sup>

<sup>155</sup> Witness statement of Naomi Burnett (26 April 2022, para 4.1).

<sup>156</sup> Witness statement of Elise Neame (11 July 2022, para 11.1).

<sup>157</sup> Witness statement of Elise Neame (11 July 2022, para 14.2).

<sup>158</sup> Witness statement of Mr UF (14 May 2023, page 3).

<sup>159</sup> Witness statements of Jasmine Grew (1 June 2022, para 4.77) and Naomi Burnett (26 April 2022, para 4.7).

<sup>160</sup> Witness statement of Deborah Oakley (31 May 2022, page 5).

<sup>161</sup> Witness statements of Elise Neame (11 July 2022, para 11.1) and Sina Dubbelman (8 September 2022, para 9.9).

<sup>162</sup> Witness statement of Deborah Oakley (31 May 2022, page 7).

<sup>163</sup> Written account of a survivor who wishes to remain anonymous (28 March 2021, page 9).

<sup>164</sup> Witness statements of Deborah Oakley (31 May 2022, page 5) and Naomi Burnett (26 April 2022, page 3).

<sup>165</sup> Witness statement of Naomi Burnett (26 April 2022, para 4.4).

115. Elise Neame told the Inquiry "I felt in isolation as a child, and even though I have now left the religion, I still feel in isolation as an adult. The feeling of being an outcast and different to others never leaves you."<sup>166</sup>
116. Jasmine Grew said she was not allowed to go to the homes of her school friends after school or have sleepovers.<sup>167</sup> Ms Grew said her mother was very social, but as a Jehovah's Witness, "the only thing she could do to socialise was to host potluck dinners and fancy-dress parties ... The guests had to be Witnesses".<sup>168</sup> Debbie Oakley said:
- "As a JW child, I recognised that life was different. We were not allowed to play with outsiders or visit their homes. I thought other kids were very lucky. Other parents were so nice, yet they were supposed to be evil ... Our household was very strict. We were questioned when we got home about whether we'd played at school with any non-JW kids."*<sup>169</sup>
117. An anonymous witness told the Inquiry:
- "I believed all 'Worldly' people were wicked, and the only 'good' people were the JWs and the organisation. (I was alienated from both sets of people in every degree once I was disfellowshipped.) I believed Armageddon was going to happen shortly and I would die along with all humans, apart from faithful JWs."*<sup>170</sup>
118. Similarly, former Australian Elder, Shane McNeil who was raised as a Jehovah's Witness from the early 1980s said Jehovah's Witnesses believed the entire non-Jehovah's Witness world was under the Devil's control, and anything outside the organisation was influenced by the Devil. "Ultimately, the Devil wants Jehovah's Witnesses to leave the 'Truth' and die at Armageddon".<sup>171</sup> He said this made it difficult to interact with the world in a relaxed and trusting way, that "we were always on guard that Satan might be trying to weaken our faith somehow through the worldly people we interacted with".<sup>172</sup>
119. The evidence received by the Inquiry is consistent with a study from the United Kingdom, which found that "at an early stage of an individual's involvement with the community, the person is encouraged to live separate from mainstream society, with minimal interaction from outsiders, including family members who are not Jehovah's Witnesses."<sup>173</sup>

<sup>166</sup> Witness statement of Elise Neame (11 July 2022, para 4.12).

<sup>167</sup> Witness statement of Jasmine Grew (1 June 2022, para 4.48).

<sup>168</sup> Witness statement of Jasmine Grew (1 June 2022, para 4.57).

<sup>169</sup> Witness statement of Deborah Oakley (31 May 2022, page 5).

<sup>170</sup> Written account of a survivor who wishes to remain anonymous (28 March 2021, page 12).

<sup>171</sup> Witness statement of Shane McNeil, Australia (20 June 2023, para 19).

<sup>172</sup> Witness statement of Shane McNeil, Australia (20 June 2023, para 19).

<sup>173</sup> Grendele, W., Flax, M., Bapir-Tardy, S., Shunning from the Jehovah's Witness Community: Is It Legal? *Journal of Law and Religion* (2023), 38: 2 (Cambridge University Press, page 302).

120. The faith provided statements from current members to show that many current members live their lives fully integrated with society, and that different experiences are a reflection of individual parenting choices.<sup>174</sup>
121. The Inquiry accepts that Jehovah's Witnesses did not live fully isolated lives. But evidence from former members indicates there was for some a degree of disconnection or insularity from mainstream society. This is supported by the faith's published guidance from 1971 which stated: "Do not be misled. Bad associations spoil useful habits."<sup>175</sup>
122. Such relative disconnection from those outside the faith or congregation inevitably increased the barriers to the disclosure of abuse in care. It limited the potential range of people to whom abuse could be reported. Reporting to an Elder in the Church would not have been either easy or appropriate for all.

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<sup>174</sup> Christian Congregation of Jehovah's Witnesses (Australasia) Submissions (24 November 2023, page 33) .

<sup>175</sup> Watchtower Tract and Bible Society Pennsylvania, The Watchtower, "Awake! Bad Associations Spoil Useful Habits" (8 March 1971, pages 27–28).

## **Vetting, recruitment and training**

123. This is no evidence of any secular vetting before Jehovah's Witness leaders or Elders were appointed during the Inquiry period. Instead, Elders were appointed based on scriptural qualifications "inspired by the Holy Spirit".<sup>176</sup>
124. There was also no secular training on child safety, safeguarding or abuse prevention within the faith. The faith told the Inquiry that Elders received training in child safety that was commensurate with their role as spiritual shepherds. This is a one-day course known as the Kingdom Ministry School for Elders, which the faith says includes reminders of current policies on a range of issues, including child safeguarding. This school has been operating since 1959.<sup>177</sup> Late in the Inquiry period, a section of this school was specifically dedicated to discussing a 1997 Watchtower article on Child Sexual Abuse entitled: "Let Us Abhor what is wicked."<sup>178</sup> Similarly, the faith says that all Circuit Overseers also attended a school that year discussing the same article. During 1998 to 1999 the Circuit Overseers also met with all elders in their respective congregations to review child protection policies including the need for children not to be asked to confront their abusers in order to form a judicial committee.<sup>179</sup>
125. Former Elder Shane McNeil, who was an Elder for three years, said of his experience in Australia: "I did not have any expertise in helping victims or investigating reports of abuse ... Elders have no formal training outside of the organisation and I feel they are not adequately qualified to investigate such matters". He went on to say he received minimal formal training on how to investigate allegations or interview victims, "I can assure you, elders are ill-prepared to handle such complex issues. I am horrified that I was part of a process that can cause more harm than good".<sup>180</sup>
126. Mr Mechen became an elder at 28 years-old in 1995. He was an Elder for 12 years and told the Inquiry:

***"There is no formally recognised training for elders in dealing appropriately with child sex abuse complaints, no psychology training or qualification requirement. The only training is in simple JW procedure. There is nothing on mental health, drug abuse or dealing with victims."***<sup>181</sup>

176 Christian Congregation of Jehovah's Witnesses (Australasia) Submissions (24 November 2023, para 90).

177 Christian Congregation of Jehovah's Witnesses (Australasia) Submission, (24 November 2023, para 153).

178 JW.org, Let Us Abhor What Is Wicked, The Watchtower Announcing Jehovah's Kingdom – 1997.

179 The outline of this meeting is available on the Australian Child Sexual Abuse Royal Commission's website <https://www.childabuseroyalcommission.gov.au/sites/default/files/EXH.029.020.0001.pdf>.

180 Witness statement of Shane McNeil, Australia (20 June 2023, paras 46–47).

181 Witness statement of Shayne Mechen (8 September 2022, page 7).

127. The faith submitted that “Elders are trained to provide spiritual comfort and pastoral support. Elders are not trained to be psychologists, therapists or counsellors and do not purport to offer such professional assistance.”<sup>182</sup> The faith submitted that its members are aware they can access mental health support services. One Elder told the Inquiry that he would ensure victims and their guardians know that it was okay to accept professional help, he said he would make sure to:

*“Let the victim and parents/guardians know it is alright to accept professional help. Recognise that our role as elders is a spiritual/congregational role. I certainly recognise the value of services in New Zealand such as the various help lines such as “Lifeline” and professionals such as medical doctors, psychiatrists, psychologists or therapists of their choice.”*<sup>183</sup>

128. Inadequate vetting and training increases the risk of people in care being exposed to abuse. Without proper vetting, the potential exists for high-risk individuals to be given positions of responsibility where they can care for children or young people. Without adequate training, those in positions of authority can fail to act to prevent abuse, or mishandle reports of alleged abuse. All these factors existed for the Jehovah’s Witnesses during the Inquiry period.

## **Alleged sexual abuse in the care of the Jehovah’s Witnesses in Aotearoa New Zealand**

129. The Inquiry received at least one allegation of sexual abuse against a child in the care of the Jehovah’s Witnesses during the Inquiry period, a relatively low level of alleged abuse that must be viewed in the context of the barriers to disclosure described above.

130. In the early 1980s when Ms SC was 15 years old, “she was not behaving well” due to being abused by her brother and his friends. In response to this, Ms SC said that “the Elders considered I needed to be built up spiritually by attending tutoring or Bible study”. Ms SC stated that she felt like she didn’t have a choice but to attend:

*“So I think [I] was really under the care and control of the Jehovah’s Witnesses as I believed I had to do what I was told by the Elders.”*<sup>184</sup>

131. Ms SC did regular Bible studies in an Elder’s home. These sessions were conducted by the Elder’s wife. Ms SC said she would “often be at their place after school or to go on outings”.<sup>185</sup> As well as the one-on-one Bible studies, she would join the Elder’s family regularly for their family Bible study, for witnessing practice and for witnessing.<sup>186</sup>

<sup>182</sup> Christian Congregation of Jehovah’s Witnesses (Australasia) Submissions (24 November 2023, para 145).

<sup>183</sup> Witness statement of Victor Walker (23 November 2023, para 40).

<sup>184</sup> Witness statement of Ms SC (1 March 2024, page 4).

<sup>185</sup> Witness statement of Ms SC (1 March 2024, page 4).

<sup>186</sup> Witness statement of Ms SC (1 March 2024, page 4).

132. Ms SC's mother trusted this Elder because of the authority the faith conferred on him. Speaking of her abuse by the Elder, Ms SC said:
- "The Elder would drive me home [after Bible studies in their home] but instead of going home, he took me to another area nearby where there were no houses or anything at that time. This was when the abuse took place. It happened many times over a period of 4-5 months. At first he touched my genitals, then he digitally penetrated me, then he had full sexual intercourse with me."<sup>187</sup>*
133. The faith's position is that it has never assumed responsibility for the care of children in their homes nor condoned or had any policy to support an Elder being alone in a child's home. Consistent with this, the faith submitted that this example was not evidence of abuse in the care of the faith, and that the faith had not assumed responsibility for Ms SC when the abuse occurred.
134. However, the Inquiry finds that Ms SC was in the care of the faith at the time of the abuse. The faith conferred power and authority on the Elder. He assumed responsibility for Ms SC through an informal pastoral care relationship, related to the faith's work, namely Bible studies and caring for 'fatherless children' within the congregation. The faith's assumption of responsibility for Ms SC flowed from it conferring authority and trusted status on the Elder, and the actions of the Elder in taking Ms SC into his care, unsupervised.
135. 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.<sup>188</sup> One was abused by a man that their family trusted,<sup>189</sup> another witnessed his brother being sexually abused by a man that his family were friends with because they were also Jehovah's Witnesses.<sup>190</sup>
136. The faith supplied information relating to sexual abuse by four Elders:
- i. an allegation that an Elder took advantage of his position as an elder to abuse and rape a girl aged between 8 and 12 years old
  - ii. an Elder developing an "inappropriate relationship" with a 15 year old girl
  - iii. an Elder engaging in sexual activity with a 15 year old girl
  - iv. an Elder removed from office for "inappropriate behaviour involving a minor".
137. The records supplied were limited and it is not possible to be certain whether the children were abused in the care of the faith. The faith maintains that none of these children were in its care, and the evidence does not permit any clear conclusions.

<sup>187</sup> Witness statement of Ms SC (1 March 2024, page 4).

<sup>188</sup> Witness statement of Naomi Burnett (26 April 2022, pages 6–7).

<sup>189</sup> Witness statement of Sina Dubbelman (8 September 2022, paras 5.1–5.19).

<sup>190</sup> Witness statement of Mr UF (14 May 2023, page 3).



138. In summary, there is evidence of at least one case of sexual abuse in the care of the Jehovah's Witnesses during the Inquiry period. Because of barriers to disclosure and the faith's approach to record keeping, this is unlikely to reflect the number of people who suffered sexual abuse in the care of the faith during that period.

## **Other alleged abuse in the care of the Jehovah's Witnesses in Aotearoa New Zealand**

139. The Inquiry's Terms of Reference are not limited to sexual abuse.<sup>191</sup> Former members of the Jehovah's Witnesses also made allegations of psychological and emotional abuse during the Inquiry period, which they said they experienced when in the care of the faith while undergoing judicial investigation and committee processes.

140. Witnesses described their experience of judicial committees as emotionally and psychologically abusive in and of themselves, particularly after they had been sexually assaulted or abused. As a 12 year old, Jasmine Grew was questioned by three male elders after she disclosed sexual abuse:

*"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 ... I was honest, and I told them everything because I had to be honest. I was fearful of the consequences of Armageddon. The two words that come to me still now are humiliation and embarrassment ... [The elders] were very intimidating. They made no attempt to support or comfort me in this process."*<sup>192</sup>

<sup>191</sup> Royal Commission of Inquiry into historical abuse in State care and in the care of Faith-based institutions Order 2018, Terms of Reference, clause 17.1.

<sup>192</sup> Witness statement of Jasmine Grew (1 June 2022, page 12).

141. As described earlier, three Elders questioned 16 year old Debbie Oakley and her sister in a car, in the absence of her mother, about sexual abuse by her step-father. Ms Oakley described shaking at the time she disclosed the abuse.<sup>193</sup>
142. Elise Neame also described attending disciplinary meetings at around 17 years old with her mother, and three or four male Elders. Ms Neame told the Inquiry, "they asked me inappropriate personal questions and I found myself having to describe the sexual acts my boyfriend and I had been involved in." Ms Neame described being "grossly traumatised" by having to give intimate details.<sup>194</sup>
143. As set out above, the Inquiry found that the Jehovah's Witnesses assumed the responsibility for the care of children and young people interviewed by Elders during judicial investigations or committee processes without their parents present. There is credible evidence that the practice of questioning children or young people, particular those who were victims of sexual abuse, during such investigations and judicial committee processes was inappropriate and emotionally or psychologically abusive. The evidence showed the severe impact that such practices had on the individuals concerned.

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<sup>193</sup> Witness statement of Deborah Oakley (31 May 2022, para 6.7).

<sup>194</sup> Witness statement of Elise Neame (11 July 2022, paras 6.2 and 6.4).

# Chapter 5: Steps by the Jehovah's Witnesses to prevent and respond to the risk of abuse in care

## The Jehovah's Witnesses' policies, rules, standards and practices

144. During the Inquiry period, the Jehovah's Witnesses relied primarily on passages from the Bible in setting policies and procedures, including those for responding to child sexual abuse.
145. The faith told the Inquiry that, since the early 1980s, Jehovah's Witnesses have provided their congregations with scripturally based guidance (in the form of magazines, religious books, and videos) about protecting children from child sexual abuse.<sup>195</sup> From at least the 1990s, under the direction of the governing body, the branch office has periodically issued directives in the form of letters addressed to all bodies of Elders providing instruction on how to respond to allegations of child sexual abuse.<sup>196</sup>
146. From the 1980s to the 2000s, the Jehovah's Witnesses continued to develop a child protection policy, as set out in various issues of *The Watchtower* and in letters from the branch office of Jehovah's Witnesses, as well as in other publications such as the magazine *Awake!* and the book *The Secret of Family Happiness*.<sup>197</sup>
147. Items in the *Awake!* magazine referred to what the faith described as "combatting child sexual abuse".<sup>198</sup> For example, a 1993 issue of *Awake!* had a section "Protect your Children!":
- "Your Child is in Danger: The molestation of children is an ugly reality ... it affects more of us than cancer!"***<sup>199</sup>
148. That issue of *Awake!* went on to tell parents they should teach their children to know that sometimes adults do bad things, and that not even a child has to obey anyone, as well as teaching children to name body parts that are private.

195 Christian Congregation of Jehovah's Witnesses (Australasia), Response to Royal Commission of Inquiry into Abuse in Care Notice to Produce 1 (1 December 2021, Annexure – G. Summary of beliefs and practices, page 6).

196 Australian Child Sexual Abuse Royal Commission into Institutional responses to Child Sexual Abuse, Report of Case study no 29 (Commonwealth of Australia, 2016, page 21).

197 Christian Congregation of Jehovah's Witnesses (Australasia), Response to Royal Commission of Inquiry into Abuse in Care Notice to Produce 1 (1 December 2021, Annexure – G. Summary of beliefs and practices, page 9).

198 Christian Congregation of Jehovah's Witnesses (Australasia), Response to Royal Commission of Inquiry into Abuse in Care Notice to Produce 1 (1 December 2021, Annexure – L. Extracts of publications of Jehovah's Witnesses on combatting child sexual abuse (1981-2019), specifically, *Awake!* 8 February 1981, *Awake!* 22 June 1982, *Awake!* 22 January 1985, *Awake!* 22 December 1986, *Awake!* 8 October 1991, *Awake!* 8 March 1993, *Awake!* 8 October 1993 and *Awake!* 8 April 1997).

199 Christian Congregation of Jehovah's Witnesses (Australasia), Response to Royal Commission of Inquiry into Abuse in Care Notice to Produce 1 (1 December 2021, Annexure – L. Extracts of publications of Jehovah's Witnesses on combatting child sexual abuse (1981-2019, page 4), specifically *Awake!* 8 October 1993).

149. In a later edition of *Shepherd the Flock of God* handbook,<sup>200</sup> the faith instructed Elders that child sexual abuse was captured by one or more of the following scriptural sins:
- > 'porneia', which includes sexual intercourse, oral or anal sex, 'immoral use of the genitals whether in a natural or perverted way, with lewd intent',
  - > 'brazen or loose conduct', which is conduct that reflects 'an attitude that betrays disrespect, disregard, or even contempt for divine standards, laws and authority'.<sup>201</sup>
150. The previous handbook *Pay Attention to yourselves* and *All the Flock* (1991), also referred to the lesser scriptural offence of 'uncleanness', which included 'an intentional momentary touching of sexual parts or caressing of breasts'.<sup>202</sup>
151. The policies, rules, and standards that were relevant to child sexual abuse during the Inquiry period were from various separate directives from the governing body, across many different issues of various Jehovah's Witness publications, published at intervals over the Inquiry period, and all based primarily on passages from scripture or the Bible.

## **Processes available to raise concerns or make complaints about abuse in care**

152. In this Inquiry's redress report, *He Purapura Ora, he Māra Tipu: From Redress to Puretumu Torowhānui*, the Inquiry found many survivors faced significant barriers to disclosing abuse in faith-based care.<sup>203</sup> Historically, faith-based institutions have not done enough to reduce or resolve these barriers.<sup>204</sup> The barriers to disclosure within the Jehovah's Witnesses and the cause of these are detailed above.
153. Inadequate disclosure processes can prevent abuse being disclosed and allow it to continue. It increases the risk of non-disclosure if children and young people are disempowered or do not feel able or safe to disclose harm. This prevents meaningful intervention and protection measures and can contribute to a situation of impunity for abusers.
154. As discussed above, in the Jehovah's Witnesses faith specific factors that may have prevented or inhibited disclosures of abuse included the fearful environment described by former members, the belief they were under the faith's control, the fear of shunning and the relative disconnection of Jehovah's Witness members from secular authorities.

200 Australian Child Sexual Abuse Royal Commission into Institutional responses to Child Sexual Abuse, Report of Case study no 29 (Commonwealth of Australia, 2016, page 23); Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania, "Shepherd the Flock of God" (April 2010), Chapter 5 Determining whether a Judicial committee should be formed (pages 58) and Chapter 14 Child Abuse.

201 Australian Child Sexual Abuse Royal Commission into Institutional responses to Child Sexual Abuse, Report of Case study no 29 (Commonwealth of Australia, 2016, page 23); Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania, "Shepherd the Flock of God" (2010), Chapter 5 Determining whether a Judicial committee should be formed (page 60).

202 Pay Attention to Yourselves and All the Flock 1991 as cited in Australian Child Sexual Abuse Royal Commission into Institutional responses to Child Sexual Abuse, Report of Case study no 29 (Commonwealth of Australia, 2016, page 23).

203 Royal Commission of Inquiry into Abuse in Care, He Purapura Ora, he Māra Tipu: From Redress to Puretumu Volume 1 (2021, page 166)

204 Royal Commission of Inquiry into Abuse in Care, He Purapura Ora, he Māra Tipu: From Redress to Puretumu Torowhānui, Volume 1 (2021, page 166).

## Processes for handling and responding to concerns or complaints and their effectiveness

155. During the Inquiry period, disclosures of child sexual abuse, or any other kind of “wrongdoing” within the Jehovah’s Witnesses, were required to be made to the Elders. Once an allegation of child sexual abuse was made to Elders, the organisation would open a ‘spiritual investigation’. Investigating Elders would take further action, including establishing a judicial committee if the truth of an allegation was established according to the scriptural standards of proof.<sup>205</sup>
156. Former members found the investigation and judicial committee process to be traumatising. Witnesses told the Inquiry that at the investigative meetings they were required to describe, in detail, the sexual abuse they had experienced to a group of Elders, all male, some with their abuser present at that meeting but no support person or parent.<sup>206</sup> They were fearful and intimidated by this practice.<sup>207</sup> These meetings were often arranged quickly, with no warning to the child or young person.
157. Even when the abuser admitted to the abuse, the witness was required to detail the abuse in front of several men, including the abuser. Naomi Burnett said:
- “I was petrified. Having to talk in front of the male elders, about what my uncle had done to me, as a child, and being on my own and fearing that I was going to be in trouble. All these men were present and there was no one supporting me. I was made to feel like I had done something wrong... There were seven chairs in a circle. Two Elders, my father and I...on one side; and two elders from my uncle’s congregation and him – on the other side. In this judicial process, the allegations were put to my uncle, and he admitted to the offending, so a second witness was not required ... I was made to share and describe, in detail, the abuse in front of these men, including my abuser ... I had no support person, my mother was not allowed in, and I was absolutely petrified throughout the meeting.”<sup>208</sup>*

### The two-witness rule

158. During the Inquiry period, the Jehovah’s Witnesses had a rule that before a judicial committee could be formed, there must be “sufficient evidence” to establish the wrongdoing, and that sufficient evidence meant a confession, or two or more eyewitnesses to either the same incident of wrongdoing or separate incidents of the same kind of wrongdoing.<sup>209</sup>

205 Australian Child Sexual Abuse Royal Commission into Institutional responses to Child Sexual Abuse, Report of Case study no 29 (Commonwealth of Australia, 2016, page 10).

206 Witness statements of Jasmine Grew (1 June 2022, page 12) and Sina Dubbelman (8 September 2022, paras 6.6 and 8.3).

207 Witness statement of Jasmine Grew (1 June 2022, page 12).

208 Witness statement of Naomi Burnett (26 April 2022, pages 6–7).

209 Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society, “Shepherd the Flock of God”, Chapter 12 Determining whether a Judicial committee should be formed (April 2022, para 40).

159. This rule, sometimes referred to as the "two-person rule", was stated in the Elders' handbook *Shepherd the Flock of God*.<sup>210</sup> As authority for the rule, the Jehovah's Witnesses cite ancient scriptures including Deuteronomy 19:15 which states that "[o]ne witness is not enough to convict anyone accused of any crime or offense they have committed. A matter must be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses."<sup>211</sup> The two-witness rule was conceived more than 2000 years ago.<sup>212</sup>
160. In practice the two-witness rule meant an abuser would face no consequences unless they committed the abuse in front of another person or another witness came forward and reported similar conduct by the abuser.
161. The faith submitted that even if a judicial committee is not formed, there are other consequences permitted by their guidelines, such as the survivor or their family reporting the matter to the Police if there is a legal obligation to do so, or the child is at risk. However, as discussed below, the Inquiry heard that in practice there was a lack of reporting to authorities and inadequate consequences for abusers.
162. This policy and practice may have allowed abusers to continue abusing because of the unlikelihood of there being two witnesses to an offence, and because of barriers to disclosure reducing the likelihood of multiple survivors disclosing the same kind of offending. If an abuser did not confess, as the second witness under the two-person rule, then it was possible no further action would be taken.
163. The policy stated in the more recent handbook, *Shepherd the Flock of God*, appeared to reflect an ongoing hesitation to accept the evidence of children and young people: ***"The testimony of youths may be considered; it is up to the elders to determine whether the testimony has the ring of truth. The testimony of unbelievers and disfellowshipped or disassociated ones may also be considered, but it must be weighed carefully."***<sup>213</sup>
164. This reflected the reality during the Inquiry period that evidence from anyone other than an adult Jehovah's Witnesses member was treated with caution, making it difficult to reach the threshold of "sufficient evidence" to call a judicial committee. This inevitably undermined the response of the faith to abuse in care.

<sup>210</sup> Witness statements of Ms IU (16 October 2022, para 4.2.9.5) and Sina Dubbelman (8 September 2022, para 6.4).

<sup>211</sup> The Holy Bible, Book of Deuteronomy, Chapter 19, verse 15, New International Version, retrieved from <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Deuteronomy%2019%3A15&version=NIV>.

<sup>212</sup> Australian Child Sexual Abuse Royal Commission into Institutional responses to Child Sexual Abuse, Report of Case study no 29 (Commonwealth of Australia, 2016, page 66); Witness statement of Naomi Burnett (26 April 2022, pages 6–7).

<sup>213</sup> Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society, "Shepherd the Flock of God", Chapter 12 Determining whether a Judicial committee should be formed (April 2022, para 40).

165. One witness described the usual effect of the two-witness rule:

*"In effect this means that, unless two people see or hear something it does not happen. This obviously mitigates against complaints of sexual abuse being taken seriously because, by its very nature, this form of abuse is likely to occur when there is no audience."*<sup>214</sup>

166. Former Elder Robert Ker said:

*"The Jehovah's Witnesses take the bible literally and it talks about there needs to be two or more witnesses to an event. Obviously, with deviancy there are not any other witnesses.*

*In my experience this is a faith that does not like scrutiny and is not transparent. Given that the members are so subservient it is the ideal playground for deviants, as the saying goes, 'a wolf in sheeps clothing'."*<sup>215</sup>

### **Lack of reporting to external authorities**

167. Former Jehovah's Witnesses said that during the Inquiry period complaints and concerns of abuse were not often reported to secular authorities. Parents and survivors typically reported abuse directly to the Elders, rather than to any secular authority. Elders handled these reports internally, without any training,<sup>216</sup> and did not usually involve police.<sup>217</sup> Naomi Burnett said:

*"There was no mention of going to the Police and reporting this to the authorities. It was dealt with in-house. Involving the authorities would bring shame to Jehovah. It would shame the religion. This is the reasoning for the Jehovah's Witnesses religion intentionally concealing crimes like this from the Police."*<sup>218</sup>

168. Former Elder Shayne Mechen said that members were discouraged from reporting matters to police, because the faith considered the police to be part of the "worldly" population outside the Jehovah's Witnesses: "the police are seen as evil and under Satan's control".<sup>219</sup>

169. Particularly because of this practice of rarely reporting abuse to police,<sup>220</sup> being in the Jehovah's Witnesses sometimes gave abusers additional protection and a place to hide.<sup>221</sup>

<sup>214</sup> Witness statement of Ms IU (16 October 2022, para 4.2.9.5).

<sup>215</sup> Witness statement of Robert Ker (6 April 2023, paras 48–49).

<sup>216</sup> Witness statement of Shayne Mechen (8 September 2022, para 3.12).

<sup>217</sup> Witness statements of Sina Dubbelman (8 September 2022, para 6.7) and Naomi Burnett (26 April 2022, page 7); Private session transcript of a survivor who wishes to remain anonymous (17 May 2022, page 20).

<sup>218</sup> Witness statement of Naomi Burnett (26 April 2022, page 7).

<sup>219</sup> Witness statement of Shayne Mechen (8 September 2022, page 7).

<sup>220</sup> Christian Congregation of Jehovah's Witnesses (Australasia), Response to Royal Commission of Inquiry into Abuse in Care Notice to Produce 1 (1 December 2021, Annexure – F. Records, page 2); Witness statement of Deborah Oakley (31 May 2022, page 2).

<sup>221</sup> Christian Congregation of Jehovah's Witnesses (Australasia), Response to Royal Commission of Inquiry into Abuse in Care Notice to Produce 1 (1 December 2021, Annexure – F. Records, page 2); Witness statement of Deborah Oakley (31 May 2022, page 2).

170. Jehovah's Witnesses' official guidance on child sexual abuse requires Elders to report to secular authorities "if the victim or another minor is still in danger of abuse".<sup>222</sup> However, Debbie Oakley said she continued to be sexually abused by her step-father despite reporting the abuse to Elders: the Elders did not report the abuse to secular authorities or do anything else to protect Debbie from further abuse by her step-father.<sup>223</sup>
171. The Inquiry heard an example where a former member had reported abuse to the Elders of her congregation, who said they could not help and that she must write to the governing body in America, which she did. Two years later she received a reply from the governing body telling her they couldn't help and that she needed to see her local Elders. At this point she gave up in taking the disclosure any further.<sup>224</sup>
172. 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.<sup>225</sup>

### **Inadequate consequences for abusers**

173. If the outcome of a judicial committee was disfellowshipping, the Elders would formally announce to the congregation that the wrongdoer was 'no longer one of Jehovah's Witnesses, but would not give the congregation the reason.<sup>226</sup> The Inquiry heard that sexual offending was often not made known to other congregation members, but instead kept quiet.<sup>227</sup> One witness said that the Jehovah's Witnesses culture was to "hush cases like that up and keep it in house so as not to tarnish the JW squeaky clean image."<sup>228</sup>
174. Witnesses also explained that abusers would be allowed back into the congregation after being are disfellowshipped.<sup>229</sup> For example, Debbie Oakley's abuser had been disfellowshipped for abusing a seven year old girl before Debbie but had been allowed back into the faith and appointed as a ministerial servant.<sup>230</sup>

222 Christian Congregation of Jehovah's Witnesses (Australasia), Response to Royal Commission of Inquiry into Abuse in Care Notice to Produce 1 (1 December 2021, Annexure – K. Child Sexual Abuse: Guidelines for Branch office service desks, page 3).

223 Witness statement of Deborah Oakley (31 May 2022, page 10).

224 Written account of a survivor who wishes to remain anonymous (1 October 2020, pages 3–4).

225 Australian Child Sexual Abuse Royal Commission into Institutional responses to Child Sexual Abuse, Report of Case study no 29 (Commonwealth of Australia, 2016, pages 60–61); The United Kingdom Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse (IICSA), Child protection in religious organisations and settings Investigation report (September 2021, pages 110–112).

226 Witness statement of Edward Narayan (5 September 2022, page 6).

227 Witness statements of Mr UF (14 May 2023, pages 3–4), Naomi Burnett (26 April 2022, page 7) and Edward Narayan (5 September 2022, page 6).

228 Christian Congregation of Jehovah's Witnesses (Australasia), Response to Royal Commission of Inquiry into Abuse in Care Notice to Produce 1 (1 December 2021, Annexure – F. Records, page 2).

229 Witness statements of Naomi Burnett (26 April 2022, page 8.14), Deborah Oakley (31 May 2022, para 6.6, 11.1) and Sina Dubbelman (8 September 2022, paras 6.7–6.8).

230 Witness statement of Deborah Oakley (31 May 2022, para 6.6).



175. The result of an abuser being readmitted, or never facing consequences in the first place, was that it would often be the victim who left the faith. They might no longer be able to tolerate staying while their abuser was still within the organisation, and would choose to disassociate themselves.
176. Documents provided by the Jehovah's Witnesses confirmed that abusers are allowed back into congregations after they are disfellowshipped as in the case of a particular abuser,<sup>231</sup> who was "deleted" as an Elder, and had his activity restricted after he confessed to sexually abusing a 15 year old girl in the Aramoho congregation. Documents show he had earlier been involved in 'serious wrongdoing' in Auckland before he arrived in Aramoho,<sup>232</sup> and that after the Aramoho abuse he went on to a Halswell congregation where he was disfellowshipped for adultery but reinstated.<sup>233</sup> He was then disfellowshipped again from an Avonhead congregation for "pornei'a" (illicit sexual activity),<sup>234</sup> but then reinstated to that congregation, with a restriction that he did not qualify for privileges in the congregation and did not again serve as an Elder or ministerial servant. Throughout all of this there is no evidence the man was reported to the Police.
177. In one case, the only reason the Jehovah's Witnesses informed other members about abuse was because 'family members knew what had happened and others would likely get to know of it'.<sup>235</sup>

### **Record-keeping practices during the Inquiry period**

178. Creating and retaining accurate records of abuse allegations is fundamental to preventing and responding to abuse in care, as well as redress processes. Incomplete, inaccessible or inaccurate records can make it difficult for an organisation to know whether someone has previously committed or been accused of sexual abuse and is a safeguarding risk. Without sufficient and accurate information about past behaviour, an organisation cannot ensure it responds appropriately to risk. In addition, for many survivors of abuse in care the first step in seeking closure is to request records from the institution.<sup>236</sup> If it is difficult to do so, this can be traumatic for survivors.

231 Christian Congregation of Jehovah's Witnesses (Australasia), Response to Royal Commission of Inquiry into Abuse in Care Notice to Produce 1 (1 December 2021, Annexure - A. Narrative and Analysis of Records, page 1).

232 Christian Congregation of Jehovah's Witnesses (Australasia), Response to Royal Commission of Inquiry into Abuse in Care Notice to Produce 1 (1 December 2021, Annexure - B. Records, Summary, page 2).

233 Christian Congregation of Jehovah's Witnesses (Australasia), Response to Royal Commission of Inquiry into Abuse in Care Notice to Produce 1 (1 December 2021, Annexure - B. Records, Summary, page 1).

234 Porneia is a transliteration of the Greek term for infidelity, and a general term for all unlawful sexual intercourse. It includes adultery, prostitution, sexual relations between unmarried individuals, homosexuality and bestiality.

235 Christian Congregation of Jehovah's Witnesses (Australasia), Response to Royal Commission of Inquiry into Abuse in Care Notice to Produce 1 (1 December 2021, Annexure - D. Records, Summary, page 9).

236 Royal Commission of Inquiry into Abuse in Care, He Purapura Ora, he Māra Tipu: From Redress to Pūretumu Torowhānui, Volume 1 (2021, pages 249–250).

179. The approach of the Jehovah's Witnesses to record keeping of allegations of abuse was mixed at best during the Inquiry period. Former Elder Shayne Mechen described the position for judicial committees in the mid-1990s:

***"Elders take personal notes but these are later destroyed ... A judicial committee would send a blue envelope to the Auckland Bethel, and it would be kept in their database. There would be a record of the perpetrator, and what's he done to prove he's sorry."***<sup>237</sup>

180. Mr Mechen said he expected that formal records would be retained.

181. Shane McNeil, a former Australian Elder, said that one of his initial duties in his Australian congregation was to maintain all of the congregation's paperwork. He said the paperwork in his Australian congregation was in a state of disarray:

***"When I went through the paperwork, many of the policies were missing, including the most important letters relating to allegations of abuse. I don't know how the local elders had handled the reports of abuse before us."***<sup>238</sup>

182. The approach of the Jehovah's witnesses appeared to rely on a brief summary document being retained, with the notes of the Elders on judicial committees being destroyed.

183. In August 2019, after the commencement of this Royal Commission, the Christian Congregation of Jehovah's Witnesses (Australasia) wrote to all bodies of Elders in New Zealand and Australia reminding them of existing guidance that during Elders' meetings:

***"There should be no need for any Elders to take extensive notes ... When decisions have been implemented by the assigned Elder(s), there is generally no need for the notes to be retained."***<sup>239</sup>

184. The letter went on to say that in judicial committee hearings, members would usually not need to make 'personal notes' but if they did, the notes should be destroyed. The letter asked that each Elder review the records they held to ensure "that no confidential correspondence is retained outside the congregations confidential file". The letter also reminded Elders that, at the conclusion of a matter "a written record should be prepared" containing "a brief summary" of "only pertinent facts and the final determination of the person's standing in the congregation."<sup>240</sup>

<sup>237</sup> Witness statement of Shayne Mechen (8 September 2022, page 12).

<sup>238</sup> Witness statement of Shane McNeil, Australia (20 June 2023, page 15).

<sup>239</sup> Memorandum from the Christian Congregation of Jehovah's Witnesses (Australasia) to All Bodies of Elders regarding Congregation records (28 August 2019, page 1).

<sup>240</sup> Memorandum from the Christian Congregation of Jehovah's Witnesses (Australasia) to All Bodies of Elders regarding Congregation records (28 August 2019, pages 1–2).

185. The faith said that its data retention policy was to keep enough information for their religious purposes, to provide a safe environment for children. It said if someone is guilty of child abuse “we don’t need to know all the gory details ... but we need to know enough to ensure that if they move to another congregation, there will be a letter that follows them to say that this is the situation, these are the restrictions that are imposed ... The second purpose for record keeping is to ensure no one is appointed as ministerial servant or elder who is guilty of these matters.” It said there is no need for extensive records, and once an offender has been ‘dealt with’ there is no need for background notes to be kept.<sup>241</sup>
186. The Inquiry’s review of the records the Jehovah’s Witnesses provided indicates the types of “brief summary” retained by the faith were inadequate to ensure sufficient information was available to inform proper decision-making. For example:
- a. The records of an Elder disqualified from serving in the late 1970s simply indicated that the relevant conduct was “inappropriate behaviour with a minor (details not known)”;
  - b. The records of a man deleted as an Elder in 2002 for child abuse consisted of a one-page letter with very little information about the underlying conduct. The letter indicated the conduct involved two girls aged around 15 or 16 years old, and that the Elder had been involved in “serious wrongdoing” in Auckland prior to moving to the relevant location. He had been alone with the girls at his home, at times naked and aroused sexually. The man was twice disfellowshipped and once deleted over a 13-year period, but the entire record of his conduct appeared to consist of the one-page letter. The man was reinstated some years later, with a recommendation that Elders should call the service department before extending any privileges.
187. The combination of the Jehovah’s Witnesses’ practices as described above, and the records the Inquiry has reviewed, indicate an inadequate approach to the documenting and retention of information about alleged cases of abuse. The information documented and retained did not provide an adequate basis for well-informed risk-based decision making to ensure the safety of children and young people in the care of the faith. The lack of detail in records retained by the faith also inhibited the Inquiry’s ability to assess the extent of abuse in the care of the faith because of the lack of detail about the nature of the relationships between Elders and abused children.

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<sup>241</sup> Jehovah’s Witnesses interview transcript with the Royal Commission of Inquiry into Abuse in Care (8 March 2023, page 69).

## **Conclusions on steps by the Jehovah's Witnesses to prevent and respond to the risk of abuse in care**

188. In response to complaints or concerns about abuse, there would be an internal investigation by Elders, and sometimes, if the Elders decided there was sufficient evidence, a judicial committee would be formed.
189. The investigation and judicial committee process was rigid, inappropriate and daunting for victims of abuse, with limited flexibility and very little consideration for the trauma or support needs of the victim and has likely prevented other disclosures of abuse.
190. The 2000 year old two-person rule showed a lack of understanding of the nature of sexual abuse, and the policy guidance suggesting that the words of adults should be believed over the words of children was misguided and likely caused further harm to children and young people in the faith.
191. In short, the Inquiry concludes that the faith's processes for handling and responding to concerns or complaints of abuse in care were inadequate. Moreover, the faith's approach to this Inquiry was premised on the basis that no children or young people were ever in its care. The ongoing failure of the faith to recognise that children and young people were in its care and adapt its approach to child safety gives the Inquiry significant concern about the faith's overall approach to the safety of children and young people in its care.

## **The international context**

192. The faith's approach to abuse in care during the Inquiry period was in many ways related to its overall approach to abuse. In recent years, international inquiries and studies have investigated and made findings about the faith's systems, practices, and procedures for raising and responding to allegations of child sexual abuse. Each of these inquiries had different terms of reference and scope, and all differed from this Inquiry to a greater or lesser extent. Caution is therefore needed in assessing the relevance of the findings of those inquiries. However, despite the differences, the work of these inquiries also overlapped with this Inquiry to some extent. In particular, the inquiries in Australia and England and Wales considered the historical period address by this Inquiry as well as the more recent period. We refer below to the findings of those inquiries to provide some additional context for the findings we have made.

## **Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse (Australia)**

193. The Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse in Australia explored in detail the experiences of two survivors of child sexual abuse within the Jehovah's Witnesses, and the response of the organisation to those survivors' complaints. The Australian Child Sexual Abuse Royal Commission also examined more broadly the systems, policies and procedures in place within the Jehovah's Witness organisation for raising and responding to allegations of child sexual abuse and for preventing child sexual abuse within the organisation.
194. The terms of reference for the Australian Child Sexual Abuse Royal Commission were confined to child sexual abuse. Other forms of abuse such as physical, psychological and spiritual abuse were not considered if they happened separately from sexual abuse. The abuse or neglect of adults in care was also outside the Inquiry's scope.<sup>242</sup> The Australian Child Sexual Abuse Royal Commission was also not restricted to historical abuse or abuse 'in care'.
195. There was however, some crossover between the two inquiries and those common elements make the findings relevant:
- a. Both New Zealand and Australia have domestic legislation and international obligations that provide for the protection of children, which is one of the reasons each inquiry was established.
  - b. Both inquiries were tasked with identifying best practice to ensure that children are protected and that institutions respond appropriately to child sexual abuse.<sup>243</sup>
  - c. The centralised organisational structure of the Jehovah's Witnesses means that the policies, beliefs, and practice of the faith in Australia and New Zealand are the same, and both share the same branch office (with the same service and legal desks).
  - d. Like the Australian Inquiry, the Inquiry's Terms of Reference also require reporting on factors that contributed to abuse, including the processes for handling complaints and their effectiveness.<sup>244</sup>

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<sup>242</sup> Australian Child Sexual Abuse Royal Commission into Institutional responses to Child Sexual Abuse, Report of Case study no 29 (Commonwealth of Australia, 2016, pages 82–83).

<sup>243</sup> Australian Child Sexual Abuse Royal Commission into Institutional responses to Child Sexual Abuse, Report of Case study no 29 (Commonwealth of Australia, 2016, page 79); Royal Commission of Inquiry into historical abuse in State care and in the care of Faith-based institutions Order 2018, Terms of Reference, clause 10.2.

<sup>244</sup> Royal Commission of Inquiry into historical abuse in State care and in the care of Faith-based institutions Order 2018, clauses 10.2 and 31(b).

196. In total, the Australian Child Sexual Abuse Royal Commission received 70 complaints about child sexual abuse in the Jehovah's Witness organisation. Its relevant findings on abuse allegations were that:<sup>245</sup>
- a. Since 1950 there had been allegations, reports or complaints received by the Jehovah's Witness organisation in Australia, relating to at least 1,800 alleged victims of child sexual abuse
  - b. About 11 percent of the alleged perpetrators were Elders or ministerial servants at the time of the first instance of alleged child sexual abuse
  - c. About 3 percent of the alleged perpetrators were subsequently appointed as Elders or ministerial servants after an allegation of child sexual abuse was made against them
  - d. Although 40 percent of the alleged perpetrators were disfellowshipped as a result of an allegation of child sexual abuse, about 57 percent of those disfellowshipped were later reinstated, and 19 percent of the total who were disfellowshipped were disfellowshipped more than once as a result of an allegation of child sexual abuse.
197. In 2015, before the final report of the Australian Child Sexual Abuse Royal Commission was published the Jehovah's Witnesses provided submissions addressing the terms of reference, the approach of the faith to sexual abuse matter, and its view on the appropriateness of the suggested findings and systemic considerations.<sup>246</sup> In summary, the faith submitted:
- a. In response to the proposed finding that it was the policy or practice not to report allegations of child sexual abuse to the police, the faith said that this finding was unsupported by facts. It specifically said: "From an uninformed view, it is easy to say that a crime should always be reported to the authorities, but the legal system is not that simple. A number of factors may be involved, for example: What does the law require? What does the victim or his/her parents want to be done about the matter? What is the morally right thing to do? What do the Scriptures say about the matter? Ignoring any of these questions oversimplifies relevant considerations and results in positing a simplistic, untenable solution."<sup>247</sup>

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245 Australian Child Sexual Abuse Royal Commission into Institutional responses to Child Sexual Abuse, Report of Case study no 29 (Commonwealth of Australia, 2016, pages 58–59).

246 Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, Submissions on behalf of Watchtower Bible and Tract Society of Australia & Others (9 November 2015).

247 Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, Submissions on behalf of Watchtower Bible and Tract Society of Australia & Others (9 November 2015, para 3.10).

- b. Whether a sinner's guilt is determined by congregation Elders (men) appears to have no causal connection to whether child sexual abuse occurs within a family or outside the family. Male judges determine the guilt or innocence of defendants all over the world and there is no empirical evidence suggesting men are not intellectually or emotionally equipped to determine the guilt of someone accused of child abuse. The faith also submitted that "repentance takes into account the risk of reoffending".
- c. "It would, however, be unfortunate if findings or recommendations had the effect of denying to members of a faith the right to adhere to their beliefs or to freely exercise their religious choice. For example, an adherent may prefer that a matter be cared for within his/her faith. It would be unfortunate if findings or recommendations of the Royal Commission had a 'chilling effect' on the disclosure of cases of abuse to ministers".<sup>248</sup>
- d. Changes have been made, and it would be unfair to judge what occurred in 1982 and 1988 in light of contemporary attitudes, values and beliefs.

198. Later, in October 2016, the Australian Child Sexual Abuse Royal Commission published Case Study 29 into the Jehovah's Witnesses and found that the organisation does not respond adequately to child sexual abuse.<sup>249</sup> That case study also noted that children were not adequately protected from the risk of sexual abuse and that this was because of the following factors:

- a. The organisation's policies and practices for responding to child sexual abuse were outdated and 'by and large' wholly inappropriate and unsuitable in cases of child sexual abuse. The fact that the organisation continued to apply policies such as the two-witness rule in cases of child sexual abuse showed a serious lack of understanding of the nature of that abuse.<sup>250</sup>
- b. The organisation's internal disciplinary system for addressing complaints of child sexual abuse is not child or survivor-focused in that it is presided over by males and offers a survivor little or no choice about how their complaint is addressed.<sup>251</sup>
- c. The sanctions available within the organisation's internal disciplinary system are weak and leave perpetrators of child sexual abuse at large in the organisation and the community.<sup>252</sup>

<sup>248</sup> Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, Submissions on behalf of Watchtower Bible and Tract Society of Australia & Others (9 November 2015, para 3.9).

<sup>249</sup> Australian Child Sexual Abuse Royal Commission into Institutional responses to Child Sexual Abuse, Report of Case study no 29 (Commonwealth of Australia, 2016, page 77). For further findings, see Case study no 54, and the Final Report, Volume 16, Book 3, part D, Chapter 15, pages 71-108.

<sup>250</sup> Australian Child Sexual Abuse Royal Commission into Institutional responses to Child Sexual Abuse, Report of Case study no 29 (Commonwealth of Australia, 2016, page 77).

<sup>251</sup> Australian Child Sexual Abuse Royal Commission into Institutional responses to Child Sexual Abuse, Report of Case study no 29 (Commonwealth of Australia, 2016, page 77).

<sup>252</sup> Australian Child Sexual Abuse Royal Commission into Institutional responses to Child Sexual Abuse, Report of Case study no 29 (Commonwealth of Australia, 2016, page 77).

- d. In deciding the sanctions to impose and precautions to take in relation to a known or suspected perpetrator, the organisation has inadequate regard to the risk that they might reoffend. This demonstrates a serious lack of understanding of the nature and impact of child sexual abuse.<sup>253</sup>
  - e. The organisation's general practice of not reporting serious instances of child sexual abuse to police or authorities – in particular, where the complainant is a child – demonstrates a serious failure by the organisation to provide for the safety and protection of children in the organisation and in the community.<sup>254</sup>
199. In 2018, after publication of the Final Report and Case Study 29, the Jehovah's Witnesses provided a further report to the Australian Child Sexual Abuse Royal Commission.<sup>255</sup> The Jehovah's Witnesses report criticised the Australian Child Sexual Abuse Royal Commission, and said in particular that:
- a. the Commission's criticism of Jehovah's Witnesses' Bible-based beliefs and practices were misplaced and should have been directed instead to a lack of uniform mandatory reporting laws
  - b. a large part of the Commission's investigation into Jehovah's Witnesses and the evidence it heard were outside the Commission's terms, because they related to child sexual abuse within families of members of Jehovah's Witnesses
  - c. the Commission had conflated familial and institutional sexual abuse
  - d. the Commission gave little or insufficient weight to the evidence of the education provided to parents and to the journals, pamphlets and literature published and disseminated by Jehovah's Witnesses
  - e. there were significant difficulties in relying on any findings based on private sessions
  - f. the Commission's investigation of the Jehovah's Witnesses was inherently unfair.

<sup>253</sup> Australian Child Sexual Abuse Royal Commission into Institutional responses to Child Sexual Abuse, Report of Case study no 29 (Commonwealth of Australia, 2016, page 77).

<sup>254</sup> Australian Child Sexual Abuse Royal Commission into Institutional responses to Child Sexual Abuse, Report of Case study no 29 (Commonwealth of Australia, 2016, page 77).

<sup>255</sup> Bennet, D and Gibson, J, Executive Summary, Jehovah's Witnesses in Australia and The Final Report of the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse (14 November 2018).



## **Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse (England and Wales)**

200. The Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse in England and Wales (IICSA) published an investigation report on child protection in religious organisations and settings, including the Jehovah's Witnesses.
201. The IICSA had different terms of reference from the current Aotearoa New Zealand Inquiry and was limited to the sexual abuse of children. Despite this, it is helpful to consider their findings given their review of the failures of the Jehovah's Witnesses to identify abuse, the gaps in the child protection procedures of the Jehovah's Witnesses and their recommendations, which are all relevant to the Inquiry.
202. The IICSA found that the Jehovah's Witnesses organisation had the third highest number of sexual abuse victims (15 or 11 percent) after the Catholic and Anglican churches.<sup>256</sup> It further found:
- a. The two-witness rule is not intended to be a safeguarding measure; it is part of an internal religious process for determining whether someone should remain a congregant. Nevertheless, the application of the rule in the context of child sexual abuse is likely to increase the suffering of victims and fails to reflect the reality that by its very nature child sexual abuse is most often perpetrated in the absence of witnesses.
  - b. The Jehovah's Witnesses do not carry out vetting and barring checks on Elders, ministerial servants, or those who run the organisation regionally or at a national level. This is because they maintain that they do not separate children from their parents during religious worship or practice or when children are in the company of someone in a position of trust, and so checks are not permitted by law. This fails to recognise that the mere presence of parents does not prevent those in position of trust from developing inappropriate relationships with children or being able to groom both their children and their families.<sup>257</sup>
  - c. The Jehovah Witness child protection policy, consisting of four core documents, are rooted in religious text and written in 'scriptural language'. Two of these documents fail to provide practical guidance, including on how to contact statutory authorities.<sup>258</sup>

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<sup>256</sup> The United Kingdom Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse (IICSA) Research team, *The Truth Project thematic report: Child sexual abuse in the context of religious institutions* (2019, page 72).

<sup>257</sup> The United Kingdom Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse (IICSA), *Child protection in religious organisations and settings Investigation report* (2021, pages 50–51).

<sup>258</sup> The United Kingdom Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse (IICSA), *Child protection in religious organisations and settings Investigation report* (2021, page 42).

# Chapter 6: Summary of findings

203. The Inquiry finds that during the Inquiry period:
- a. Elders in the Jehovah's Witnesses held positions of power and had status and authority conferred on them by the faith.
  - b. 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. 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.
  - c. There is credible evidence that:
    - i. sexual abuse occurred in the care of the Jehovah's Witnesses faith
    - ii. the practice of Elders questioning children or young people who were victims of sexual abuse during investigations and judicial committee processes was inappropriate and emotionally or psychologically abusive.
  - d. There were factors that increased the risk of abuse in the care of the Jehovah's Witnesses, including:
    - i. the status of leaders and the power imbalance between them and members of the faith in the context of elevated levels of influence within the faith
    - ii. the barriers to the disclosure of abuse, including the place of females in the faith, the fear of exclusion and relative disconnection from the secular world
    - iii. lack of vetting and training of Elders in child protection and abuse prevention.
  - e. The full extent of abuse in the care of the faith cannot be quantified for reasons including inadequate record keeping and the barriers to disclosure described above.
  - f. Steps taken by the faith to prevent and respond to abuse in care were inadequate. In particular:
    - i. there was inadequate vetting and training of Elders in child protection and abuse prevention
    - ii. the policies, rules, and standards relevant to child sexual abuse were from various separate directives from the governing body, across many different issues of different publications, all based primarily on passages from scripture
    - iii. processes for raising, handling and responding to concerns or complaints of abuse in care were inadequate.

# He waiata aroha mō ngā purapura ora

Kāore te aroha i ahau mō koutou e te iwi I mahue kau noa  
i te tika  
I whakarerea e te ture i raurangi rā Tāmia rawatia ana  
te whakamanioro  
he huna whakamamae nō te tūkinō  
he auhi nō te puku i pēhia kia ngū  
Ko te kaikinikini i te tau o taku ate tē rite ai ki te kōharitari o tōu  
Arā pea koe rā kei te kopa i Mirumiru-te-pō  
Pō tiwhatiwha pōuri kenekene  
Tē ai he huringa ake i ō mahara  
Nei tāku, 'kei tōia atu te tatau ka tomokia ai'  
Tēnā kē ia kia huri ake tāua ki te kimi oranga  
E mate Pūmahara? Kāhorehore! Kāhorehore!  
E ara e hoa mā, māngai nuitia te kupu pono i te puku  
o Kareāroto  
Kia iri ki runga rawa ki te rangi tīhore he rangi waruhia  
ka awatea  
E puta ai te ihu i te ao pakarea ki te ao pakakina  
Hei ara mōu kei taku pōkai kōtuku ki te oranga  
E hua ai te pito mata i roto rā kei aku purapura ora  
Tiritiria ki toi whenua, onokia ka morimoria ai  
Ka pihi ki One-haumako, ki One-whakatupu  
Kei reira e hika mā te manako kia ea i te utu  
Kia whakaahuritia tō mana tangata tō mana tuku iho nā ō rau  
kahika Koia ka whanake koia ka manahua koia ka ngawhā  
He hokura mārīe mōwai rokiroki āio nā koutou ko Rongo  
Koia ka puta ki te whaiao ki te ao mārāma  
Whitiwhiti ora e!

# A Love Song for the Living Seeds

The love within me for you, the people, remains unchanged  
Left alone, abandoned by justice and order  
Subjected to the silent suffering of mistreatment  
A heaviness in the core, silenced into stillness  
The gnawing of my heart cannot compare to the anguish of yours  
Perhaps you are hidden in the depths of the night, Mirumiru-te-pō  
A night dark and dense  
Where there may be no turning in your memories  
But here's my thought: 'Do not push open the door to enter!  
Instead, let us turn to seek life and well-being  
Is memory dead? No, certainly not!  
Arise, friends, let the truth resound loudly from the heart of Kareāroto  
To ascend to the clear skies, a sky washed clean at dawn  
Emerging from the troubled world to a world of promise  
A path for you, my flock of herons, to life  
So, the precious core may blossom within you, my living seeds  
Scattered across the land, cherished and growing in abundance  
Rising in One-haumako, in One-whakatupu  
There, my friends, lies the hope to fulfil the cost  
To restore your human dignity, your inherited mana from your ancestors  
Thus, it will thrive, flourish, and burst forth  
A peaceful feather, a treasured calm, a serene peace from Rongo  
Emerging into the world of light, into the world of understanding  
A crossing of life indeed!



# Abuse in Care

Royal Commission of Inquiry

Presented to the Governor-General by  
the Royal Commission of Inquiry into  
Historical Abuse in State Care and in  
the Care of Faith-based Institutions

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