

Witness Name: Elise Madeline Neame

Statement No: WITN1328001

Dated: 11 July 2022

ROYAL COMMISSION OF INQUIRY INTO ABUSE IN CARE

WITNESS STATEMENT OF ELISE MADELINE NEAME

I, **Elise Madeline Neame**, will say as follows: –

1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 I was born in Christchurch on **GRO-C** 1988.
- 1.2 I am a former Jehovah's Witness and a mother of two young daughters.
- 1.3 We reside in Canterbury.

2. STATEMENT PURPOSE

- 2.1 I became aware of the Royal Commission of Inquiry into Abuse in Care through someone I know who advised me that the Royal Commission was including an inquiry into abuse within the Jehovah's Witnesses.
- 2.2 My purpose in now sharing my experiences is to raise public awareness of child abuse and of the abusive processes in institutions like the Jehovah's Witnesses church.

- 2.3 I hope that this awareness effects change to prevent such abuse happening to others.
- 2.4 The Jehovah's Witnesses' "shunning" rule is so emotionally and psychologically abusive. It must be stopped.

3. MY EARLY YEARS

- 3.1 I was born into and grew up a Jehovah's Witness as was my mother and her mother had also been. My great-grandparents were the first in our family history to join the faith.
- 3.2 I was raised by my mother on her own as my father had been an alcoholic and was GRO-C.
- 3.3 We belonged to the Huntsbury and the Halswell congregations. We later moved up to Auckland and attended the Waitakere or Henderson congregations.
- 3.4 I had a large family and growing up I was always surrounded by family. We were always having pot-luck dinners and gatherings and I remember us having to yell over one another to be heard because there were so many of us.

4. LIFE AS A JEHOVAH'S WITNESS

- 4.1 Growing up I always felt like I was different to the other kids. Mum would pull me out of shows and events at my primary school, never allow me to go to birthday parties if I was invited, and I was not allowed to watch movies with my class if they involved anything like wizards, witches, or make believe. So, I was left out of a lot of things.
- 4.2 As Jehovah's Witnesses we did not celebrate birthdays, Christmas, New Year's, Mother's Day or other holidays as mum told me we were always to be "no part of the world". I always felt like an awkward strange kid and, as I got older, because I was not allowed to be involved in these things, I got bullied a lot.
- 4.3 I recall feeling embarrassed because mum pulled me out of the school event where we all got to watch the movie James and the Giant Peach, and all the kids were asking me why.

- 4.4 On my first-ever school camp there was a magic show which I had to stay back in my room alone while all the other kids got to watch, and I remember feeling so embarrassed as the teacher led me out of the hall and all the kids were asking “what’s going on?”
- 4.5 It got so bad that someone told my mother that there was a tea party that I was invited to, and I was excited because I was allowed to finally go but it turned out that the parent had lied to my mother, just so I could attend, and it was a birthday party.
- 4.6 My mother stormed in, right in the middle of the game Pass the Parcel and pulled me out and I was taken home.
- 4.7 Mum read every single lyric in my CDs and cassette tapes, monitored everything we watched, and, in many ways, I felt left behind in the world. Everyone else appeared to be moving forward, except me.
- 4.8 As a Jehovah’s Witness, I attended many annual conventions, which lasted between one and three days. These consisted of long daily conventions with teachings about living a clean Christian life, and the pending doom of this world.
- 4.9 I found these conventions incredibly boring. I wanted to play outside like a normal kid, but I was expected to keep quiet, stay on my best behaviour and keep notes on the religious topics being covered.
- 4.10 This was the only life that I knew. I remember as a kid being terrified of the very near “end of the world” and being told, “no one knows the day or the hour, only Jehovah God”.
- 4.11 I watched my mother sign cards to display in her wallet advising emergency services not to give blood transfusions should she be dying, and this also terrified me as I knew it would be the same for me.
- 4.12 I never had any friends outside of the faith. Boyfriends were completely out of the question. I got teased and bullied at high school and called a lesbian because I was not allowed to date. 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.
- 4.13 At 13 years old, I asked to get baptised because I wanted to be accepted by my JW peers and I wanted to make my mother proud of me.

- 4.14 When you're baptised as a JW, you are devoting your life to serving Jehovah God and promising to live a clean and Christian life.
- 4.15 When I advised the elders I wanted to be baptised, they came to my home and asked me questions to ensure my heart is truly committed to serving Jehovah. They then went away and contacted me later to advise me that my request to be baptised was successful. I was baptised at 13 years old. The JW expectation of me was now to serve Jehovah, never breaking any JW rules for the entirety of my life.
- 4.16 As an adult now, I find it incredible that I was allowed to be baptised at such a young age. At 13 years old, like others of this age, I had very little life experience. How could I possibly be capable of making such a life-long decision? No elder or any other JW ever explained to me the repercussions of me breaking the JW rules (as a baptised JW). I had no idea about what being "disfellowshipped" meant.
- 4.17 Had I been properly informed and understood these JW rules, I don't think – even at 13 years old – I would have wanted to be baptised. What kind of faith allows such young children to make these life-changing decisions? I didn't ask to be baptised because I wanted to be. I did it for others.

5. MY ABUSE

- 5.1 During my early years, before my parents broke up, I was emotionally and psychologically damaged. I witnessed GRO-C and GRO-C that no child should ever be subjected to.
- 5.2 At this time, my father was not a true Jehovah's Witness, but he did bible study for a long time. He would come home drunk and GRO-C my mother and always in front of me.
- 5.3 From seven years old I have kept a very dark secret. My father sexually abused me.

5.4

GRO-C

5.5

GRO-C

6. JEHOVAH'S WITNESS DISCIPLINE PROCESS

- 6.1 When I turned 17, I had my first boyfriend and as a normal teen I started partying and drinking a little, living like other teenagers do.
- 6.2 The elders at the church found out about the lifestyle I was starting to live, and I was required to attend Jehovah's Witness disciplinary meetings with three to four male elders. They asked me inappropriate personal questions and I found myself having to describe the sexual acts my boyfriend and I had been involved in.
- 6.3 Then the elders decided to reprove me which meant I lost my privileges and was no longer allowed to engage in group activities. I had a long road ahead of me to prove I was sorry and to repent my sins. This included extra bible studies and door-to-door witnessing. I was required to do these things to prove my commitment to the religion and to be forgiven.
- 6.4 Eventually this discipline I was subjected to was removed but I will never forget how grossly traumatised I was by having to explain the intimate detail of my sexual experiences to three elderly men with my mother sitting next to me.
- 6.5 These men were not trained therapists or counsellors; they had no qualifications to carry out these meetings with a minor.
- 6.6 I cannot explain the feeling of panic waiting in the other room while the elders deliberated on my punishment. I felt pure shame. My friends never spoke to me again and I was known as a "bad association".

7. KICKED OUT OF HOME (2008)

- 7.1 When I was 20 years old and started dating someone, my mother found out and she promptly kicked me out of home.
- 7.2 I remember overhearing her talking to the elders about my committing a sin because she had found out I had had sex before marriage. She said, "You're not pregnant are you?" – before kicking me out and leaving me to find

somewhere on my own. She seemed to have forgotten that she had become pregnant with me at 20 years old out of wedlock.

7.3 I had nothing and nowhere to go.

7.4 My mother also became angry with me because I had spent Christmas with her sister who was disfellowshipped from the Jehovah's Witnesses. This all flipped when my cousin, who was the daughter of my mother's sister, had an anaphylactic fit and was dying in the hospital. I watched my family, who had spent years shunning her, now at the hospital pretending to support her.

7.5 When it came time to bury her, and watching my auntie mourn the loss of her daughter, I overheard my mother talking to my grandmother and she said, "I'm worried I have spent too much time associating with her." All because her sister had been disfellowshipped, my mother was concerned that she would somehow become spiritually poisoned from having spent too much time with her. It is actually a disfellowshipping offence to even share a meal with a disfellowshipped member.

8. LEAVING THE JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES – BEING SHUNNED

8.1 Time passed, and I gradually left the JWs and stopped attending meetings but was never disfellowshipped; I just quietly faded away from the religion. 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.

8.2 When I was 21, my future husband and I met, and we started living together. We had a good life; however, my relationship with my mother became more distant as she started withdrawing from me.

8.3 We would talk but not as often as we had before I met my partner.

8.4 I had my first daughter in 2010 and my mother was there for the birth and for my wedding that same year. I had one auntie who wrote to me and told me that because I had left Jehovah that she would not be attending, and another friend who refused to be my bridesmaid because I was not in good standing with Jehovah. Another friend would not attend the baby shower for the same reason.

- 8.5 I tried to ignore this shunning and I wanted to carry on with my life. I gave birth to my second daughter in 2012. By this time, my mother had remarried to a JW elder and she did not attend the birth.
- 8.6 Earlier I had been declined when I asked to speak at her wedding. I was told to write her a card instead. From this time, I watched my mother gradually withdraw from me.

9. MY OWN RESEARCH – (2015/16)

- 9.1 I then decided to join a Facebook support page for former Jehovah's Witnesses, and started researching the faith. I had always been taught to never do this because anything online is written by apostates and is false information, so I knew that I needed to do this research privately and not to tell anyone I had done it.
- 9.2 My cousin found out and felt the need to tell both my mother and my grandmother of this research and of the FB group. My grandmother then had a meeting with me about it.
- 9.3 At the time she was having piano lessons with me, and she sat me down and brought her husband, who is an elder, into the meeting to discuss what I was researching.
- 9.4 She told me I was doing a terrible thing and that I was associating with people who are "spiritually dead" and had been disciplined by Jehovah God. She told me she would no longer associate with me.
- 9.5 I started to become very emotional and through my tears I told her I had found so many people who had **died GRO-C** because of Jehovah Witnesses' families shunning them after they had been disfellowshipped. She replied, "It was their choice to **die GRO-C**"
- 9.6 I tried so hard to explain why I was doing this and began talking about how mum had taken a step back from me for no reason and she started yelling at me, "Don't you dare blame your mother."
- 9.7 I left the home I grew up in and I never returned. As I left, my auntie pulled up the drive and she did not even make eye contact with me, so it was clear the message was sent out, "Don't talk to Elise anymore."
- 9.8 My nana used to call me her "chocolate fudge cake" but now she won't even speak to me.

- 9.9 A couple of weeks later, my mother sent me a letter to say that she would “no longer associate with me unless it was for necessary family matters because I was associating with people who had been disciplined by Jehovah.”
- 9.10 She also mentioned my new “anger issue” and said that she just could not understand it – even though I had explained my anger was because my father had been so lovingly accepted back into the Jehovah’s Witnesses after the abuse I had suffered, and that I was frustrated that no one was listening to me.
- 9.11 In anger I asked my mother’s husband, who is an elder, where I could send my letter to officially disfellowship myself, to which he promptly gave me the address. No question of concern, no “are you sure you want to do this”, absolutely nothing. Which I now know is the direct opposite of what an elder is meant to do: they are meant to provide you with a shepherding call to check on you. This was never done.
- 9.12 So, I sent a letter to the elders of my congregation to have myself disfellowshipped from the Jehovah’s Witnesses. I explained the reasons why and they announced it at the Kingdom Hall, so everyone knew.
- 9.13 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 was in the city one afternoon and 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 and have never even met three new babies who are my cousins.
- 9.14 The shunning became so bad that my mother began completely avoiding me and messaging my husband asking if she could spend time with my children. My husband became very angry and upset and told her that we came as a package, and you cannot pick and choose who you want to see.
- 9.15 So, I went four years without seeing or speaking to my mother or any of my JW 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. My mother would send packages and gifts and cards to my children without any mention of me and it began to slowly kill me inside.

10. MY FATHER ACCEPTED BY JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES (2016)

- 10.1 Things worsened when I heard that my father was bible studying with the Jehovah's Witnesses. The one form of communication I was getting from my mother and my grandmother related to how wonderful my father was doing in the religion.
- 10.2 He had stopped drinking and smoking and was attending all the meetings; they were so proud of him. Hearing these things triggered me and suddenly all the GRO-C abuse GRO-C I had suffered came to a head. I became a truly angry person.
- 10.3 I found it incredible that my mother and grandmother had forgotten and forgiven all the abuse we had been subjected to and were willing to welcome him back with open arms.

11. FIRST DISCLOSURES (2016)

- 11.1 Jehovah's Witnesses have a distrust of worldly people, the government and government agencies like the Police. Crimes like child abuse are not reported to Police. Instead, those affected must report such matters to the church elders.
- 11.2 I was concerned about what my father may do to other children and on two occasions I tried to speak to church elders about the abuse my father had subjected me to.
- 11.3 Both times I was brushed off. One of the elders told me that I had an anger problem and that they did not want to hear about it.

12. SECOND DISCLOSURE OF ABUSE (2017)

- 12.1 One day I decided to tell my mother about my father sexually abusing me as a child, and we agreed to meet at a café.
- 12.2 I was stunned to see my mother who usually has dark hair but now had turned fully grey. I realised it was because we had not seen each other for so long. We spoke at length, and my mother was very emotional and upset to hear what I had to say about my father's abuse.

- 12.3 She suggested that I tell the Police. So we both went, and I gave a statement. My mother sat with me with her hand wrapped around me in support and I remember thinking how strange she was acting – suddenly supporting me after so many years of shunning me. The Police said because the assault was from so long ago that there was nothing they could do.
- 12.4 My mother's husband, who is an elder, told me that he had informed the elders from my father's congregation as he was now considered a threat to the safety of the congregation. But the elders never checked on me, never asked me if I was OK, never visited, and only ever phoned me once – to ask if I was ready to return to the faith, to which I declined. I have never ever heard from them again.
- 12.5 My mother and her husband after that went straight back to shunning me and we went back to not speaking. It was a ruse to try and get me back into the faith by pretending to support me and to show me what I am missing. However, I am stubborn, and I will not return to the hand that abuses me. It only pushed me away further.
- 12.6 In 2019 my husband had an affair and ended our 10-year marriage. I was at the lowest of my lows. I had nowhere to go, and no family or friends. So, I contacted my mother. She was there for me through the separation, and it was a very emotional time. I was back in a suicidal and dark place and could not look after myself anymore, let alone my two school-aged children. I really thought my mother would be there for me again but after about six months – and after she found out I was dating – she started shunning me again. She told me I was “not learning my lesson” and suggested that I walk around with the word “vulnerable” on my forehead. She told me that she really enjoys spending time with her husband's children, who are Jehovah's Witnesses. She told me, “I was thinking to myself Elise could be here too, if she wanted to.” Meaning, if I returned to the faith I could then be included.
- 12.7 I have found out recently that my uncle's ex-wife, who had been disfellowshipped for having an affair, has just been reinstated into the religion. Everyone is so happy to have her back in the faith, even though her affair broke our family and not to mention the three small children that were involved.

13. IMPACT OF ABUSE

Isolated

13.1 I watched my mother's brother cry and drink himself stupid, he was a ruined man. Only to hear that this woman who had been reinstated (his ex-wife) lives just down the road from me, and my mother and grandmother visit her often, and she was even invited to my mother's wedding anniversary party. But none of them will associate with me and I am not allowed and am never invited to such family events.

Emotional abuse through separation

13.2 The last time I contacted my mother was about six months ago. I happened to be listening to Tina Turner in the car and it brought back memories of how my mother used to sing her songs so loud and it brought me a small happy memory.

13.3 Reluctantly, I texted her as I always do, hoping for a different response this time. I said, "Mum I miss you so much, I am listening to Tina Turner, I must be turning into you LOL" – to which she responded by text message the next day. It read, "I love you and the girls very much too, and I look forward to the day, we are allowed, to be closer to one another."

13.4 This text just about killed me; I cried the whole day.

13.5 I recently joined another former JW's Facebook group, which I did not know my mother's husband monitors. He has since blocked my phone calls and text messages. I fear the consequences of my writing this statement, however I now have nothing to lose. There is nothing more that the Jehovah's Witnesses can take away from me.

Suicidal thoughts

13.6 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.

13.7 I often daydream of what it is like to be part of a normal family, what it is like to have a support system. I wonder what it must be like to have a real Christmas celebration with a big meal and presents and lots of people. I

wonder what it must be like having an Easter egg hunt, or a big birthday party with all your family present.

13.8 I have not experienced these things.

Loss of family

13.9 I have a work friend as a next-of-kin in case of an emergency, and friends that help me if I need anything. I am now strong and the way I have been treated by the Jehovah's Witnesses has conditioned me to stand on my own two feet. But at times I do walk around with a huge hole in my heart. I dream of just having a simple cooked meal with my mum and a chat about her day.

13.10 I have two little girls who are nine and 11 years old and without them I would truly be 100% alone. It is so hard trying my best to be a solo mum and doing everything on my own without support of my family, who are meant to be there for me but chose not to – simply because I do not share their beliefs.

14. RECOMMENDATIONS

14.1 I believe that all religions that have an active shunning / excommunicating practice that breach human rights and cause such suffering must be stopped. The following Jehovah's Witnesses' breaches of human rights must be addressed as they are in other parts of our society.

The right to life and liberty

14.2 The Jehovah's Witnesses breach this human right, as members are only allowed to live within their rules. There is no liberty within the religion. Members have no freedom to have their own thoughts and natural human feelings and emotions.

Freedom from slavery and torture

14.3 Jehovah's Witnesses breach this human right, as members are required to attend all meetings, bible studies, and spend countless hours preaching door to door. Members are required to take time off work or school for the religious conventions and put Jehovah and the faith before anything else. Like a slave. They also 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.

Freedom of opinion and expression

- 14.4 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. Members are not allowed to express their feelings or question any of the Jehovah's Witnesses' teachings. Members are required to dress modestly and are not allowed to be seen wearing anything deemed to be part of the world.

The right to work and education

- 14.5 Jehovah's Witnesses breach these human rights by prohibiting members from participating in higher learning. Women are particularly discriminated against in the Jehovah's Witnesses, which is strictly male dominated.

15. LOOKING FORWARD

- 15.1 I work so hard to give my daughters the life I never had because I do not want them to grow up with the same emotional abuse I had as a child. We celebrate their birthdays and Christmas as normal because that is what I wanted as a child but missed.
- 15.2 We celebrate Santa Claus and the tooth fairy because I never got to be a normal child with a normal imagination. My only hope is that my daughters see my unconditional love for them, and they grow up knowing that my love as their mother has no end and that there is nothing that they could ever do to make me stop loving them.

STATEMENT OF TRUTH

This statement is true to the best of my knowledge and belief and was made by me knowing that it may be used as evidence by the Royal Commission of Inquiry into Abuse in Care.

Signed:

GRO-C

Dated: 18/7/22

GRO-C