

Witness Name: Naomi Susan Burnett
Statement No.: WITN1156001
Exhibit No.: WITN1156002
Dated: 26 April 2022

ROYAL COMMISSION OF INQUIRY INTO ABUSE IN CARE

WITNESS STATEMENT OF NAOMI SUSAN BURNETT

I, Naomi Susan Burnett, will say as follows: –

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 I am 49 years old,

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1.2 I was born into a Jehovah's Witness family in the early 1970s. We lived in Christchurch and were with the Gloucester Street Congregation.

1.3 I was sexually abused from the age of 10 years old, by a male member of the Jehovah's Witnesses faith.

1.4 I remained in the religion until I was 15 years old, when I left and started a new life outside of the constraints of the Jehovah's Witnesses religion.

2. STATEMENT PURPOSE

2.1 I believe that the public of New Zealand generally know very little about this religion, and it astounds me that the leadership of the Jehovah's Witnesses religion in New Zealand have been able to keep child abuse within the faith, concealed from the rest of society for so long.

2.2 I believe that the time has come that more and more people are breaking away from the religion, and one of the main reasons for this is the way the

Jehovah's Witnesses leaders' cover-up child sexual abuse and how disclosures of abuse are dealt with internally within the religion.

- 2.3 I see the Royal Commission of Inquiry into Abuse in Care as a way of reporting to government and the people of New Zealand, the faith-based abuse, and abusive processes within the Jehovah's Witnesses religion.
- 2.4 Having lived the early part of my life under the control of this religion, and having experienced faith-based child abuse myself, I believe that sharing my experiences, in this way, will help to publicly uncover child abuse within the Jehovah's Witnesses religion.
- 2.5 I am hopeful that by sharing my experiences I will help other Jehovah's Witnesses' abuse survivors break away from the religion and share their accounts of abuse.
- 2.6 I know that this religion is a cult hiding amongst us in our community and that they strongly resist transparency.
- 2.7 I hope my statement will help inform the Royal Commission of Inquiry in its findings and in its recommendations to government, for change to protect children from faith-based abuse.

3. MY EARLY YEARS

- 3.1 I was born in Christchurch in 1972.
- 3.2 My mother's family immigrated from England via Australia when she was young. Her mother got into the Jehovah's Witnesses when my mum was in her late teenage years.
- 3.3 My father was from Cheviot, a farming community in Canterbury. He got into the religion in his early 20s in Nelson. Dad became involved in the religion through a close friend in Motueka. Dad's mother became involved in the religion too.
- 3.4 Dad moved to Christchurch. My parents met when they were both studying in the Jehovah's Witnesses congregation at Gloucester Street, Christchurch. So, my parents both had "worldly" upbringings as children. However, their lives changed when they joined the Jehovah's Witnesses faith.
- 3.5 Because my parents were, by this time, committed to the religion, they raised my brothers and I within the bounds of the Jehovah's Witnesses religion and their new beliefs.

4. LIFE AS A JEHOVAH'S WITNESS

- 4.1 The fundamental background of the Jehovah's Witnesses faith is the teaching that "Armageddon" will, at some time in the future, occur and that all non-Witnesses will perish in this event. The faith is that all Jehovah's Witnesses faithful will survive and live in paradise here on earth. The faithful are taught not to trust or associate with the non-faithful who are referred to as "Worldly People". However, they are also taught to, and encouraged to, attempt to convert as many, of the non-faithful to the faith, as possible.
- 4.2 The Jehovah's Witnesses faith is male dominated. Males make all the decisions and hold all positions of authority within the congregation.
- 4.3 There is no recognition or celebration of Christmas, Easter, peoples' birthdays, New Year, Anzac Day, Waitangi Day or Queen's Birthday.
- 4.4 Jehovah's Witnesses are discouraged from forming any bonds with non-faithful. It is quite exclusive.
- 4.5 I remember that when I went to school, my parents took me there and always reminded me about what my religion did not allow me to do at school. I was not permitted to take part in a lot of things other school children in New Zealand do, for example: Easter celebrations and traditions, Christmas decorations, no standing up for the national anthem.
- 4.6 My parents had given my teachers instructions about what I could and could not get involved in at school. I had to be removed from the class when certain things were being taught. I can recall one Easter when my class was making Easter buns in class. For some reason they overlooked removing me from the class and I enjoyed getting involved in the activity. After the class I knew that I could not take my buns home, so I intentionally left them in the class. Unfortunately for me, another kind parent found them and unknowingly brought them around to my home, thinking I had forgotten them. I then got into trouble at home.
- 4.7 I had to sit down on the ground every time the national anthem was sung. All these different rules are things that the religion does not recognise because they are Pagan. The Jehovah's Witnesses religion does not align with other religious faiths. The faithful are taught not to trust government agencies and worldly people in authority (outside of the religion).
- 4.8 As a school child I had to go door-knocking on Saturdays and sometimes on Sundays, and I was often knocking on school friends' doors, selling "The Watchtower" and "Awake". These are Jehovah's Witnesses magazines. This is referred to as "Witnessing". The faithful must attend congregation meetings on Tuesday and Thursday evenings and sometimes on Sunday evenings (depending on daylight saving hours).
- 4.9 That was my life. It was regimented. My family, my extended family, and all my friends were part of the religion, and all lived, and were committed to, and bound by, the Jehovah's Witnesses lifestyle.

- 4.10 As a child, living within the confines of the religion, I believed I was standing my ground. I thought, "I'm doing what I'm supposed to be doing and all you people are going to be destroyed in 'Armageddon'." That is what you get taught. It's deeply instilled in you.
- 4.11 The elders within the faith hold their own processes for dealing with issues that arise. Members are discouraged from reporting matters to the Police but instead to bring these issues to the attention of congregation leaders. They hold their own in-house "judicial proceedings" and make rulings. They can "disfellowship" members for "sinning". They 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.
- 4.12 Their focus is very much on the rights and interests of the perpetrator and not on the complainant or survivor.

5. MY ABUSE

- 5.1 This is what happened to me and how they dealt with sexual abuse.
- 5.2 In 1982 my mother's sister – my aunt and her husband GRO-B – my uncle by marriage, arrived from Australia to live in New Zealand and came to live with us temporarily until they found a home of their own.
- 5.3 They had with them their two children – my cousins. The youngest was a baby girl and I adored looking after her. I was 10 years old and had proved to be a good babysitter.
- 5.4 My uncle lavished attention onto me, such as brushing my hair and telling me I could be a model one day. I loved the attention but, at an early stage, I did not understand that this attention had sexual undertones.
- 5.5 One afternoon, I was putting my baby cousin to sleep in her cot, in my aunty and uncle's bedroom. I was lying on the bed waiting for her to drop off to sleep.
- 5.6 I was keeping very still so she would not see me, and I had a blanket over my face. It was at this point that my uncle came into the room. He started to stroke me. I felt uncomfortable, but I could not move, I was frozen.
- 5.7 He put his hands under my top, stroking my belly, then leading downwards to my knickers. While he did this, he took my hand and placed it around his hard penis. He asked me if I liked it.
- 5.8 I said I did not like it. He allowed me to get up. Before I left the room, he told me that if I told anyone, it would destroy the family and I would be to blame for it.

- 5.9 The wonderful experience of having my extended family around me, came crashing down for me that day.
- 5.10 Soon after this happened my aunt and uncle found a home of their own, but this kind of sexual abuse continued for about three years.
- 5.11 I would be asked to babysit in their new home, but he would hang around. One time at their place, he asked me if I knew how to "french kiss." I was 11 years old at the time. He decided that he would show me how to french kiss. He grabbed my face and put his tongue in my mouth forcibly, for what seemed like an eternity.
- 5.12 My family would attend the Jehovah's Witnesses conventions that were often held in different cities. On one of these occasions my immediate family shared a holiday home with my aunt and uncle.
- 5.13 My uncle would get up in the middle of the night and come into my room, putting his hands down my pants while he masturbated. I remember pretending to be asleep, I was frozen with fear and horror. I did not understand what he was doing, I was too young to understand it.
- 5.14 He was a photographer and had a small business in the town where they lived.
- 5.15 When I was 12 years old, he announced that he wanted to do a photo shoot of me before I had my braces put on. He had me change into different dresses and pose for him, while he indecently touched me and masturbated.
- 5.16 I knew this was all wrong and I began to distance myself from him at family gatherings.
- 5.17 When I started high school, the abuse stopped.

6. FIRST DISCLOSURE

- 6.1 I was 12 years old at the time and I had two very good friends who were also in the Jehovah's Witnesses religion. They were being beaten by their mother, who was a single parent. We confided in each other, our stories of abuse – theirs was physical and mine was sexual.
- 6.2 For three years, this initial disclosure went no further than the two friends I had confided in.

7. SECOND DISCLOSURE

- 7.1 In my last years at school, at 15 to 16 years of age, I was getting into trouble at school, and at home I was jumping out of my bedroom window at night and going to parties.
- 7.2 I felt like suddenly, my religion was becoming uninteresting to me. It just dropped off. I was growing up through high school and I recognised that I had been missing out on so much. My religion did not allow me to play sports, I was not allowed to go into a drama class and that's what I really wanted to do. I was not allowed to do any of the things other kids at school were involved in.
- 7.3 There was no longer anyone in the religion that I really clicked with as a friend. I wanted to hang out with my school friends.
- 7.4 I began to live a double-life. I would pretend to not be a Jehovah's Witness at school and be the Jehovah's Witness angel when I was home. This took its toll on me, and I decided that I did not want to be a part of the religion any longer.
- 7.5 I ran away from home at 15 years old. I knew of an abandoned house to go to, but my father and other members of the religion put pressure on my friends to tell them where I was, and they did.
- 7.6 My father was, and still is, a respected elder in the congregation and he is also the Secretary, so we always had to live up to high expectations, in the religion, as his children.
- 7.7 My father and I had a big argument and I told him that I wanted to leave the religion. He asked me why and I said, "Because you've got people like that (my uncle) in the religion doing this, to your own daughter." I disclosed the child abuse I had been subjected to. He was taken aback. He was angry at first, in hearing what I said, then after calming down he announced that he would organise a meeting with the elders, to investigate.

8. JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES' JUDICIAL PROCESS

- 8.1 The judicial process was held at Kaiapoi because that was my uncle's congregation. It was held within a week of my disclosure. The elders like to control disclosures very quickly. I was told that there was a meeting and that I had to be there.
- 8.2 In a situation like this, a Judicial Committee is arranged with the abuse survivor and the abuser. If the abuser denies the allegations and there are not two witnesses to the events, then the matter is unproved and is dropped.
- 8.3 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.

- 8.4 All these men were present and there was no one supporting me. I was made to feel like I had done something wrong.
- 8.5 There were seven chairs in a circle. Two elders, my father and I from my family's Gloucester Street congregation – on one side; and two elders from my uncle's Kaiapoi congregation and him – on the other side.
- 8.6 In this judicial process, the allegations were put to my uncle, and he admitted to the offending, so a second witness was not required. The Jehovah's Witnesses' judicial process otherwise requires two witnesses to the event to find the complaint proved. I was not familiar with the Jehovah's Witnesses judicial process prior to this.
- 8.7 I was made to share and describe, in detail, the abuse in front of these men, including my abuser.
- 8.8 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.
- 8.9 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.
- 8.10 I had no support person, my mother was not allowed in, and I was absolutely petrified throughout the meeting.
- 8.11 The elders found him guilty, and his punishment was for him to be disfellowshipped (excommunicated) from the religion. This protocol requires the elders to advise the congregation that he is no longer a Jehovah's Witness. However, the elders do not disclose to the congregation the reason for the disfellowship.
- 8.12 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.
- 8.13 In this religion, child abuse is seen as a sin, not a crime. The belief is that when Armageddon comes those who have sinned will be dealt with.
- 8.14 A disfellowshipped person may become reinstated if they repent and wish to return. They must sit at the back of the hall for a year or two and be shamed, then they can come back in. Others within the congregation are never told the reason for the disfellowship.
- 8.15 For my trauma, the JWs compensated me with extra bible studies to "help me get through". This did not last long, as I decided to stop going to church meetings.

- 8.16 My uncle was later accepted back into my family, as it was only my mother and father who knew, not the rest of the extended family or my four brothers.

9. JUDICIAL COMMITTEE

- 9.1 At about the age of 16 years, and because of a relationship I had formed with a boy, I was called in for a separate Judicial Process. I was questioned by congregation elders Siesage, Aydon and Broadbent about my immorality with a young man I had become involved with. This meeting was documented by the elders and kept on record.
- 9.2 My brother found this typed record many years later when searching my father's secretarial documents belonging to the congregation. By this time, my brother knew I had been sexually abused as a child. He gave me a copy of the committee document.

Refer Exhibit – WITN1156002 – “Judicial committee re. N. Burnett Nov.11 1987”

- 9.3 After the Judicial Committee in 1987, my father gave me an ultimatum of returning to the religion or getting out of his house. He told me that he loved Jehovah more than me, and for the sake of my younger siblings, seeing my worldly ways, I had to get out. I was 16 years old when I left.
- 9.4 In the years that followed, I saw my family only occasionally.
- 9.5 I had chosen the “worldly way of life” that did not fit in with the Jehovah Witnesses' rules, and for my family and friends within the religion, associating with me was discouraged. I was “shunned”.
- 9.6 However, years later, I was invited to my brothers' weddings, both of which my uncle attended as the photographer.
- 9.7 My mother died of cancer when she was 59 years old. The night that she died at the hospice, I had to look across the room at my abuser asking me if I would like a cup of tea.

10. PRIOR OFFENDING DISCLOSED

- 10.1 In 2009 when I was 37 years old, my father asked me to come to his house as he said he had something to discuss with me. He told me that my uncle was going to be on trial for historical sexual abuse against another girl over the years 1975 to 1980.
- 10.2 The abuse survivor was now living in Australia and could not carry on with life knowing her abuser had not been convicted.

- 10.3 Due to this being publicised, my father wanted to let me know that my brothers and extended family would now be made aware that their uncle was a paedophile.
- 10.4 He was found guilty in the Christchurch District Court on four counts of indecent assault, three of which were at the upper end of the offending scale.
- 10.5 He was sentenced to nine months' home detention and ordered to pay \$5000.00 to a charity of the victim's choice. He was yet again disfellowshipped as a member of the Jehovah's Witnesses.
- 10.6 Today he is reinstated and is an active member of a South Island congregation once again.
- 10.7 I have not laid charges against this man, who is now a convicted offender. However, I am pleased that this other woman did. I am comfortable knowing that I avoided having to become involved in the criminal justice process.

11. IMPACT OF ABUSE

- 11.1 I have had some counselling for the abuse I suffered but when I hear of other stories, much worse than mine, I feel relieved. My counselling was some years ago and I cannot now recall how it was funded.
- 11.2 The pain I suffer from now, is the secondary abuse and the negligence of the leadership of this faith. My own father did nothing. He left the decision up to four men, who were unqualified and undignified in the way they dealt with such a serious and traumatic event.
- 11.3 My choice of leaving the religion cost me my entire family. From the day I left home at the age of 16 years old, it has been just me.
- 11.4 The Jehovah's Witnesses have taken so much from me and, I believe, there are thousands of other survivors that are just like me – having been abused, left the religion, and then been shunned by their families and friends within the religion.
- 11.5 The "shunning" from my family will never stop unless I become one of them again, which will never happen.
- 11.6 My younger brother lives in Christchurch, he has three children who I have met only twice, during very short visits. I have another brother, who moved to Auckland, and he has two kids who I have never met. I have a brother, who moved to Canada with his Jehovah's Witness wife, and I have not seen him for years. I have another brother (the brother who found the 1987 JW Judicial Committee document), he lives in Ireland and has been shunned also because of his leaving the religion. He is now my only connected family member

- 11.7 I have not seen my father for years. My children have not had the wider family connection because they are negatively impacted because of my decision to leave the religion. It has been an intergeneration impact of the abuse and my exclusion from family and others within the religion.
- 11.8 As a child in the Jehovah's Witnesses faith, I was sexually abused whilst in the care of a member of the faith and when I disclosed the abuse, I had no option but to comply with the judicial process and the control the faith had over its followers.

12. REDRESS

- 12.1 Apart from being offered an additional bible study, I have not received any form of redress for the abuse I was subjected to as a child and for the degrading secondary abuse I suffered, in the form of the Jehovah's Witnesses' "judicial process".

13. CHANGES REQUIRED

- 13.1 The way the Jehovah's Witnesses religion deals with child sexual abuse will never change unless more of us, who have left this religious cult, speak up about the abuse of children within the religion and the antiquated, inadequate, and inappropriate complaints processes they employ, which are heavily weighted in favour of the abuser.
- 13.2 Their system has little to no focus on the abuse survivors. People reporting abuse within the Jehovah's Witnesses must be better supported and have people, of their own choice, around them through the judicial process.
- 13.3 Currently there is no support in their congregations for anything that their faithful may be suffering. Their typical response is: "Well, you're obviously not praying enough and you're not doing this and that"; "You need to do more service, being out in service and doing preaching and door-knocking". This lack of empathy and real support must change.
- 13.4 There must be mandatory reporting of child abuse to the Police.

GRO-C

Signed: _____

GRO-C

Dated: _____

27/04/2022