

Witness Name: Shane McNeil

Statement No.: WITN5831001

Exhibits:

Dated: 20 June 2023

ROYAL COMMISSION OF INQUIRY INTO ABUSE IN CARE

WITNESS STATEMENT OF SHANE JOHN MCNEIL

I, Shane McNeil, states as follows: -

Introduction

1. My full name is Shane John McNeil. I was born on GRO-C 1973. I have two daughters.
2. I live in a town called GRO-C, GRO-C I was raised in the Jehovah's Witness religion from the age of 10. I officially joined Jehovah's Witnesses when I decided to get baptised at the age of 18. In time, I served as a ministerial servant for about 10 years, and then as an elder for three and a half years. I stopped serving as an elder in 2007. I stopped attending meetings (church) in 2018.

3. I left Jehovah's Witnesses in March/April 2018 when I was 45 years old. I had, however, stopped believing what Jehovah's Witness teach a few years prior to that. I stopped believing because I came to the conclusion that many of the teachings of Jehovah's Witnesses are factually wrong. Since that time, I have also come to realise how harmful many of the practices of the Organisation are.
Jehovah's Witnesses refer to the "Church" as the "Organisation".
4. This evidence relates primarily to my experiences in Australia. Having said that, Jehovah's Witnesses are a global religion/organisation that prides itself on the unity among all members worldwide. Witnesses are proud of being "one mind". They study the same material globally at their meetings. The Organisation endeavours to operate, as much as possible, in the same way in all countries, including New Zealand. At a practical level, Australia and New Zealand share the same head office, located in Sydney. Regional head offices are called "Bethel". Bethel receives its direction from the Governing Body of Jehovah's Witnesses located in the United States. All theological and doctrinal positions are decided by the Governing Body and distributed globally.
5. Local Bethels have some ability to adapt to local laws if necessary, but by and large, the Jehovah's Witness organisation is intentionally and essentially the same globally. Jehovah's Witnesses do not see themselves as being restricted by national boundaries, in fact they strive to be "separate from the world". They consider themselves to be a "spiritual nation" in their own right, one people, serving God (Jehovah). The teachings, spiritual culture and policies of Witnesses are almost the same everywhere, unless local laws force changes. For example, there are differences in local laws relating to mandatory reporting of abuse, which changes how the Organisation approaches allegations of abuse at a local level.

6. Due to this united, global, “brotherhood”, issues such as the level of respect and obedience shown towards elders are the same in New Zealand and Australia. Similar types of arrangements are made for the care of children by other adults in the congregation, such as in home Bible studies and formal witnessing activities. In both countries, as described below, outsiders are regarded as part of Satan’s world and thus to be wary of. Former members who have left the religion, or have been disfellowshipped, are shunned by family and friends.

Joining the Jehovah’s Witnesses

7. My mother joined Jehovah’s Witnesses when I was 10 years old. This happened after a neighbour moved in next door to us. The neighbour was a Jehovah’s Witness and Mum got talking to her. Mum was always a very religious person. Prior to that we had been attending the Baptist church. I had already had a very religious upbringing, so joining the Jehovah’s Witnesses seemed like a normal step in Mum’s search for religious truth. My Mum and Dad had divorced a few years prior to this, so it was just Mum, myself and my two younger brothers. Our life changed a lot. We had to stop celebrating things like Christmas and Easter and birthdays. School became very challenging because I suddenly stood out as different. I was no longer allowed to participate in things I had in the past. I started being told that the end of the world was coming. And we started preaching from door to door to try to warn and save as many people as we could.
8. Ultimately, neither of my younger brothers formally joined Jehovah’s Witnesses. Jehovah’s Witnesses do not baptise babies. They believe that there comes a point when a young person needs to “make the truth their own” and dedicate their life to God (Jehovah). This is a private decision made by an individual which is shown publicly by getting baptised. Once you are baptised you are recognised by the

Organisation as a fully ordained minister. *All* baptised Witnesses are considered to be ordained ministers, regardless of age, and the public preaching work they do is considered to be their formal ministry. There is no specific age for baptism, but an individual must be viewed as being able to make their own decisions to qualify. Having said that, baptism is an option roughly from the age of 10 onwards. Once you take that step, you are accountable to the Organisation and can face formal judicial action and be disfellowshipped if you are found to have unrepentantly sinned in their view. This includes baptised minors.

9. I formally joined Jehovah's Witnesses when I was 18 years old. I stopped attending meetings for a couple of years during high school and applied to attend university to study science. My family however, wanted me to dedicate my life to Jehovah. I ultimately turned down the invitation to go to university and was baptised. Jehovah's Witnesses strongly discourage members from pursuing higher education.
10. From that point on, I made what I thought was serving God the focus of my life. Jehovah's Witnesses believe that any day now, the end of the world (Armageddon) will come. They believe you should make serving Jehovah the focus of your life in preparation for Judgement Day. They believe that when Armageddon comes, only the good people will survive, and everyone judged as evil will be executed by Jehovah's heavenly army. Essentially, they believe that only Jehovah's Witnesses will survive, so their goal is to try and save as many people as possible. That is why they go door to door, to try and save people by convincing them to dedicate their life to serving Jehovah. I can't overstate how central the preaching work is to Jehovah's Witnesses. They believe their purpose in life is to save as many people as possible, or, to at least warn them that Judgement Day is coming. The Organisation strongly encourages members to organise their lives around preaching, dedicating as much time as possible to that work.

11. I threw myself into congregation activities. I became a ministerial servant, which is like an assistant to the elders. I was a ministerial servant for about 10 years. I was an elder for three and a half years from 2004 to 2007.

Armageddon

12. As mentioned above, a central part of Jehovah's Witness' beliefs, is the belief that Armageddon is imminent. They have been expecting this to happen since the 1880's. As decades have now gone by without Armageddon occurring, Jehovah's Witnesses have had to reinterpret their understanding of Bible prophecies, and their expectations about how and when Armageddon will occur. They do still expect it any day now though. As a child, I was told I that I would never finish school and would never need a career. The end of the world would come before then.

13. Witnesses are expecting a series of events that will lead into Armageddon. They have changed their understanding of those events as time has gone by, but basically they expect global conditions to deteriorate and that world governments and authorities will attempt to ban or destroy their organisation. They are thus very wary of external attention being directed at them by "worldly authorities". Currently, the COVID pandemic followed by the situation in Ukraine has got their attention. They believe Russia (the "King of the North" as they call it) is a significant country that will do something to bring about the end of the world. Russia invading Ukraine is the sort of event they are expecting to trigger the "Great Tribulation" that will lead into Armageddon.

14. We were taught that during the Great Tribulation, the world's governments and authorities will first destroy all religions, except Jehovah's Witnesses. Then, they will try to destroy Jehovah's Witnesses too. We expected to face terrible persecution at this time. But Jehovah's Witnesses believe that God will then step

in and save his people. Jesus and the angels will come out of heaven and stop the persecution and will execute Jehovah's enemies. In the Bible, that event is called the Battle of Armageddon. There is a lot more nuance to what they are anticipating, but in a nutshell, that is what Jehovah's Witnesses believe the future holds. What is especially relevant, is the Organisation's reservations in dealing with, or listening to, the very "worldly" authorities that they expect to turn on them any day now. It is also very difficult for members to contemplate leaving. They fear being shunned by family and friends and then being executed at Armageddon.

Education and life outside the church

15. We were taught not to make too many plans for our future in this world. The most important thing in life is to be serving God and preparing for Armageddon. At times in the past, they discouraged getting married, having children, building a career, getting an education and even owning a home. The priority is to serve God (Jehovah) and to be doing what he wants you to do. Mostly, that means going to meetings and knocking on people's doors, finding ways to preach to them about the "Truth" (the Witnesses interpretation of the Bible). A lot of the resistance to people going to university stems from these priorities. God is not really interested in whether you have a degree. It will not help you at the end of the world nor will it be needed in Paradise.
16. Jehovah's Witnesses believe that a university education will teach you things that are contrary to the Bible. For example, you will learn about evolution, and Jehovah's Witnesses deny that evolution is true. There are many scientific points that they disagree with. They are very suspicious of psychology and psychiatry. They believe that any knowledge found outside of the Organisation, and the Bible, has been tainted by Satan in some way.

17. They prioritise the Bible, and the Organisation's understanding of the Bible, over any knowledge or expertise that comes from the "world". We were taught that the Bible is the best source of knowledge. We were literally told that reading the Bible, going to meetings and reading the books that the Organisation prints, is better than any university education.
18. By and large, most Jehovah's Witnesses have little or no formal education beyond High School, unless they joined later in life. Occasionally you will find a member who has a profession, but mostly Jehovah's Witnesses are just regular people, doing whatever work they can find to cover expenses.
19. Jehovah's Witnesses believe that the entire world is under the Devil's control to some degree, and so anything that is outside of the Organisation is influenced by the Devil. Ultimately, the Devil wants Jehovah's Witnesses to leave the "Truth" and die at Armageddon. This makes it hard to interact with the world in a relaxed and trusting way. We were always on guard that Satan might be trying to weaken our faith somehow through the worldly people we interacted with, that Satan was trying to take us away from the Truth.

Starting a family

20. Of course, the end of the world didn't come, so I did end up finishing school and in time got married. We delayed starting a family because again, we thought best to wait until after Armageddon came, and then have children in Paradise.
21. I met my wife through the congregation. Jehovah's Witnesses are not supposed to marry outside of the Organisation. In fact, you are not really supposed to have any friends outside of the congregation. You can have acquaintances and be nice to everybody, but your friends and your associates should all be from within the congregation. Certainly, you shouldn't marry a "worldly" person i.e. someone who is

not one of Jehovah's Witnesses. Your standing in the Organisation is affected if you do.

22. My wife and I moved away from [GRO-C] to a small town in New South Wales, as there was a need for help in the local congregation. They didn't have many elders or ministerial servants there. This is when I became an elder. Prior to this move I had been working selling and installing computers. I subsequently found work in office administration and part time cleaning.

23. A few years down the track, Armageddon still hadn't come, so we decided to start a family. Now aged 35, I had not expected to still be living in this "system". Starting a family was the trigger for me to question everything I had been taught.

24. We moved back to [GRO-C]. By that stage, as I discuss below, I had been through a lot as an elder, which had caused me to question aspects of the Organisation and its teachings. Everything I had been told that was supposed to have happened, hadn't. I became very uncomfortable with the doctrines we were expected to preach to others about, especially now my children.

25. Even though I kept trying to give talks (sermons) and preach from door to door, my heart wasn't in it. I thought that the problem was with me. I thought, "I am lacking faith", or "I haven't been reading the Bible enough". I decided to step aside from my duties and rebuild my faith.

Losing belief

26. I decided to start with the basics. I had never really questioned the religion when growing up. I had just accepted what I had been raised with. So, I went through everything the Organisation teaches, to try to prove it all to myself and strengthen my faith. However, I quickly found that the more I studied, the less I believed.

27. I saw more and more things that were wrong with the faith. I love science and I had planned to do a Bachelor of Science. As I dug into real science and compared it to the Organisation's teachings, I realised they had it very wrong.

28. It felt like I had pulled a thread on a tapestry. My beliefs were like an amazing tapestry I had woven together, but when I pulled on the little threads that made me uncomfortable, the whole thing just fell apart.

29. I was not sure what to do. Mum had already left the religion some years before. I had to shun her because of this. I never fully shunned her though, as I was supposed to, but I certainly cut back my contact with her. As an article in the *Watchtower* said:

"It is also proper to respect the judicial decisions of the elders. ...But how would you act if one of your relatives was disfellowshipped? While there might be a need for limited contact to care for family matters, all spiritual association with the disfellowshipped relative would have to be cut off. ...Surely, loyalty to God and his organization should move us to respect the judicial decisions of the overseers."

30. Even though I could see the Organisation wasn't right, I didn't know what was right.

I didn't have an alternative. I decided to keep the peace. I let it drop and just did the minimum I needed to do, so as not to draw attention to myself. Witnesses are a very tight-knit community, and we had lots of good close friends in the congregation. We had a lot of good times with them. If you come out and question the Organisation, you very quickly feel barriers going up. The more you question things, the more people start distancing themselves from you and eventually the elders will get involved. Because I had been an elder, I knew what would happen if I started questioning too much. I decided to sit quiet, as I did not want to be disfellowshipped.

31. Not long after that, my wife was diagnosed with breast cancer. I focused on helping her and our children through that difficult time. She passed in 2016.

Leaving the church

32. The Australian Royal Commission into Abuse happened the year before my wife passed away and although her illness was all-encompassing, I paid a little bit of attention to it.
33. Later, I heard some Witnesses saying that Jehovah's Witnesses had been exonerated by the Royal Commission. I thought, "That wasn't my impression", but I hadn't really followed it closely. I downloaded all the transcripts and read through every page. I was mortified by what I read.
34. I stopped attending meetings in 2018. I could no longer sit in the hall knowing what I knew. As of now, I haven't attended meetings in five years, and I haven't believed in the teachings for about 10 years, if that makes sense.
35. It was fortunate that I had 10 years living experience on the outside before Mum joined the Organisation. You would be surprised what a difference that made when I left. It's much harder if you are born into it. The Organisation is all you have ever known. At least I remembered celebrating events, and I remember doing some normal things. That made a world of difference for me. But if someone has only ever known life in the Organisation, it is much harder to leave. Especially if they are leaving due to circumstances related to abuse. When you leave, you feel like you are getting abused again. You lose your friends and your family, your entire support network.

Witnessing

36. The public preaching work is the primary focus of the congregation. All baptised Witnesses are viewed as ordained ministers by the Organisation. The Organisation

classifies a minister as someone who preaches to the public. Each month, Witnesses count and report to the Organisation how much time they spend preaching. In fact, only the Witnesses who hand in a report each month are officially counted in the numbers the Organisation counts as “active” Witnesses. Time spent door knocking, telephone calls, letter writing, talking with work colleagues etc can all be reported. Parents may report one hour per week for studying with their children. They also report how many people they visit more than once, how many books are left, videos shown, and so forth. At the end of each month, they hand that report into the elders.

37. The elders collate the reports and send them to Bethel. They will also examine the reports and see if anybody seems to be struggling, or not doing too much. It stems from a genuine concern. It is not meant to be pushy, but if somebody has only been putting in an hour or two, an elder would be concerned about their spirituality. Elders might visit them to encourage them. I was putting in one-hour reports for a long time. If you put in no report at all, the elders want to know why, and I didn't want to have that conversation.

38. You will sometimes see the expression “Active Jehovah's Witness”. That means the person is actively handing in reports each month. Miss one month and you are classified as “irregular”. Miss six months in a row, and you are classified as “inactive”. This means that although you are still technically one of Jehovah's Witnesses, you are no longer counted in the membership numbers. When you see the official numbers of Jehovah's Witnesses as reported by the Organisation, that is the number of people handing in reports. It is not the number of people coming to meetings each week and it is not the number of people who have been baptised. Just to reiterate, the door to door preaching work is the primary, formally organised activity (they claim it is a charitable work) that the congregation sponsors.

Judicial processes

39. The Organisation has its own internal judicial processes. As an elder I was involved in several judicial investigations and judicial committees.
40. There is a confidential elder's book that sets out the details. I think the latest one is called *Shepherding the Flock of God*. Portions of it were made available during the Royal Commission in Australia. There are also Witnesses inside the Organisation, who no longer believe in the Truth, and who leak information to the ex-JW community. This book and other documents have been leaked online.
41. Among ex-JW's the term PIMI means that somebody is physically in and mentally in. PIMO means that someone is physically in, but mentally out – which is what I was for a long time. I am now POMO, which is physically out, mentally out. There is also physically out, mentally in – POMI. This would be the case if a person was disfellowshipped and thus shunned, but mentally still believed in the "Truth". These are just colloquial expressions we use to describes the stages of waking up.
42. In the elders' book, there is quite a long list of sins that trigger a judicial investigation by the elders if someone were to commit them. If you commit a "serious" sin, or if you make a complaint about somebody else having committed a "serious" sin, two elders will investigate the allegations. Elders are always male. If the elders determine that a serious sin was committed, i.e., that the complaint is true, or if the person confesses, then the matter will go before a Judicial Committee.
43. A Judicial Committee is made up of at least three elders. Usually the two investigators, plus one or more others elders as needed. If a judicial committee is called, the elders have pretty much determined that the person has committed a serious sin. The purpose of a Judicial Committee is to determine whether the person is sorry or repentant. If the person is found to be not repentant, they will be disfellowshipped and shunned. If the elders believe that the person is repentant,

they may face some internal disciplinary action, but they won't be disfellowshipped. The accused might still defend themselves during the Judicial Committee – but the elders wouldn't call a Judicial Committee unless they believed the person was guilty. An appeal can be made if the accused is unhappy with the outcome and a new committee of elders will examine the case.

Investigating complaints of sexual abuse

44. Although I sat on a few judicial committees, these did not involve matters relating to sexual abuse. I was however, involved in re-investigating three reports of sexual abuse. These never proceeded to Judicial Committees.
45. I am reluctant to go into detail about the cases. This is not to protect the Organisation, but to protect the victims. I feel they have been through enough and I want to avoid causing further harm by making public comment. I would however, like to make some comments on the process the Organisation follows when investigating allegations, based on my experience. I make these comments out of a desire to help victims find real justice.

Training and support

46. I did not have any expertise in helping victims or investigating reports of abuse. My background was in IT and office administration. Elders have no formal training outside of the Organisation and I feel they are not adequately qualified to investigate such matters. We could telephone head office and speak to someone in the Service Department or the Legal Department, if we felt the need. We also

had letters from the Organisation with instructions on how to proceed, but in all honesty, they were not much help in dealing with very complex issues nor with helping people suffering from trauma as victims of serious crimes. I received minimal formal training regarding how to conduct an investigation or interview with victims. Now that I am on the outside, I can see what real, formal training looks like. 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.

47. Looking back at how we dealt with those matters, there is no question in my mind that they should have been reported to the appropriate authorities immediately. Our attempts to help, although genuine, were very amateurish.

48. When you are on the inside, as an elder, you are made to feel that you are more than capable of handling difficult situations. Maybe not as an individual, but with the backing of the Organisation. We were told repeatedly that we were “fully capable and completely equipped” to deal with even very difficult issues, so long as we relied on the Bible and followed the advice from Bethel.

49. I am studious by nature. Even before these three issues arose, I had read every book and every policy letter on file so that I knew how to handle allegations. I was extremely careful to follow all the procedures properly. I was scrupulous about following the advice from head office. At the time I genuinely felt we had handled the issues responsibly and were doing the right thing.

50. I am still personally affected by those three cases. I relied on the Organisation to provide us with the appropriate moral, ethical, legal and psychological guidance necessary to professionally handle these investigations. But following the Australian Royal Commission, I could see clearly how much the Organisation fails victims and those who are asked to investigate. I would *never* seek to elevate my own distress above that of victims, but I wish that I had never been involved. I

sincerely wish that I had never been an elder. My willingness to speak now is in the hope that by speaking out, some victims will receive the real help they deserve.

Record keeping

51. My first job when I was appointed an elder was to act as Secretary. I had to maintain all the congregation's paperwork. I was very disappointed to find the congregation's paperwork was in a state of disarray.
52. There is the elders' book, but there are also numerous supplemental letters that get sent out to elders to update or supplement the elders' book regarding policy and procedure changes. So, in addition to the elders' book, we had a little over one hundred other letters on file describing different policies. At the time, most of the child abuse policies and procedures were in the letters, not in the elders' book.
53. 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. Many of the directions weren't even on file to follow. I had to chase up all the letters.
54. There were some notes on file for one, maybe two, of the past allegations. There was nothing for the third one. I didn't really have much access to what had happened in the past. It was unclear to me exactly what had happened during previous investigations. It was difficult to get any sense of what had been reported previously, what evidence had been collated, or how it had been dealt with. The record-keeping was quite amateurish.
55. We tried to talk to a few people that had been involved previously, including former elders. They could recall some things, but there were a lot of gaps. There was no orderly file. There were handwritten letters that were hard to understand. I

remember reading through one of the letters on file. It was a two-page letter, and I was none the wiser by the end of it as to exactly what had gone on and what the allegations had been.

56. During our investigation we took notes. They are kept locked away in the congregation files. Any handwritten or supplementary notes are ultimately destroyed. Only the Organisation's official forms are kept. The secretary maintains the file, so only the elders that are investigating the matter would see the forms. They are sealed in an envelope and are not free for every elder to come and look at.

57. The Presiding Overseer/Coordinator of the body of Elders would be aware of the investigation, even if he wasn't part of it. The Secretary would usually know too.

58. A few years after I had been an elder, the Organisation sent out directions for reorganising the file, including what should be kept and what should be destroyed. I don't know what the current directions are about what to keep and what to throw away, or whether the documents are kept locally or at Bethel. In my time, the documents were kept in the local congregation's filing system with copies sent to Bethel.

Going to head office – Bethel

59. If someone comes forward to make an allegation of abuse, the elder they speak to is supposed to ring head office, Bethel, before he speaks to anybody else, even other elders.

60. New Zealand no longer has a local head office. They amalgamated the New Zealand and Australia Bethel's some years ago. I imagine that any calls from New

Zealand would go to the Australia Bethel now. The Australia Bethel is located in Sydney, in a suburb called Ingleburn.

61. There are two departments at Bethel that we spoke to. There is the Legal Department and there is what they call the Service Department. The Service Department is comprised of Bethel elders who respond to questions involving the work of Jehovah's Witnesses in each country.

62. If local elders are unsure of how to do something, they will usually contact the Service Department. If the Service Department feels the need, they will involve the Legal Department.

63. The first thing we did when we received allegations of child sexual abuse was to ring the Service Department. We told them what we knew, they gave us directions, and we went from there.

64. We were directed to gather as much information about the allegations as possible. This involved sitting down with the victims and hearing their evidence. We also had to take the alleged perpetrators' evidence. We compiled everything into reports and sent the reports to Bethel.

65. I took it very seriously. I read all the letters and made sure I was following all the guidelines that the Organisation had provided. Like almost all elders, we had little to no experience with investigating such issues. We did the best we could to follow our instructions carefully.

Outcome of the cases

66. Each of the alleged perpetrators denied everything again.

67. There is a "two-witness rule" within the Organisation – that means that generally there must be two eyewitnesses to an event to establish that something has

occurred. This includes abuse. There are rare exceptions, but by and large, the rule is that there must be two eyewitnesses. If there are not two eyewitnesses, no Judicial Committee can be formed. It doesn't mean there aren't any repercussions whatsoever, but there won't be any formal Judicial action taken against that person. Whether the sin is smoking or abuse or getting drunk, etc, the same rule applies. There must be two eyewitnesses.

68. Unfortunately, in each of these three cases there were not two eyewitnesses. I expect this is common in cases of sexual offending.

69. Bethel made the determination that we could not take any of the allegations further. We didn't get to make that decision. Bethel told us that there was not enough evidence. We had to go back to the victims and tell them that we could not take any further action.

70. The victims were understandably disappointed and upset. Ultimately, though, they accepted it. It is hard to express too much upset with the Organisation. If you start criticising the elders and start questioning them, or Bethel, then you start looking bad yourself. There is not really an avenue for appeal. You could appeal to directly to Bethel, but they are the ones that made the decision anyway.

Reporting to Police

71. Jehovah's Witness elders are made to feel like they are fully competent to handle any situation. The reality is very different, however. We were nowhere near qualified to investigate crimes, interrogate people, or conduct what is basically a criminal investigation and hold a judicial hearing. I was in no way qualified for that.

72. I think the only time the Police were mentioned in my time, was in one case when Bethel asked me if the person was intending to go to the Police. I said, "I don't know, I haven't asked them." They asked me to find out.
73. The Organisation's stand, at least at that time, was that it was up to the individuals and their families to decide whether they were going to report it to the Police. It wasn't the job of the elders to do that. The elders weren't supposed to influence the decision in any way. Nor were there instructions to even raise the subject.
74. Even though we weren't supposed to actively discourage people from going to the Police, I have no doubt that in some cases it will have been discouraged. We were taught that the most important thing is to protect God's sovereignty and his name or his reputation. We wanted people to speak well of God and we wanted people to speak well of his servants – Jehovah's Witnesses. We were very careful not to bring any reproach on the Organisation. People would say that reporting abuse will make us all look bad. (My argument is that not reporting it makes you look even worse.)
75. The belief among Jehovah's Witnesses is that the Organisation is capable enough to handle anything. "Why would you go to the Police? Don't you trust us? We can handle this ourselves. The Police can't do anything better than we can, so why would you do that?" As an elder I never told anyone that they couldn't, or that they shouldn't, go to Police, but nor was the idea of going to the Police on our radar.
76. The only exception to that general stance would be if there was a law obligating elders to report abuse to the authorities. If there was a law that says they should, that is where the Legal Department would get involved and provide direction. But I was never told to report anything to the Police. In fact, I had never even heard of the concept of mandatory reporting laws.

77. I seriously regret everything I had to do with dealing with these cases. As I said previously, as elders we were entirely reliant on Bethel to give us the legal, moral and ethical guidance we needed to handle something like this and in hindsight I do not think the direction Bethel gives is anywhere near adequate. The Police should be involved, or at the very least talking to them encouraged.

After an investigation

78. If an investigation finds that there is insufficient evidence of abuse to take a matter further, it is entirely possible that a victim will be expected to remain in the congregation alongside their alleged perpetrator and continue life as usual. The elders though are supposed to keep an eye on perpetrators so that nothing further happens. I was never sure how we were supposed to do that. Fortunately, by chance that did not happen in the three cases I was involved in as an elder, as the perpetrators were no longer in the congregation.

79. Other victims are not so fortunate. I am aware of a case where a child was expected to continue to attend meetings along with the perpetrator of their abuse. After the abuse was reported, the elders continued to allow this man to attend Jehovah's Witness activities, even though he confessed. They expected his victim to continue to attend those activities as well.

80. The elders failed to deal with the issue of that child's sexual abuse responsibly. I thought that the failings had occurred because the local elders had failed to follow proper procedure. I did not realise until after I had been an elder myself, that it was as a result of organisation-wide policies as well.

81. In a way, elders are set up to fail. The failings of the Organisation to properly respond to abuse allegations are systemic. When I was an elder, as hard as I

genuinely tried to do the right thing, I really had no qualification to deal with these matters. There was no way I was going to handle it professionally. Most elders are in the same situation. They are doing the best they can to do the right thing, but the Organisation's policies mean that further harm can be done. That is what upsets me.

“Care”

82. During the Australian Royal Commission, the Organisation claimed that it didn't fall under the definition of “institutional abuse”. If you ask me, that is right, wrong and irrelevant all at the same time. Jehovah's Witnesses are right from the point of view that they don't have orphanages or schools or day-care centres or Sunday School. It is not like the Catholic Church or the Anglican Church in that way. The nature of the problem is not the same. But there are aspects of being a Witness where children are separated from their parents at times. As part of formal congregation activities, children can be cared for by adults they might not know very well.

83. In addition, aside from all of that, Witnesses are directed to report all allegations of abuse to the elders in the first instance. In doing this, the Organisation takes it upon themselves to address the matter. The Organisation takes the “care” of abuse victims by insisting that all allegations go to Bethel first. I feel that the Organisation turning around and saying it wasn't institutional abuse and absolving themselves of responsibility is very disingenuous, especially when the institution itself directs all allegations to be reported to it, regardless of the circumstances.

84. Here is an example of when a child might be separated from their family and placed in someone else's care during formal religious activities. When Witnesses go door to door, which is their formal ministry as ordained ministers, everyone who wants

to go out for the day will meet at the Kingdom Hall (Church) or someone's home beforehand. Numerous families might turn up with their children and invariably there would be as many or at times more children than adults. Witnesses work in pairs and try not to send more than two people to a door. So, children are often split from families and assigned to work with other adults. As a child, you could very much end up being sent with somebody who is not your parent. So, although it is not "institutional care" in one sense, there are activities within Jehovah's Witnesses formal arrangements for worship where children can be isolated with other adults.

85. As a child I would often be put with an adult to go door to door. My Mum would turn up with the three of us. She would always take the youngest one in the stroller with her, and my brother and I would be sent off with other people.

86. Later, as an Elder, it was my job to organise those groups. Witnessing is usually done in pairs, with four to six pairs in a street. I would divide everyone up so there were not too many children in one group. I would ask other adults to take children with them as their witnessing partner. If need be, I would take someone else's child with me door to door as well. This is a common practice and part of formal congregational activities. In fact, one of the ways elders are directed to keep an eye on perpetrators is to make sure that they don't assign a child to work with someone who has been found guilty of abuse in the past. (All elders are informed if a guilty perpetrator is a member of the congregation).

87. Another example of elders and others having children in their care, is during home Bible studies. Again, because it was just Mum and us boys, an elder was assigned to come to our house and study the Bible with us once a week. Each family is expected to do one hour of study per week, usually led by the father. In my family, because there was no father present, one of the elders came instead. He would study with me on my own for an hour and then he would sit with my brother and

study with him on his own for an hour. Nothing ever happened, but this is an example of when an elder could be alone with a child as part of congregation activities.

88. Elders and other men in the congregation were encouraged to assist single mothers in this way. It was normal, expected, and in accordance with the Organisation's policy. For example, there is a section in the *Watchtower* magazine about "fatherless boys" (which is an expression from the Bible describing children with only one parent):

BROTHERS — 'RESCUE FATHERLESS BOYS'

The mother in a single-parent family naturally is concerned about the lack of a father's influence in the home, especially on the sons. Men in the congregation should feel as did Job, who said: "I would rescue . . . the fatherless boy and anyone that had no helper." (Job 29:12) Often what is needed is sincere interest. These boys could be personally invited to share with you in witnessing, in certain activities at the Kingdom Hall and even in wholesome recreation. This attention could "rescue" a boy from a worldly course and draw him toward the congregation.

89. Elders and adults in the congregation are actively encouraged to help children, which includes taking them door-to-door and involving them in other activities such as working bees and Hall cleaning.
90. The Organisation may respond by saying that parents don't have to accept these arrangements. So, for example, Mum didn't have to let us get split up and handed around. But her only alternative would be to question the elders' decisions or go home. This creates a different problem. We were strongly encouraged to cooperate with what the elders say. The elders know what needs to be done. You can trust them. You should co-operate with their instructions.

91. Additionally, as mentioned above, if there is ever a serious problem among Witnesses, everybody is directed to take the matter to the elders. If it is a case of abuse, the first thing the elders would do is to call Bethel.
92. You are never told that if something serious happens that you should or even could go to the Police. In other words, the Organisation claims jurisdiction over whatever happens in the private lives of Witnesses, including serious, criminal events. The Organisation's direction is that if abuse occurs, you must report it to the elders and the elders will take it from there.
93. Most of the abuse that occurs in the Organisation is probably not by elders or servants, who would very roughly be the equivalent of priests and deacons in say, the Catholic church. There are elders and servants who have committed abuse, but most of the abuse is familial abuse, as revealed by the Australian Royal Commission. The Organisation may say, "This is not our responsibility," but I feel they are being disingenuous when they say that. In the minds of the members of the Organisation, the elders are the ones to deal with serious matters and the Organisation promotes itself as the answer to the world's problems. Help from anywhere else is ultimately influenced by Satan.
94. I think it is also irrelevant to argue whether the care provided is institutional or not. That is not really the point. The Organisation claims jurisdiction over these problems. They don't tell you to go to the Police. They direct you come to the elders, and the culture of the Organisation is to handle matters it in-house.
95. It is hard to convey to people on the outside the level of influence and control that the Organisation, via the elders, have over members of the congregation. Even if something happens in a private home, there is no concept of a "serious sin" being outside the purview of the elders. There is nothing "familial" that is separate from the Organisation. For example, if a person received a blood transfusion in hospital

or started smoking and drinking at home, and their spouse found out, the spouse would be expected to report it to the elders to deal with. Our own private homes became the automatic domain of the Organisation, just as much as anywhere else.

96. The *Watchtower* explains the relationship between elders and the congregation as follows:

Be Obedient to Those Taking the Lead

Be obedient to those who are taking the lead among you and be submissive, for they are keeping watch over your souls as those who will render an account.” —HEBREWS 13:17. ...

JEHOVAH has provided overseers for his organization in this “time of the end.” (Daniel 12:4) They take the lead in caring for sheeplike ones, and their supervision is refreshing. (Isaiah 32:1, 2) Moreover, loving oversight by elders who treat God’s flock with tenderness serves as a protection from Satan and this wicked system of things. —Acts 20:28-30; 1 Peter 5:8; 1 John 5:19.

...

Jehovah would be displeased if we failed to be obedient and submissive to Christian overseers. This would also prove burdensome to them and would harm us spiritually. If we were uncooperative, the elders might care for their duties with sighing, perhaps in a spirit of discouragement that could result in a loss of joy in our Christian activities. But our obedience and submissiveness promote godly conduct and strengthen our faith. ‘The Lord is with the spirit we show,’ and joy flourishes in such a climate of cooperation, peace, and unity.—2 Timothy 4:22; Psalm 133:1.

...We will be helped to obey and honor those taking the lead if we remember that God himself has provided the elders. (Ephesians 4:7-13) Since these men are spirit appointed and God’s organization occupies a vital place in the lives of Jehovah’s Witnesses, surely we want to demonstrate our gratitude and respect for theocratic arrangements. Moreover, we can assist new

ones to develop this attitude if we set a fine example of obedience and submission to those taking the lead among us.

...

In the world, there is a tendency to reject leadership. As one lecturer said: "The rising education level has improved the talent pool such that followers have become so critical that they are almost impossible to lead." But a spirit of independent thinking does not prevail in God's organization, and we have sound reasons for confidence in the men taking the lead among us. ...Instead of feeling frustrated by their limitations and treating their counsel lightly, let us appreciate and accept the Bible-based direction of the elders as coming from God.

Australian Royal Commission

97. I did not speak with the Australian Royal Commission. My wife was very unwell at the time. Plus I didn't know it was happening until it actually happened. That is one of my greatest regrets. I did speak to *Four Corners*, off the record, which is a well-respected current affairs show in Australia. The story, which I think was called "Bearing Witness" is still available on the Australian ABC website. I was one of several Witnesses who spoke to the ABC. I did not appear on camera, however.

98. When I watched the questioning in the Australian Commission, I knew that some of the things the Jehovah's Witnesses were saying weren't true or were at best, disingenuous. When I saw the Organisation's processes pulled apart and compared with what would normally be expected, I was horrified that I had been part of this terrible system. I didn't know what a normal process looked like from a Police point of view, or from a counselling point of view, so when I saw the contrast, I was devastated.

99. I don't know how to repair the damage that I was part of, that is why I am more than happy to talk and help people to understand what goes on inside the Organisation and the psychology behind it. It is hard to convey just how much Jehovah's Witnesses see the Organisation as their whole world. Or how we were naturally suspicious of the Police and worldly authorities (because eventually the Police are going to come and arrest us and lock us up because we are Jehovah's Witnesses). There is a natural suspicion of anything that is outside the Organisation. We always tended to deal with matters in-house unless forced to do otherwise.
100. At heart, I don't think there have been many changes since the Australian Royal Commission. The two-witness rule hasn't changed. The judicial process and the two-witness rule are a major part of the problem. They will take formal action *if* the perpetrators are found guilty, but that is very difficult to prove, and any action taken is not effective. Known predators can be free to mingle with society, including preaching from door to door, because the Organisation doesn't feel the need to inform authorities. Also, women aren't allowed to be involved in the judicial process either, although I think it is essential that they are.
101. I have heard that elders may be more likely to report straight to the Police nowadays but they are only doing it because the law says they should, not because they think they should. The Organisation feels reporting should be left to the parents or victims unless the law directs otherwise. My argument is that you don't need a law to do it. You can just do it. It's the right thing.
102. I think they now realise abuse is a serious issue. I don't think they took it as seriously previously. But they are still trying to handle it with unfounded self-confidence in their own knowledge. They are not looking to external experts as to how to properly address this. Their processes are still roughly the same as in the


past, so they are just going to keep making the same mistakes. That is why, from my point of view, the only thing that will really change their behaviour is enacting appropriate laws. If you can bring in a law that says, "You have to report this", they will do it. The more laws you can bring in that obligates them to behave appropriately, the better. If you let them manage it themselves, nothing will change.

103. I am not criticising the fact that the Organisation includes children, and their families, in congregation activities. But I think it is essential that the Organisation realises, that at times, children are placed into the care of other adults during those activities. That being the case, the Organisation needs to have appropriate procedures and safeguards in place to ensure the wellbeing of young people.

104. I would like to thank the Commission for giving me the opportunity to voice my concerns. I am happy to provide further information as need.

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: 20/06/2023

GRO-C

Date.....20/06/2023.....