

How Many More?

By Michael Pence

How many more times must children of Jehovah's Witnesses suffer the humiliation and agony of sexual abuse before church leaders decide to change their policies? How many more lives must be broken?

It is not a question of whether charges of such abuse in the group have reached the ears of the leaders of the 6 million-member sect, which includes a million members in the US. One of those magazines in the hand of the earnest Jehovah's Witness at your door on a Saturday morning, *Awake!*, in the October 8, 1991 issue, featured a cover series on the problem of child sexual abuse in modern society. The series was in response to an influx of letters from members, recounting their tales of abuse and their concerns about its handling in the church.

Barbara Anderson, 62, of Tullahoma, Tennessee, was a staff member for *Awake!* at that time. She recalled in a recent interview that this October 8 issue seemed to give voice to a newfound tolerance toward psychotherapy, and displayed a previously unheard-of willingness to consider the validity of "repressed memories" in assessing charges of abuse. It was a ray of hope, a glimmer of progressive thinking in an insular and secretive group.

Nowhere did such thinking find more opposition than in the very building that published it. The governing body member who administered the writing department, Lloyd Barry, now deceased, and the governing body member who oversaw the Service Department, in charge of the congregations, Ted Jaracz, were entrenched in battle. When elders, lay ministers in the congregations, called in confusion to the service department, they were told, according to Anderson, that the magazine was "a mistake."

Mistake or not, *Awake!* opened the floodgates and a torrent of correspondence came into the group's Brooklyn Heights headquarters. J. R. Brown, now spokesman for the group, was working in the writing department at that time, and personally passed on information to the governing body concerning this influx of response. In a recent interview, he acknowledged that these letters included claims that cases of child sexual abuse brought to the elders were "not handled properly" and that members were told that they "should not make this known."

By early 1992, just months after the publication of the October 8, 1991 *Awake!*, the accusations of mishandled cases of child sexual abuse had reached a new level. According to Anderson, "some of the governing body were aware in 1992 that there were confessed or convicted pedophiles, who claimed repentance, holding positions of authority in the organization." Meanwhile, abuse survivors who were able to muster the courage to come forward were being met with "skepticism or downright hostility."

Ten years ago, if not earlier, church leaders knew that widespread allegations of child sexual abuse were coming in from their own members.

It is also not a question of whether the group's policies in handling allegations of abuse internally could lead to an abuser finding protection instead of accountability. The Witnesses live under the simple delusion that all outsiders are co-conspirators with Satan, so when faced with a serious problem members turn to their untrained lay ministers: the congregation elders. These men, appointed by Holy Spirit (by way of headquarters), wield the Holy Scriptures, rendering them "completely equipped" (1 Timothy 3:15, 16) for whatever problems members may have to bring to them, including child sexual abuse. The criterion for evaluating any charge is likewise simple and scriptural, if daunting (Deuteronomy 19:15): there must be two eyewitnesses.

The elders cross-examine the alleged victim -- often still a minor -- about the intimate details of the act. The intent is to identify what level of sin the charge entails, and whether the victim was somehow complicit in the act, by wearing seductive clothing or failing to scream while being raped. They may even require the accuser to face the accused and repeat the charge. When the accused denies wrongdoing, the elders then must ask for the nearly impossible burden of proof of two eyewitnesses to be met. Failing that, they declare the accused innocent before God. They also remind the accuser that malicious gossip -- like spreading accusations of abuse against someone whom God has declared innocent -- could result in their expulsion from the congregation, and subsequent shunning by family, friends and God himself. Then, they close with prayer.

The governing body codified such procedures in the secret elder's manual *Pay Attention to Yourselves and All the Flock*, though it is obvious that such a burden of proof could provide a *de facto* shelter for secretive child sex abusers. The result for many is that victims are silenced while abusers are exonerated. The abuse continues.

Witness leaders also cannot feign ignorance to the dangers of having known child sex abusers in positions of authority in the group, or having them preaching in their emblematic door-to-door ministry. Instead, they seemed to move in a direction of excluding penitent pedophiles from leadership privileges, though explicitly prescribing public evangelism as a token of faith even for convicted child sex offenders.

Both issues were addressed in the other journal published by the group, *The Watchtower* of January 1, 1997. It stated, for the first time, that a "known" molester "would not qualify for congregation privileges," such as becoming an elder or ministerial servant (deacon). However, a secret letter to all bodies of elders three months later, on March 14, 1997, quietly backpedaled: "An individual 'known' to be a former child molester has reference to the perception of that one in the community and in the Christian congregation." As for determining whether those already in a position of authority had a history of molestation, the letter directed that "the body of elders should not query individuals."

Unknown to the faithful, who would have taken *The Watchtower* as gospel, molesters could remain in positions of authority at all levels of the organization. The contents of that letter, though leaked on the Internet, remain a secret to the lay members of the group. “It was explained to the elders,” said Brown, “and it is not a part of our standard way of handling things to always inform every detail of matters to the congregation in general. What is stated there [in the January 1, 1997 Watchtower] and the way it’s stated there, without the clarification, is certainly what happens most of the time.”

The same issue of *The Watchtower* insured that not even a history of criminal child sexual abuse would exclude a penitent member from being required to engage in the Witnesses public preaching activity. Speaking of a molester who may have recently been released from prison, it states, “if he seems to be repentant, he will be encouraged to make spiritual progress [and] share in the field ministry.”

Brown reassured that a penitent predatory pedophile might be offered alternatives to going door-to-door, at the discretion of the local elders. "We consider just as valid if he sits on a bench in a mall with magazines and offers them to people there. Or, if he calls up on a telephone."

As a matter of policy, the governing body stipulated that known child molesters may hold positions of authority in the church and that even criminal child sex offenders must engage in public preaching.

Underscoring all of this is the refusal of church leaders to simply instruct their members to call civil authorities when allegations of child sexual abuse arise. Instead, a February 15, 2002 letter to all bodies of elders in the United States proffers the advice to immediately call the group’s Legal Department whenever facing allegations of child sexual abuse in the congregation. The letter clarifies that the elders should “never suggest to anyone that they should not report an allegation of child abuse to the police or other authorities.” The simple advice that it may be the parents’ legal obligation to notify authorities, as caretakers of the minor, is never mentioned. Nor is a list of states that mandate reporting of abuse by clerics provided to the elders by their leaders, even though the US government maintains such information, and publishes it at the National Clearinghouse on Child Abuse and Neglect Information (<http://www.calib.com/nccanch/>).

Why not encourage psychotherapy, take child sexual abuse out of the hands of untrained elders, refuse to allow know molesters to be in positions of authority, exclude them from public ministry, and inform parents of their obligation to notify authorities of allegations of abuse? Why not adopt a policy of informing authorities of possible child endangerment regardless of local statute? *Why not take the moral high ground on child sexual abuse, when you presume to take God’s name as your own?*

The leadership of Jehovah's Witnesses knows that today -- maybe even right now -- there is a child trembling beneath the hands of a child sex abuser among their members. They know that maybe a change in their policies could put an end to that, but they refuse to act in a way that consistently places child sexual abuse under those who are trained to deal with it. What do they have to hide? How many more victims, and how many more unspeakable acts will it take for them to see the need to change? How many more little children have to die inside to try to escape the horrid plague that their moral leaders are afraid to confront?

One child is too many. Two survivors of child sexual abuse among Jehovah's Witnesses already dwell under my roof. How many more will it take?

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Publication inquiries: mikepence@yahoo.com