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Jehovah's Witnesses ordered to pay more than \$20 million to woman who said she was sexually abused

By James Eng, msnbc.com

Updated at 3:20 p.m. ET: In what both sides described as a momentous ruling, a jury in Oakland, Calif., has found that Jehovah's Witnesses was partly responsible for the alleged sexual abuse of a girl by one of its members and must pay her more than \$20 million.



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The Alameda County Superior Court jury on Thursday awarded \$21 million in punitive damages to the plaintiff, who is now 26 years old. That was on top of the \$7 million in compensatory damages it awarded her on Wednesday.

The Watchtower Bible and Tract Society of New York, the Jehovah's Witnesses' legal entity, is responsible for the entire punitive damages amount and 40 percent of the compensatory damages, said Rick Simons, attorney for the plaintiff. Sixty percent of the compensatory damages was assessed against Jonathan Kendrick, the man accused of abusing her.

Candace Conti sued Watchtower, the Fremont, Calif., congregation of Jehovah's Witnesses and Kendrick in 2011. It's msnbc.com's policy not to identify victims of sexual abuse, but Conti agreed to be identified so that any other victims would feel they could come forward too.

"The ultimate goal of the lawsuit was to have a change in policy, to be able to ID these people, child molesters, to the congregation to protect children," Conti told msnbc.com. "Secondarily, to have

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silent ones come forward and tell their stories and to bring to light that overall issue of violence and the hush-hush policy."

Both her parents were Watchtower congregation members at the time of the abuse, she said.

"I was trying to be the best Jehovah's Witness I could be at that time," she told msnbc.com.

Jim McCabe, attorney for the Fremont congregation of Jehovah's Witnesses, said that he was "stunned" by the verdict and would appeal.

"This is the first case I know of where a church has been hit with liability involving a rank-and-file member," he told msnbc.com.

"Mr. Simons has his twist on the facts and we will see how a court of appeals views the trial court rulings and the evidence," McCabe said.

The jury found that the elders who managed the Fremont congregation in the 1990s and who were under the supervision of Watchtower knew that Kendrick, a member, had recently been convicted of the sexual abuse of another child, but they kept his past record secret from the congregation, said Simons.

Kendrick went on to molest the plaintiff, who was a Jehovah's Witness member in Fremont, over a two-year period beginning when she was 9 years old, the lawsuit contended.

Kendrick was eventually convicted in 2004 of the sexual abuse of another girl, and is now a registered sex offender in California, Simons said. He has not been criminally charged with abusing the plaintiff, but Simons said the case is under investigation by law enforcement.

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Kendrick was not in court for the trial and msnbc.com could not immediately find a contact number for him.

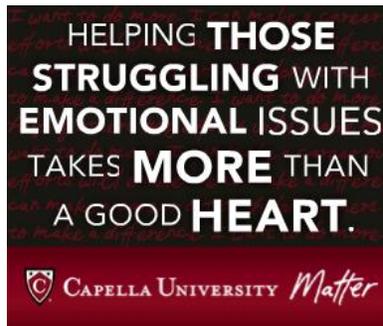
The California sex offender registry lists two convictions for him: lewd or lascivious acts with a child under 14 years of age and sexual battery involving a restrained person.

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The lawsuit alleged that Watchtower had a policy that instructed elders in its Jehovah's Witnesses congregations to keep reports of child sex abusers within the religious group secret to avoid lawsuits.

"The verdict is significant because the policy of hiding sex abusers within the congregation was out in this case," Simons said.

He also said the judgment was "one of the largest in the country for a child sex abuse single victim in a religious institution molestation case."



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Jehovah's Witnesses is a Christian denomination noted for its nontraditional interpretation of the Bible. Members are best known for their door-to-door preaching, distributing literature such as The Watchtower and Awake! magazines.

Conti filed the lawsuit after trying, without success, to get Jehovah's Witnesses in Southern California and in Fremont to change the secrecy policy, Simons said.

"There was no settlement demand from her because she felt the only way to expose this policy and make it change was to bring this case to trial and make it public," he said.

"The money is the only way left for her to force Jehovah's Witnesses to stop keep hiding known sex offenders within their congregation."

McCabe denied Jehovah's Witnesses has a secrecy policy concerning child sex abuse. He called the verdict "unprecedented."

"We're stunned by the verdict. We hate child abuse and everything to do with it."

McCabe said he was not aware of any other case in which a religious organization has been found liable for wrongdoing by a member who was not in an official position of responsibility.

"We've got a long ways to go yet before this one is resolved," he said of the planned appeal.

Simons said Jehovah's Witnesses has sufficient resources, including valuable real estate, to cover the judgment but an appeal could drag out for years.

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